

## 2.THE START OF THE JEWISH REVOLT

### WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

The Jews longed for the coming of the Messiah. They thought He would deliver them from the rule of the hated Romans and restore the ancient kingdom of David to its former glory. The hearts of the Jewish people beat with impatience and desire for a future with no arrogant Roman soldiers marching through the streets of Jerusalem.

They also longed for a future where they could call the tax collectors to account. The Jews saw the collectors as traitors, who worked for the enemy at the cost of their fellow Jewish brothers. When, oh when would the moment come when, under the command of their own king, they could drive the Romans out of their country? With these thoughts in mind, hatred against the Roman oppressors flared up in their hearts: *those foreign intruders!*

Jesus of Nazareth? He was not the Messiah! He was a deceiver, and they rightly delivered Him to the Romans. The Jews witnessed His humiliating death on the cross, and they persecuted the followers of this Jesus with fire and sword. Away with Him! When a Jew heard the name 'Jesus', they would spit on the ground with contempt.

Yes, this was the way most people thought during those early years after Christ's death and resurrection. They refused to believe that the despised Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. They refused to admit that they had rejected their King, their Redeemer. The thought of God's severe punishment for killing His beloved Son did not even enter their heads. They were unaware that this harsh punishment of an angry God was swiftly drawing near. No, the *true* Messiah still had to come, of course. They were still expecting Him and earnestly longed for Him!

In the days of Roman rule, the Jews enjoyed great wealth and prosperity. There was no poverty and food was abundant. However, the yoke of Roman oppression soured their lives. As long as the

Romans were in power, the Jews could not, or would not, be happy.

The Jewish people were often surprised by strange rumours about the Messiah appearing in a particular place. For a second, this would raise hope in their hearts: "Could this be true?"

Often a group of Jews would follow a leader who claimed to be the Messiah and would take part in a revolt with this self-proclaimed Messiah. The revolts were not successful as the Romans ruthlessly suppressed them. The hated Romans reigned supreme.

Another time, the Messiah was said to have appeared in a different area. Again, it raised hope and expectation but ended in further disappointment. Many Jews became impatient waiting for the Messiah.

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He told His audience that this would happen, but the blinded Jewish people refused to hear Him. Jesus had said: 'For many shall come in My Name, saying, I am Christ, and shall deceive many.' Jesus' prophesy was literally fulfilled as the false Messiahs deceived many of the Jews, but they did not realise it.

### GESSIUS FLORUS

'Can you spare something for the poor governor?' Many Jews walk the streets of Jerusalem with boxes and plates. From house to house they knock at every door and everywhere the same question is heard: 'Can you spare a donation for the poor governor?'

A contemptuous smile is on their lips and their words are full of mockery and contempt. Various Jews walk along with the beggars. Everywhere there is laughter and mockery.

What is this all about? Why are the Jews doing that? Who is this poor governor?

Don't you know? The begging Jews know it very well, yes, all of Jerusalem knows. The Jews clench their fists, and their eyes are full of hatred.



Gessius Florus

During this time, the Roman governor Gessius Florus rules the Jewish nation. He is not a nice person; he is a cruel man. He makes the Jewish people pay a lot more tax than they need to.

So, it is no wonder that the Jews hate him. He only has himself to thank for that! Instead of trying to win the love of the Jews, he is so cruel and wicked that the Jewish people rebel against him.

One day he even has the temple treasury robbed. Well, this has never happened before, and the Jews become extremely angry. In helpless rage, they clench their fists and plot revenge. Does this heathen dare to steal that which is holy? They *must*, they *shall* take revenge, but how to go about it? A revolt will not work because they'll soon be cruelly beaten by the Roman soldiers. So, the Jews reach for the weapon of mockery.

Does Gessius Florus need money? Then they will help. They will go and beg for him.

Many Jews walk the streets of Jerusalem with boxes and plates. They ask everywhere: 'Please, could you spare a donation for the poor governor?' This is a blatant insult to the proud Roman governor. They try to upset him in the worst possible way they can; they make him the subject of Jewish scorn and ridicule.

When Gessius Florus hears what is taking place in Jerusalem and learns how openly the Jews mock him, he turns white with rage and gnashing his teeth; he gives his commands.

Soon a detachment of Roman soldiers, swords drawn, march from the encampment. Without

any warning, they attack the begging and mocking Jews. Screaming and crying suddenly fill the air, and soon dead bodies cover the streets. Without pity, the angry Romans kill anyone they see. Three thousand Jews lose their lives in that horrible massacre.

The mocking and laughing of the Jews has changed into cries of distress. Everyone tries to save his or her life by running away but it doesn't help.

