

DISCOVERY GUIDE
5 LESSONS FOR GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS

WALK AS JESUS WALKED

Being a Disciple in a Broken World



THAT THE
WORLD
MAY KNOW.

EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE IN
HISTORICAL CONTEXT
with Ray Vander Laan

RUN! – THE PASSION OF ELIJAH

Each of us is passionate about something. Whether it's biking or golf, music or gardening, hunting or travel, photography or our grandchildren, we strive to devote as much time and energy to what fires up our passion as is appropriate . . . and sometimes more than is appropriate. When we speak of the things we're passionate about, excitement dances across our faces and echoes in our voices.

But how many of us are truly passionate about our walk with Jesus? Although we may devote considerable time to worship, Bible study, prayer, and similar activities, is our daily walk with Jesus — how we live out our faith through personal discipleship — our deepest passion? Do we devote our best effort to our walk with Jesus? Does our relationship with him animate our conversations and energize our steps? Do other people notice our devotion, and does how we walk with Jesus inspire them to do the same?

For most of us, it's all too easy to have plenty of passion for some things but little zeal for our walk with Jesus. Our less-than-zealous obedience to God and his Word communicates that our spiritual walk is not something that excites us, and that influences how we live out our faith. We become complacent and apathetic about our relationship with God.

Yet God desires that his people live for him with passion. The religious Jews of Jesus' day understood intense devotion and zeal for God. They honored the passion and zeal of the ancient heroes of the faith — Moses, Phinehas, Hezekiah, Elijah, and so many more. They sought to emulate the fire these heroes showed in their walk with

God, their devotion to Scripture, and their commitment to obedience. And they readily recognized those among them who lived with a passionate zeal for God.

Jesus the Messiah was not a laid-back, unemotional, matter-of-fact teacher. He lived with an intensity for God that few have ever known. He clearly fulfilled the ancient prophecy: “zeal for your house consumes me” (Psalm 69:9). In fact, he displayed such great zeal for God that he was even mistaken for Elijah — the zealous Old Testament prophet who gave God everything he had. Jesus too gave everything, even his very life, in obedience to God.

Jesus challenges those who believe in him to become his disciples — his *talmidim* — to follow in his steps and become like him. So to be a disciple of Jesus is to walk zealously with God and make disciples as he did. The Jewish disciples of Jesus — including Peter, John, and Paul — understood this call for passionate discipleship. And they lived it. But Jesus sent his disciples out of the Jewish world and into a Hellenistic world that did not know Jesus and that had never heard of the passion of Elijah. It was a world not unlike the world into which he sends us today.

So in this session, amidst the spectacular ruins of the Roman city, Aphrodisias, we’ll see how the disciples translated Jesus’ call to passionate discipleship into the language and images the Roman culture already understood. We’ll see how they used the people’s knowledge of sports and the arena games to communicate the total dedication and intense passion needed to “run” the spiritual race in order to win. To give everything you have, your whole self, in order to win the prize is an image the Greek and Roman world understood. It is one our culture understands as well.

Opening Thoughts (4 minutes)

The Very Words of God

I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty.

1 Kings 19:14

Think About it

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that you could see Jesus as he walked and taught in the villages of Galilee. How would you describe his appearance and demeanor — the way he sounded as he spoke, the look in his eyes, the way he moved as he walked? What do you think you would notice about him? Which heroes of the Bible, or our own time and culture, do you imagine as portraying some of the characteristics or qualities of Jesus?

DVD Teaching notes (22 minutes)

The passion of Elijah

The passion of the Olympic games

Competing to honor the king

Surrounded by witnesses

DVD Discussion (4 minutes)

1. What did you learn about the prophet Elijah, Jesus, and the disciples that you had never before realized?

In what ways do the images Ray Vander Laan presents of these men change your idea of what it means to walk as Jesus walked?

2. What was the point of the Olympic games played in stadiums, such as the one at Aphrodisias, throughout the Roman Empire?

How does this knowledge help you to better understand what Paul intended to convey through references to athletic training and competition in his descriptions of what it means to walk as Jesus walked?

3. How often have you thought that the way you run your spiritual race today is a witness to those you leave behind? What does it take to run your spiritual race in such a way that you make a powerful statement of who God is and encourage others who see you to run well?



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Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (19 minutes)

The Zeal of Elijah

God loves his people with great passion and devotion and has always called those who say they love him to live for him with zeal — with a consuming passion to do his will and vigorously maintain his honor in all circumstances. That’s what it means to “love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). So whether they lived during Bible times or live today, godly people are consumed by an ardent zeal to be faithful to God’s Word and exalt him in everything they do, say, and think. Their intensity is obvious to everyone they meet.

