

Jesus on the Coal Pile

*The Gospel of Matthew in
Post-Industrial West Virginia*



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Introduction – Christ’s Judea, our Appalachia

I write this introduction in the North View neighborhood of Clarksburg. Down the road there is a glass factory, one that once made every kind of glass you might imagine. The industry boomed when glassmaking methods from Europe made their way into the states. Entire sheets of glass, huge and difficult to conceive of, or work with, were now able to be made easily. I’ve had the mechanics of the method explained to me, but I do not think I could explain it well here. Something involved floating the glass on a plane of liquid, something about rollers and several people working on it at once. Whatever the method, the result was spectacular.

You would not know that now, looking at the rusted out remains of the factory. Its smokestack is visible from Route 50 if you know where to look for it, but it mostly comes as a surprise if you drive down Hamill Ave to its end. It is a great rusted corpse, fading into obscurity. Despite funding the livelihood of hundreds and securing the retirement of many of those who still live between North View’s narrow streets, it is devoid of life itself. Its machines will never beat out their loud song again, and the trucks that once carried supplies to and from it will never roll through its gates again.

This sight is not rare in Appalachia, though I can only speak for West Virginia personally. The broken down houses and businesses that line our roads are extensions of the industries that were once the lifeblood of these communities. The factories have closed, businesses have been replaced by corporate superpowers. The money dries up, opportunity flees, and people are forced to scatter to chase better prospects, or remain to turn the lights out when the towns finally fade into the woods around them. The mountains that gave life take their land back, bit by bit. In many corners of these hills and hollers, we seem to be at the end of an enchanted age.

It is not all doom and gloom though. The past, those halcyon days we remember fondly, were full of their own problems. The mines that gave life to communities killed their miners slowly through that particular kind of silicosis we call “black lung.” The coal barons and company men were not benevolent in their treatment of workers who had to defend their rights through unions and armed revolt. Though the present struggles faced in Appalachia, the result of decades of complex social factors, seem overwhelming – they are a new brand of the same old thing. The words of Qoheleth ring out, “Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.” (Eccl. 7:10) Appalachia’s past seems to hold all the opportunity we’re missing today, but we have to see that for the nostalgic dream it is.

The troubles we face are particular to us, but they are not something we face alone. The following study seeks to examine Jesus’s teachings in their original context. First Century Judea was a politically diverse, economically depressed region that was at the mercy of interests outside itself. From the fishing ports on the Sea of Galilee displacing local fishing industries to feed the Roman War Machine, to the soldiers they fed that kept “order,” along roads and within cities.

This is all playing out in a province that was once independent and strong. The people of Judah were never larger or stronger than Egypt or the many Northern Empires that it became vassal to throughout history, but it was still able to stand on its own and sit at the table of regional politics. Before Assyria and after the Maccabean revolt, there were times of peace and relative prosperity. People longed for those days of opportunity, and like we often do today, people dreamed of how they could get those days back. Some wanted to use the powers that be to regain some power in the world, others wanted to reject it entirely, and still others took up arms to attempt to bring about change that could not come otherwise.

The Gospel that Jesus brought was an alternative reality to the world of Roman oppression – a community in solidarity with one another, where the divisions and hierarchies of the world melted away into the Kingdom of Heaven. It was also distinct from the perspective of his Jewish peers. This is not to say it was separate from them, Jesus and the message he brought were definitionally Jewish and Apocalyptic. Yet, Jesus brought a message that brought people together and scandalized every extreme. Jesus lived and preached a message that was by no means centrist, but in its extremity called everyone to reflect on the part they play.

This study is not going to solve the problems of Appalachia, not locally or as a whole. However, it will attempt to see where the history of our region aligns with the history of Judea. We look to Jesus's message and understand that, in many ways, we are similar to its original audience. We will acknowledge differences of course, we are not first century Jews after all, but we will seek to embody the United Methodist Church's goal of, "seeking to relate the old words to life's present realities."¹ The hope of this study is that we will understand what Jesus's messages to Judea in the first century can tell us about life in West Virginia today.

The factories are closed, and they are not coming back. The mines are open, but they will never be the mixed blessing and curse they were before. The state is struggling to define itself in a world that seems to be changing faster than our old infrastructure and economy can keep up with. The future is uncertain, but as Jesus offered an alternative and new life for his followers long ago, so we too can engage with an alternative to the world as it is. The transformation of ourselves, our families, our communities, and beyond. Let us approach Jesus and hear the Sermon on the Coal Pile and take every word of it to heart.

¹ "The Bible." In *What we Believe*. Available at: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/our-christian-roots-the-bible>