Soon there is a strange silence in the normally bustling streets of Jerusalem. It is the silence of death! Gessius Florus grins wickedly. He plans to teach those despised Jews another lesson. He sends a messenger to Caesarea, and soon more Roman soldiers enter Jerusalem.

King Agrippa, the same King who visited Festus and wanted to hear the Apostle Paul, fears a general revolt. He understands the Jewish people well and senses their deep-rooted frustrations.

His sister Bernice goes to the angry governor Gessius Florus and begs for the Jewish people to be pardoned. The Governor responds: 'Very well because you ask it, I shall forgive them. But only on one condition: the leaders of Jerusalem must go and meet the Roman soldiers who are on their way from Caesarea to Jerusalem, and they must sincerely promise to be obedient from now on.'



Money Collection box

Do the Jewish rulers agree to that?

Yes! They leave Jerusalem, and when they meet the approaching Roman soldiers, they bow before them with humility and show true meekness and submission. However, the Roman soldiers proudly ignore their humble greetings and promises. They remain standing and look at the Jewish leaders with eyes full of contempt.

This is too much for the Jews. Once more anger and rage rise within them. They yell and scream angrily at the soldiers. Their cries of disappointment and rage fill the air.

The commander shouts a brief order and with uplifted swords, the Roman soldiers attack the defenceless Jews again. For the second time, a bloody massacre takes place.

For the Jews, this is the drop which causes the bucket to overflow. In Jerusalem, all the Jews revolt and take up arms. Everywhere the cry is heard: 'Death to the Romans! Death to the Romans!' It becomes so bad that the Roman governor, Gessius Florus, can't handle it anymore. He escapes from the Jewish capital and flees to Caesarea. Some of the Roman soldiers stationed at Jerusalem, escape to fortified towers to save their lives.

### THE JEWISH REVOLT

Much more happened during those turbulent days, but this is how the Jewish revolt began. Not only the Jews in Jerusalem rebel, but the entire country takes up arms.

When King Agrippa hears about all this, he quickly visits the rebellious city to calm the Jews and save the situation if possible. But his good intentions fail. He must flee too, and behind his back, the angry Jews set fire to his beautiful palace.

At the start, the Jews gain one victory after another. Cestius, the Roman governor, marches with a large army to Jerusalem but suffers a resounding defeat. The Jews kill thousands of Romans. The Roman soldiers, who had withdrawn into fortified towers, surrender when the Jews promise that they will spare their lives and allow them to march out freely. But the Jews shamefully break their promise! As soon as the Romans open the gates and surrender their weapons, they are cowardly murdered by the Jewish attackers. It was cruel and false, for the Jews had sincerely promised the Romans a safe retreat.

When the news of this mass-murder spreads around the Roman Empire, the Romans murder thousands of innocent and defenceless Jews who live in other Roman cities.

Meanwhile, the Romans are driven out of Palestine. The Jews think they have obtained the victory and are exuberant and ready to celebrate. Sadly, they are greatly mistaken, because...

Before we continue with this story, there is something else to tell you.

### THE CHRISTIANS

The Lord Jesus had said: '*Therefore, when you see the abomination of desolation, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*' This was a warning to the Christians. The Lord Jesus had foretold that dark days would come. He predicted that Jerusalem would be so completely destroyed, that not one stone would be left upon another. This 'abomination of desolation' was the sign for the followers of Christ to flee Jerusalem and escape to the mountains, as Christ had commanded them.

Many Christians were still living in Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish revolt, as the first Christian church was instituted there. Due to the violent persecution, many Christians had already fled, but not *all* of them. But now they saw that Jerusalem was about to be destroyed as Jesus had said.

The fighting between the rebellious Jews and the Roman armies was fierce. The Christians, who were still in Jerusalem, decided to leave the city because they remembered the warning of the Lord. They fled beyond the Jordan and went to live in a little place in the mountains called Pella. Not one Christian perished in the destruction of Jerusalem. The Lord preserved them from that terrible misery! They were safe in Pella, for the Romans did not go there to fight.

### ROMAN EMPERORS



Nero

In the great city of Rome, a wicked, cruel emperor lives in his beautiful palace: Nero. Later we will learn more about him. Nero thought only of parties and feasting. However, he hears reports

about the Jewish revolt and the thousands of Roman soldiers who were murdered in a humiliating defeat.

These bad tidings make him worried. That could be dangerous! He imagines the other nations in his empire hearing about it and revolting as well!

That could be the end of his power; it could even mean the end of the mighty Roman Empire!

To prevent that from happening, he sends a huge army of 60,000 soldiers to the land of the Jews. He *must*, and he *shall*, subdue the Jews. One of his best generals, Vespasian, is in command of that immense army. As fast as he can, Vespasian and his army march to the border of Palestine. The Jews in Jerusalem hear about this powerful army coming their way. They decide to send the Jewish General Josephus with a much smaller army to Galilee. There he will defeat Vespasian's army and try to prevent the Roman soldiers from entering the country.