Elijah was a servant of God who is still remembered for his passionate devotion to God. Let’s look at how Elijah walked with God during a key event in his life recorded in 1 Kings 18 - 19. His story will help us better understand the ancient Jewish desire to be zealous — totally devoted — to God.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, uses the Hebrew root *qin’ah*, which is normally translated “jealous” or “zealous,” to describe God. The word’s root meaning conveys a deep passion and commitment for something or someone that leads to the desire to defend and protect. So when the Bible says that God is jealous, it is not in the sense of petty envy that we often associate with jealousy. When the Bible describes God as jealous, it means that he has a deep love for and commitment to his holiness and honor and an equally deep passion for his people.

1. Read 1 Kings 18:15 - 29. What do you notice about Elijah’s boldness in speaking to King Ahab, the people of Israel, and the prophets of Baal?

What level of commitment would be necessary to do and say these things? In other words, what motivated Elijah?

2. Read 1 Kings 18:30 - 40. How much physical effort did it take for Elijah to prepare the bull, build the altar, dig the trench? What does this tell you about his zeal for the Lord?

As you read Elijah's prayer, what do you see as the consuming passion of his heart? How much effort do you think it took to capture and execute the false prophets of Baal?

3. Read 1 Kings 18:41 - 46. Where did Elijah go after the false prophets were killed?

What did he do when it started raining? What does this tell you about the intensity of his passion and commitment to honor God?

PROFILE OF A ZEALOUS SERVANT

We do not know exactly where on Mount Carmel the events between Elijah and the prophets of Baal occurred, but we do know the Kishon River at its closest point is at least two miles and more than a thousand feet below the top of Mount Carmel. Elijah climbed Mount Carmel, built the stone altar, butchered a bull, descended to the Kishon River and supervised the execution of the prophets of Baal, climbed Mount Carmel again, descended the mountain, and ran ahead of King Ahab's chariot all the way to Jezreel more than eighteen miles away! That is one zealous servant of God! Even then, Elijah wasn't done. He went into the wilderness and for forty days and forty nights journeyed nearly two hundred miles across some of the most forbidding, mountainous desert in the world to reach Mount Horeb, the mountain of God (traditionally assumed to be Mount Sinai).

4. What does James 5:17 - 18 reveal about Elijah and our need to be passionately committed to God?

Is it possible for us to have the same passion as Elijah? Do you think God expects us to have that same zeal? Why or why not?

5. What surprises you about the disciples using metaphors of the Olympic games to describe an appropriate degree of passion for walking as Jesus walked? How well do you think it communicated the idea of the passion of Elijah to people in Roman colonies who had no idea who Elijah was?

6. Which metaphors do you think could communicate the passion of Elijah to people in our culture? How would you use those metaphors in describing your walk with Jesus?

Faith Lesson (5 minutes)

First Kings 17 reveals an essential aspect of Elijah's zeal for God that we may tend to overlook if we focus exclusively on the powerful action and drama of 1 Kings 18. Read 1 Kings 17, taking special note of verses 1 - 5, 7 - 10, 13 - 14, and 17 - 24.

1. What kind of a relationship did Elijah have with God, and how did God's words — what God said to do — influence the prophet's words and actions?

2. What impact did Elijah's zeal and all-consuming passion to obey God in everything have on the widow of Zarephath (vv. 22 - 24)?

In what ways is this similar to the impact Jesus and his disciples had on the people of their world?

3. Elijah was a man of God's Word. He knew it, honored it, quoted it, taught it, lived it, and challenged others to do the same. No wonder the first-century Jews compared John the Baptist and Jesus to Elijah. They also knew God's Word and shared a common passion for it. How might people who know you describe your passion for the words of God?

4. How greatly do you desire to be zealous for God — to have the fire of Elijah in your heart? What kind of effort on your part is necessary to know and obey God's words and become a passionate disciple of Jesus?

WORTH OBSERVING ...

Elijah is a remarkable example of a man who was zealously devoted to God, but he is just one of many faithful servants of God we can learn from in the Scriptures. Moses is another servant who served God zealously, and it is interesting to note the similarities between his life and Elijah's.

Moses	Elijah	Similar Life Experiences
Ex. 2:15	1 Kings 17:3	Fled a king and went east
Ex. 2:15–22	1 Kings 17:7–19	Stayed with a family
Ex. 16:8, 12	1 Kings 17:6	Was fed by God
Num. 11:11–12	1 Kings 17:19–21	Complained about God's treatment
Ex. 3:1, 4, 10	1 Kings 18:1	Heard God's command to return to the land of the king

Ex. 7–12	1 Kings 18:20–39	Returned to confront a king and awaken faith in God’s people
Ex. 24:4	1 Kings 18:30–31	Built/rebuilt an altar
Ex. 32:11–14	1 Kings 18:36–37	Prayed for God’s people invoking Abraham, Isaac, and Israel
Ex. 32:25–29	1 Kings 18:37, 39–40	Sought confession, commitment, and the destruction of sin among the people
Ex. 19–20	1 Kings 19	Went to Mount Sinai (Horeb) and experienced God’s appearance
Deut. 1:37–38	1 Kings 19:16–21	Appointed a successor whose name means “God [<i>Yahweh</i>] saves” (Joshua: “ <i>Yahweh</i> saves”; Elisha: “God saves”)

Closing (1 minute)

Read the following Scripture passage aloud, then pray, asking God to nurture the passion of Elijah in your hearts so that others will know that he is God.

Memorize

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1–2

Walk as Jesus Walked

In-Depth Personal Study Sessions

Day one | Jesus and His Disciples: Displaying the Zeal of Elijah

The Very Words of God

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Matthew 16:13 – 14

Bible Discovery

Called to Be Zealous for the Lord

The Jewish rabbis and their disciples (*talmidim*) sought to have the same fire, zeal, and passion for the Lord and his Word that Elijah modeled. As you will discover in the Scripture passages that follow, Jesus and his disciples did likewise. Not only that, the Lord expects no less from those who desire to be his disciples today. A disciple of Jesus must possess a fire for God, a passion for his Word, and the zeal to be an obedient follower who walks as Jesus walked.

1. As Jesus became better known and his reputation grew, who did people think he was? Why do you think they thought this, and what does it reveal about the kind of man Jesus was? (See Matthew 16:13 – 14; Mark 6:14 – 15.)

2. When he was in the temple before Passover, Jesus demonstrated his zeal for the Lord in a dramatic way. What did he do? Why? What impact did his words and actions have on people around him? (See John 2:13 - 22; also Psalm 69:9.)

THINK ABOUT IT

People who are passionate in their devotion to Jesus and seek to obey God in everything are often labeled as religious fanatics. Why? What is the difference between fanaticism and zeal? Is zeal for the Lord respected by the Christian community today?

3. The following Scripture passages highlight the kind of zeal for God that Jesus wants his disciples to have.
 - a. Read Mark 8:34 - 38. What personal sacrifice must a person be willing to make to be a disciple of Jesus? Does this sacrifice require zeal for the Lord? Why or why not?

 - b. Read Luke 9:57 - 62. Why do you think Jesus said what he did to these followers? What do you think Jesus was looking for in their response to him?

- c. Read Mark 3:13 - 17. What indicates that at least some of Jesus' disciples were very zealous?
- d. Read Luke 9:51 - 56. What evidence of zeal do we see in James and his brother, John? (Remember, fire from heaven is lightning in the Jewish understanding.) Who do you think they modeled themselves after? Where did they learn such zeal? (See 2 Kings 1:9 - 15.)
4. What evidence do the following passages provide that the early disciples of Jesus also were zealous for the Lord?

Scripture Text	Zeal for the Lord Displayed
Acts 18:24-28	
Acts 21:10-15	
2 Cor. 8:16-22	
2 Cor. 9:1-2	
Col. 4:12-13	

Reflection

What, according to Romans 12:11, is expected of God's people? What do you think this means in your own daily walk with Jesus?

How do you think people who know you would describe your zeal for the Lord?

How do you think Jesus' disciples or the apostle Paul would describe your zeal in your walk with Jesus?

What do you do to maintain your spiritual fervor—the commitment to and enthusiasm for Jesus that his disciples had?

In what ways would you like to deepen your zeal for Jesus?

Paul gave the early believers practical instruction in how to be zealous for the Lord. Read carefully Galatians 4:18, Colossians 3:23–24, and Titus 2:11–14; then write down practical ways in which you can follow Paul's instructions in your daily life.

Memorize

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

Romans 12:11

Day Two | Zealous to Obey and Honor God

The Very Words of God

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” ... People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Matthew 3:1–2, 5–6