Soon the armies approach each other. The fighting is fierce. The Jews defend themselves with desperate courage, but they are defeated. As quickly as possible Josephus rallies what is left of his defeated army and recommences the battle. The Roman soldiers beat them for the second time.



General Josephus

Josephus flees with the remainder of his army to the city of Jotapata. However, the Roman general Vespasian pursues Josephus and immediately lays siege to the Jewish fortress.

The fighting at the city Jotapata is dreadful. The struggle lasts forty-seven days, almost seven weeks. At one stage the Romans succeed in forcing themselves into the fortress, but they are driven out again by the Jews. Hundreds of Roman soldiers are pushed down into a deep ravine by the desperate Jews and are smashed to pieces on the sharp rocks below.

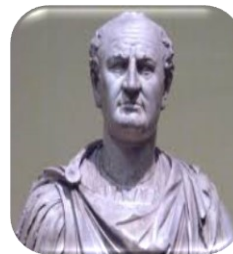
Finally, the Romans conquer Jotapata, and the embittered Romans take bloody revenge on the Jews. Some authors say that they murdered more than 40,000 Jews — men, women, children and the elderly. Without mercy, the Romans kill both young and old. Rivers of blood flow down the streets.

Josephus, the Jewish general, with forty soldiers, escapes to a cave close to the city. But the Roman soldiers find them. What will the Jews do? Surrender?

No, the majority do not want that. They would rather be dead than fall into the hands of the Romans.

And so, they decide to kill each other. They cast lots to decide whose turn it will be next. The last one must kill himself.

According to some writers, Josephus is the last survivor. However, he decides not to kill himself and the Romans take him prisoner. Soon Josephus



Vespasian

is standing before the commanding Roman general, Vespasian. The general decides not to kill him but instead becomes friends with Flavius Josephus. Josephus stays with the Romans but

refuses to fight against his people. Instead, he continually tries to convince the Jews that they will lose this conflict because they will not be able to hold out against the superior weapons and powerful Roman army. He repeatedly tells them: 'Surrender!'

But the Jews do not listen to him. Scornfully, they call him a traitor and denounce him as a deserter! What? Surrender? Never! The Jews would rather die than become prisoners of the Romans.

The war continues, undiminished. The skilled commander Vespasian conquers city after city. When the Romans penetrate the fortress Gamala, the Jewish defenders drag their wives and children to a deep ravine in the neighbourhood. First, they hurl their wives into the ravine, then their children, and finally, the desperate Jews jump after their wives and children down the steep cliff.

What terrible blindness and hardening of hearts has come upon the Jewish people. Although they valiantly defend themselves; they are defeated

time and again. Soon all of Galilee has been conquered by the Romans.

Now Vespasian marches to the capital, Jerusalem. Once the capital is taken, the war is over; the end of the Jewish revolt seems near.

But suddenly, Vespasian, the brave Roman general, leaves the army and travels back to Rome as fast as possible. Why? Has he become afraid? Is he fleeing? No, not at all! On the contrary! He hears that emperor Nero has been murdered by a slave. The army quickly proclaims their general Vespasian as Emperor. However, the people of Rome have crowned another man as emperor. Now there are two emperors at the same time! *That can't happen!*

So he hurries back to Rome. When he arrives, there is a brief battle, and the other emperor is defeated and killed. Vespasian succeeds the cruel Nero as the emperor of the vast Roman Empire.

Once he has secured his position as Rome's next emperor, he sends his son Titus to Jerusalem. Titus must continue to fight the Jews, conquer Jerusalem and put down the last opposition.

Because of the power struggles in Rome, Jerusalem enjoyed 18 months of peace. But instead of the Jews repenting or using those eighteen months to fortify the city and prepare themselves for the next battle, which will inevitably come, a terrible civil war rages in Jerusalem. It seems as if the Jews are totally blinded. And they are. They hasten their own downfall.

But I will tell you about that in the next chapter.

### QUESTIONS.

1. Give two reasons why the Jews longed for the coming of the Messiah.
2. Why did they reject Jesus?
3. What method did the Jews use to show their resentment of the Roman governor, Cestius Florus? Why was he especially hated?
4. Why did the Jews revolt? Were they successful? Explain.

5. Describe what is meant by the 'abomination of desolation.'

6. How did the Lord provide for the preservation of the early Christian church? Where were the Christians to flee?

7. Who is:

a) Vespasian b) Josephus

8. Why did the Jews consistently refuse to surrender?

9. What occurred at Jotapata?

10. Why did Vespasian suddenly return to Rome?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY.

Give a brief history of King Agrippa, including all information given in Acts concerning him.