Bible Discovery

Zealous to Fulfill the Word of God

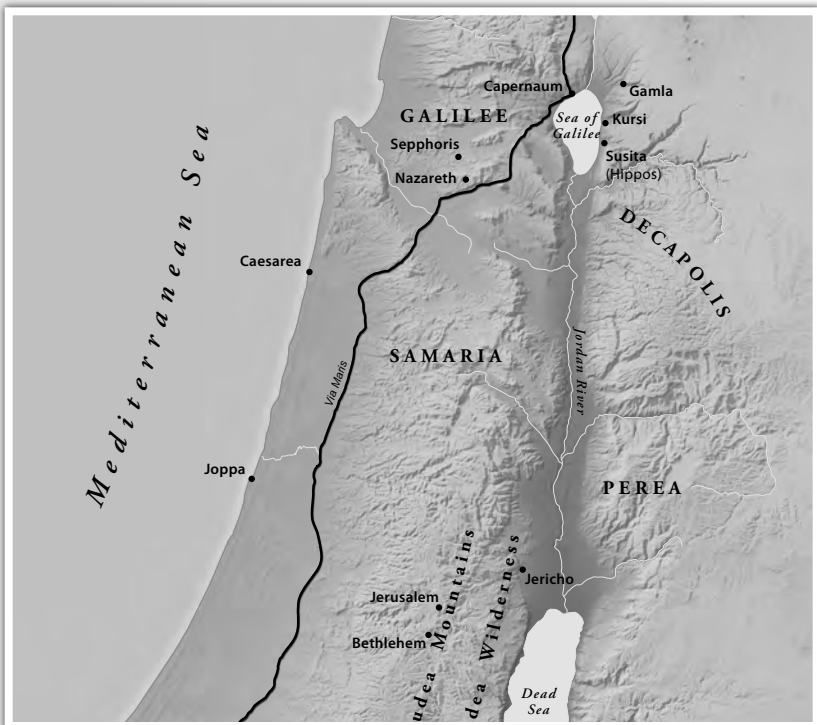
The ministry of John the Baptist focused on preparing people for the coming of Messiah and God’s great acts of redemption. John was widely recognized as having the same passion for God that Elijah had, and he was deeply committed to the Hebrew Scriptures as the basis for his teaching and actions. So take a closer look at John’s zeal for God and see how God greatly used him to warn people of God’s judgment and bring them to repentance in preparation for the coming of Messiah.

1. According to Malachi’s prophecies (3:1; 4:1–6), who would precede the Messiah’s coming — known by the Jews as the “day of the Lord” — and what would his task be?

DID YOU KNOW?

John must have known he was the fulfillment of the Malachi 4 prophecy—the Elijah to come. From his knowledge of the Hebrew text, John knew where key events in Elijah’s life occurred, and he often chose “Elijah places” in which to baptize people:

- The vicinity of the Judean wilderness, near Jericho, probably near the fords of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:3–14; Matthew 3:1–6).
- At Aenon, in the vicinity of Beth Shean, near where Elijah called Elisha (Meholah) (1 Kings 19:15–18; John 3:23).
- At Bethany beyond the Jordan, near the Yarmuk River, believed to be the brook Kerith where Elijah hid from Ahab* (1 Kings 17:1–5; John 1:19–28).



The AREA OF Ministry of John The BAPTIST

* Bargil Pixner, *The Fifth Gospel* (Rosh Pina, Israel: Corazin Publishing, 1992), 19–21; Rami Arav, *Bethsaida* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 1999), vol. 2, 388–390.

2. What message did the angel of God give to Zechariah as he was burning incense in the temple? What did the angel say about John's zeal for God? (See Luke 1:8 - 17.)

3. How do we know that Jesus considered John to be the Elijah who would come as promised by the prophet Malachi? How did Jesus view John and his ministry? (See Matthew 3:13 - 15; 11:7 - 14; 17:10 - 13.)

4. Who did the religious leaders think John might be? What was their response to him? (See John 1:19 - 28.)



**The DeSo LAtE WiLDeRneSS oF JuDAh WheRe
John The BApTiSt Mini STeReD**

5. What do each of the following passages reveal about the zeal of John the Baptist? How far was he willing to go, and how much was he willing to sacrifice, to be who God had called him to be? How zealous was he to proclaim the message of God?
 - a. Matthew 3:1 – 4 (see also 2 Kings 1:8)

 - b. Matthew 3:5 – 12

 - c. Mark 1:1 – 4

 - d. Mark 6:17 – 20

PHINEHAS: ZEALOUS FOR GOD'S HONOR

Numbers 25:1 – 13 records the shocking story of Israel's seduction by Moab and its shameless digression into sexual immorality and worship of Baal. Moses told the people of Israel that the Lord commanded them to kill everyone who had participated in these activities. Yet, in direct disobedience to God, an Israelite man took a Moabite woman into his tent and presumably had sexual relations with her. This happened right in front of Moses, right in front of the tabernacle where God's presence lived!

This was too much for Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, the priest. Displaying passionate zeal for God's honor, Phinehas went into the tent and drove a

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spear through both the Israelite and the Moabite woman. God commended Phinehas for zealously upholding his honor and rewarded him with a covenant of a lasting priesthood.

Phinehas and his zeal for the Lord is still remembered today. His zeal for God was immortalized in Psalm 106:28–31, and the Zealots considered him a hero and a model. The zeal Phinehas showed in preserving God's honor in the face of idolatry is quite similar to that of Elijah, so it is no wonder that rabbinic literature often discusses Phinehas and Elijah together.

Reflection

Those who are zealous for God make an impact on people not only during their lifetime, but often for generations — even millennia — to come. Just think of how many people today know of Moses and Elijah, of Peter and Paul, and to a lesser extent Phinehas and John the Baptist. Read Acts 19:1–9, which records an encounter the apostle Paul had with some of John's disciples in Ephesus — nearly seven hundred miles from Israel — and consider the following questions.

What does the presence of these disciples in Ephesus indicate about the impact John's zeal for God had on others? How zealous do you think these disciples were, and who were they trying to imitate when Paul met them?

Whose disciples did John's disciples become after Paul told them about Jesus? What does this tell you about their knowledge of Scripture and their zeal for obeying it?

How much does the Christian community today desire the zeal of Elijah? How much do we seek to be filled with passionate devotion and obedience to Christ and the Scriptures? How much of an impact do we have on the world around us?

How important is it to you to be zealous for God? For how long do you want the world to remember your zeal for God?

Day Three | Sharing the Passion of Elijah

The Very Words of God

Always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.

Proverbs 23:17

Bible Discovery

Teaching Elijah's Passion to People Who Never Knew Him

To zealously love God is to love him with one's whole being, and godly people of every era and culture have a consuming passion to do his will and maintain his honor in everything they do and say. The Jews of Jesus' day had been taught of Elijah's passion from their earliest days, so they readily understood what it meant to zealously walk with God. But what about the people of Asia Minor who were immersed in the pagan, Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire? They had no knowledge of Elijah. They aspired to pleasure and self-preservation. How would Jesus' disciples teach them to walk as Jesus walked?

In the arena of athletics and the Olympic games, Jesus' disciples and biblical writers found powerful metaphors of the zeal God desires. The games were widely known throughout the Roman world, and the biblical writers used the metaphors of athletic training and performance to communicate the gospel message. By capturing images of the intensity, passion, and focus required for athletic competition, they were able to explain true discipleship to people who were otherwise unfamiliar with God and his Word.

1. Even before God called him to preach the news of Christ to the Gentiles, Paul was extremely zealous for God. What things does he reveal about himself that show he took this calling seriously? Which metaphor did he use to describe his walk with Jesus? What were his concerns regarding his performance? (See Galatians 1:13 - 2:2, especially 2:2.)
2. Read 2 Timothy 2:1 - 5. Which two metaphors that would have been very familiar to people of the Roman Empire did Paul use to encourage Timothy in his walk with Jesus? How intense a focus and commitment does this tell us Paul expected of Timothy?
3. In Galatians 5:7 - 8, Paul told the Galatians that they had been "running a good race." What apparently happened to them and how did Paul "coach" them regarding the importance of their effort?

4. What did Paul hope for his disciples, and what would it mean to him? In what way does this illustrate that he was walking as Jesus walked? (See Philippians 2:14–16.)

5. Which images did Paul use to picture his life of faith? What does this tell us about the way he approached his “walk” as a disciple of Jesus? Do you think he was running a sprint or a marathon? (See 2 Timothy 4:6–8.)

DID YOU KNOW?

During the first century, the winners of athletic games would each receive a wreath of olive branches or even gold, which imitated the wreath the gods were portrayed as wearing. The wreath was given in honor of the athletes’ faithfulness and exceptional performance, much like an Olympic champion today would receive a gold medal.

In keeping with the athletic competition metaphor they often used to describe the Christian walk, the New Testament writers used the Greek word *stephanos* (crown) to describe the reward righteous people will receive for their faithfulness to God. This word typically refers to the winners’ wreath presented during the games as opposed to the word *diadem* (also translated as crown) that is used only in reference to Jesus (Revelation 19:12) and the devil (Revelation 12:3).

On our own, none of us deserves to receive a wreath of honor. But by God’s grace, Scripture’s guidance, the encouragement of the faith community, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, God forgives us for our failures. He enables us to be faithful and promises to reward our faithfulness. So we must *run*—not walk, not jog, but *run*—as we live for him!

6. What zeal and passion does Paul demonstrate as he coaches the Corinthians in how to live and train for obedience to God? In what ways did Paul demonstrate this dedication in his own life? (See 1 Corinthians 9:24 - 27.)

7. Which images of your world do you think communicate the zealous nature of being a disciple of Jesus in your culture?

Reflection

The idea of living zealously for God doesn't come solely from the New Testament writers, from Jesus' disciples, or even from the prophet Elijah or the patriarch Moses; it comes from God himself. Scripture frequently describes God as being zealous — intensely passionate — about everything he does, and he expects his people to respond to him by imitating his zeal and returning his love. Read Deuteronomy 29:14 - 29 and Isaiah 9:1 - 2, 6 - 7, which describe the nature, the fervor, and the intent of God's zeal.

Why does God desire us to be zealous for him and his Word?

In what ways does a greater understanding of God's zealous nature influence your walk with Jesus?

How zealously are you “running” your “race” for Jesus? Is your effort best described as a sprint or a marathon? How committed are you to “running to win”?

Memorize

Run in such a way as to get the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24

DATA FILE

Aphrodisias — A Culture Far Removed from God

Located in the Meander River Valley (150 miles from Ephesus and less than 50 miles from Laodicea and Colosse), Aphrodisias in the first century was a typical Greek/Roman city of about thirty thousand people. Founded by the Carians before Abraham’s time (c. 1600 BC), the city was initially named Ninoe after the local fertility goddess who was also known as Ashera. The city came under Greek influence in about 1000 BC, and the Greek goddess Aphrodite replaced the ancient Ninoe. During the Greek period, the city became known as a cultural center and location for one of the ancient world’s great schools of sculpture. Many of the magnificent statues and carvings found in archaeological digs around the Mediterranean world can be traced to the stone or sculptors of Aphrodisias.

From a religious standpoint, Aphrodite (the goddess of love, beauty, seduction, and sexual pleasure) was the dominant deity in Aphrodisias. Also called “the Queen of Heaven,” she represented frivolity, promiscuity, and sexual pleasure without commitment. Worship of Aphrodite celebrated her unfaithfulness to her “ordinary” husband, Hephaestus, and her promise of fertility, love, and sexual fulfillment made her very popular.

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Aphrodisias came under the Roman Empire in 20 BC during the reign of Caesar Augustus. The temple to Augustus, the Sebasteion built as a center for worship of the Roman emperors, the Portico of Tiberius in the agora (city marketplace), and the bath complex built by Hadrian indicate the wealth, influence, and power of the city during the Roman period. In addition to these structures, the city had a forum, theater, and arena.

Although Paul traveled through the Meander River Valley and John wrote Revelation, in part, to the church at nearby Laodicea, Aphrodisias is not mentioned in the Bible. However, we do know that the city had a Jewish community and a very early Christian community. Imagine the zeal the Christians in this city must have had in order to walk as Jesus walked!



**The CeReMoni AL GATe, CALLEd The TeTRApYLon ,
oF Wh AT ReMAIn S oF The TeMpLe oF AphRo DiTe in
AphRo DiSiAS. in The BACKGRoun D, on Ly Fou RTeen
oF The o RiGin AL Fo RTy Co Lu Mn S oF The TeMpLe
ReMAIn STAn Din G. The GATE in The Fo ReGRoun D
DiSpLAYs So Me oF The Fine, DeTAiLeD SCuLpTuRe
Fo R Whi Ch The CiTy WAS Kno Wn.**

Day Four | Acclaiming the Greatness of God!

The Very Words of God

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?... Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24, 26–27

Bible Discovery

The Sacrifice of Passionate Devotion to God

The athletic competition and games metaphors used by the early Christian disciples were more than just a meaningful way to communicate the passion of Elijah to people who had never heard of him. In the Roman Empire, running the race of faith was also an acclamation of loyalty that would become a matter of life and death for the early believers. This is because the Roman emperors considered themselves to be divine and became increasingly insistent that their subjects acclaim and honor their deity. The Scripture study beginning on page 39 explores the passion of the early believers in the face of emperor worship.

FACT FILE

Games of Life and Death

Emperor worship was increasingly a fact of life in the Roman Empire from the reign of Caesar Augustus onward. As the empire became more and more diverse with multitudes of gods and religions, worship of the emperor as god became a vital form of unification. The people could worship their

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respective gods freely as long as they would also publicly declare that “Caesar is Lord.”

Any civic celebration in the Roman world was, in fact, a religious activity. The theater, city council, gladiatorial combat, and oratorical or artistic competitions were all religious events. Festivities began with animal offerings, incense, and dedications to the gods of the event. Choirs sang praises to the deities of the community and to the empire. Each event was a form of worship performed as an offering to honor the gods.



The STADIUM OF Aphrodisias, Site of The Imperial Games

Competition in the Olympic games, which had largely become the Imperial games, was also considered an offering to the gods, a testimony to the greatness of the deity in whose name the athletes performed. Over time, the games became the stage from which spectators and participants alike could acclaim the emperor's deity and affirm their loyalty to him. Spectators by the thousands (the stadium in Aphrodisias seated 30,000–35,000) would cheer as the emperor and his officials entered the stadium and took their places in the royal box. The athletes then dedicated their performance to their gods and competed to honor the emperor's lordship and to acclaim his deity.

This created a dilemma for Jews and Christians alike who would not worship any other gods. Knowing that the Jews would never acclaim the deity of the Roman emperor, Herod had persuaded Caesar Augustus to grant the Jews an exception from the emperor worship requirement. The community of Jesus did not have such an exemption, however, and the early Christians experienced great pressure to participate in processions, festivals, and games to acclaim the emperor as god and to affirm their loyalty to him. Many of them, including nearly all of Jesus' disciples, had to make the ultimate choice—to sacrifice their lives, or to deny Jesus as their Lord and King and live.

1. What did Paul write to Timothy as the pressure of emperor worship intensified? What evidence of the passion of Elijah do you see in his words? How do you think Timothy and the people he pastored in Ephesus responded? (See 1 Timothy 6:11 - 16.)

2. What did believers who faced the harsh reality of emperor worship—the possibility they could be put to death for acclaiming Jesus alone—learn about the hope of their commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ from Romans 10:9 - 11; Philippians 2:5 - 11; and 1 Peter 3:13 - 18, 22? How would these words have fueled their passion?



The SeBASTeion oF AphRoDiSiAS, WheRe The eMpeRoRS oF RoMe WeRe WoRShipeD

3. The emperor's authority as ruler and the reality of emperor worship in the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus sheds an interesting light on the interaction between Jesus and Pilate prior to Jesus' crucifixion. Read John 18:28 - 37; 19:7 - 16 and consider what lines were being drawn, what loyalties were being affirmed, and what the future implications would be.
 - a. Who sentenced Jesus to death, and what authority did he represent?
 - b. Why do you think Jesus submitted himself to the authority of a Roman emperor who claimed to be god? How do you think the early Christians who faced death because of their obedience to God viewed what Jesus did?

- c. What were the implications of Pilate's actions (as the emperor's representative) for the early believers as they faced the pressure to acknowledge the emperor as Lord?
 - d. What were the implications of Jesus' claim to be the Son of God that so greatly offended the Jews? What do you think were the implications of the chief priests' statement to Pilate that they had no king but Caesar?
4. After his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days with his disciples proving that he was alive, teaching them about the kingdom of God, and instructing them in what they were to do. Read Acts 1:3 - 11 and answer the following questions.
- a. What "mission" did Jesus give his disciples? Of what were they witnesses?
 - b. In light of the growing emphasis on emperor worship, why do you think it was important that Jesus' disciples saw him ascend into heaven?
 - c. What connection would the disciples have made between Daniel 7:13 - 14, 27 and what they had seen? How do you think it would have affected their zeal for being Jesus' witnesses?

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Who Is Lord?

A Roman emperor was declared divine when witnesses claimed to have seen the emperor's father ascend to heaven, thus making the emperor the "Son of God." This process was called *apotheosis*. The emperor's deity stood on the validity of these witnesses. Augustus, for example, declared his father, Julius, divine in 29 BC and a statue of Julius was placed in the Prytaneion in Ephesus. Augustus then declared himself "Son of God," and the Senate affirmed the declaration.

In contrast, consider who witnessed Jesus' ascension, who the disciples told about his ascension, and/or how people responded to the news. See Acts 1:1–9; 2:14, 32–36, 41; 7:55–58; and Hebrews 1:1–12; 8:1; 12:2.

Reflection

Jesus' first disciples did not know that most of them eventually would give their lives to be witnesses of his lordship, but when the time came, they did. If you are going to be his witness, you do not know what the future holds either.

To what extent are you committed to "run the race" to honor him? How far are you willing to go to be the kind of witness Jesus' disciples were? Would you give your life?

What do you think gave the early followers of Jesus the courage to stand up for him rather than worship the emperor? What gives you that courage, particularly in the face of opposition?

A significant part of the believer’s task is to declare the lordship of Jesus in everyday life. How do you do this? What more is required of you to do it with the commitment and intensity of an athlete who is competing to win the prize?

WHEN YOUR LIFE IS ON THE LINE

Walking as Jesus walked in cities of the Roman Empire such as Aphrodisias required intense dedication and unwavering passion to obey God in everything. What fueled the passion of the early disciples to give everything they had—even life itself—to honor and acclaim Jesus as their Savior and Son of God?

The Demands of Emperor Worship	What Fueled the Disciples’ Passion
The emperor claimed to be divine.	1 Tim. 6:12–16; 1 Cor. 8:5–6
You are asked to sprinkle incense during a festival to acknowledge the emperor’s deity and authority.	Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:5–11
No one believes that Jesus is Lord and the Son of God.	1 John 4:2–3
You fear the severe penalty for not acknowledging the emperor’s deity.	1 John 4:4; 1 Peter 5:10–11; Rev. 13:10
You are tempted to remain silent about your belief in Jesus.	1 Peter 3:13–17
You are not allowed to conduct business, get water from public fountains, or participate in city life.	Rev. 13:1, 4–8, 11–17

Day Five | A Personal Challenge

The Very Words of God

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Hebrews 12:1

Bible Discovery

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

The stadium in Aphrodisias is a dramatic reminder of the passion with which we are to train, compete, and fight to “run” our walk of discipleship with Jesus with all of our heart, soul, and strength. But that is not all. As Ray Vander Laan pointed out, the stadium is also a reminder of the crowds of faithful followers of God who have gone before us. They already have fought the good fight, acclaimed their Lord and King, and won the prize of his everlasting honor. We can think of them as the witnesses of our walk, our faith, our “race.” They are, in a sense, our “fans” who cheer us on as we remember their faithfulness to our Lord.

1. Read Hebrews 11:1 - 12:1. Read it more than once so that you take in more of its meaning and significance.
 - a. Which great men and/or women of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11:1 - 31 stood out to you? Why?
 - b. Who comprises the “great cloud of witnesses” who have run the race before us?

- c. Faith for these witnesses involved far more than verbal assent or even rational belief in God and his Word. What was it that made their faith commendable?

- d. How much effort, passion, and zeal for God did these witnesses demonstrate?

- e. What can we learn from them about what it means to “run” the race for Jesus? And why must we do this?

THINK ABOUT IT

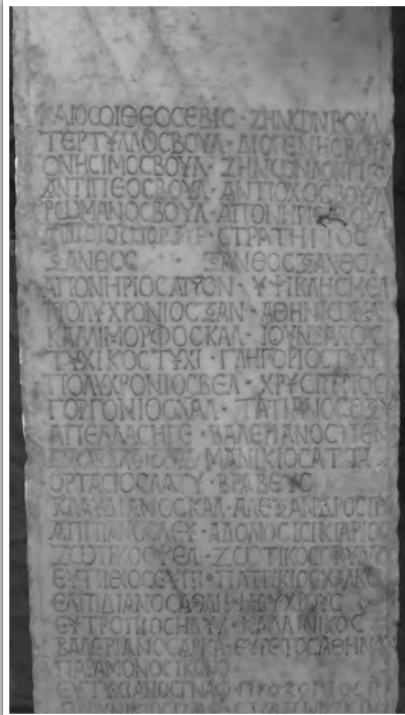
We must view faith in God as a race. It is more than intellectual assent. It is *belief* that we put into action during a marathon-like race to grow more like Jesus, one we can picture being run in front of previous runners of God’s race of faith who have finished their earthly races.

- 2. According to Hebrews 12:2 - 3, what motivated Jesus, and what did he do? What effect should his example have on us?

- 3. If we have a mental picture of life being like a marathon that we are running in front of great runners of God’s race of faith who have gone before us, how might that change how we live — and the effort we expend running our “race”?

DID YOU KNOW?

One of the most significant finds in the ruins of Aphrodisias is a simple marble pillar, called a stele, that has legible inscriptions (in Greek) on two of its four faces. It is believed the pillar dates from the time period during which the early church was growing in Aphrodisias. Scholars also are quite certain that the pillar is associated with a synagogue or a charitable undertaking, most likely a soup kitchen or food pantry, of the synagogue community.



The lists on the pillar are intriguing. One face lists individuals who have contributed to the construction of a new building. The other face (the main one) lists people associated with the project. The first group of fifty-five names are under the heading “Jews,” and the list designates three proselytes or converts, meaning three Gentiles who had fully converted to Judaism (including circumcision). The second portion of the list is under the heading “*theosebes*,” which means God fearers (the word is highlighted in the photo on page 46). These apparently were Gentiles who had been attracted to God by the faithful living of the Jewish community and, although they had not completely converted to Judaism, had abandoned their pagan gods and practices in order to obey and honor the God of the Bible and associate with the Jewish community.

Even before the Christian message came to the Roman world, God had been drawing pagan Gentiles to himself! To see the pillar at Aphrodisias with its list of fifty-five God fearers is to see passionate devotion to God in action. How could any of these witnesses have imagined that their faith in God would speak to their world and still speak so powerfully today? We can find great encouragement in the fact that if we live faithfully and speak clearly of our love for Jesus, God has and is always preparing an audience that is eager to hear the good news.

Reflection

Which “witness” or hero of the faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 (or a spouse, parent, brother, sister, child, or friend who has impacted your life) cheers you on as you remember how faithfully he or she ran the race God had set out?

What about that person's faith challenges or encourages you? Write down what that person's example teaches you and what you want to emulate in your walk with Jesus.

In what ways does remembering the life and example of this person help you to run more faithfully?

What kind of a "witness" are you to other believers? What is it about the way you run your race that can help them run their best races for Jesus?

Which things "hinder" and "entangle" you as you seek to "run" more faithfully for Jesus? What must you do to eliminate them from your life?

Speak to God about your admiration for faithful believers around the world who put their lives on the line because they believe in Jesus. Ask him to give you an unquenchable desire to demonstrate your commitment to the lordship of Jesus.

Memorize

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:2–3

DECLARE GOD'S LORDSHIP OVER YOUR LIFE!

- Jesus is Lord and God, not anyone else.
- God has declared that he alone is Lord and in control.
- All Christians—and saints who lived zealously for God—are God's Olympians.
- Your walk with and for God as his disciple is a declaration of God's lordship in your everyday world.
- You are called to live for God, not yourself.