

Good News!

The Life and Message of Jesus

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by Phillip J. Long

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502 W. Phippen Street, Whitakers, NC 27891

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First Printing, 2024

Printed in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-1-59557-412-1

Digital ISBN: 978-1-59557-414-5

Edited by Michael Matthews, Miya Nakamura, and Brent Niedergall

Cover by Noah Lehman

Layout and design by Christa Lord

Published by



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Introduction

Out of all the topics in the world to study, could you imagine anything more momentous than the life of Jesus? In all of human history, He is the most influential and astonishing person who ever lived. Anyone who knows anything about history, whether a Christian or an honest skeptic, would have to admit Jesus' tremendous influence.

Many of the young people you will teach have most likely grown up in church and have repeatedly heard the same "stories" about Jesus. So it is incumbent on you, as the teacher, to excite your students that this series will reexamine the world-changing events of Jesus' life from a fresh perspective.

The Gospels address the greatest question any human being could ever ask: Who is this Jesus? All four Gospels, taken together, draw a compelling picture of someone whose life every human being must come to terms with.

Your students' greatest need in life—if they are already Christians—is to know who this Jesus is and to be fully prepared to explain His importance to others. If they do not know Jesus or have not chosen to follow Him, they are about to face the most important question of their life: What will they do with Jesus?

Before beginning any new series, teachers know the importance of asking God's help so the Holy Spirit will give them the words to say and will open the hearts of students. But teachers need to encourage their students to ask God for the same things.

Teachers also need to follow through with undiminished excitement throughout all thirteen lessons. By God's grace, this study could become the most riveting "grand story" that your students have ever heard or that you have ever taught. If the story of Jesus' life has become overfamiliar, we need God's help to look at His life again with fresh eyes, sensing the same wonder as the first crowds who heard the gospel in the first century—whether Jew, Greek, Roman, or barbarian.

Students who are believers need to pray that God will help them master this message so they can powerfully share it with any modern listener, whether friend, neighbor, or relative. By the end of this course, students should know how to make the wonder of Christ real to anyone they talk to as well as present the gravity of the decision their hearer must now make. What will they do with Christ?

This study will focus on three things so students can see the Gospels with fresh eyes:

- What shocking things did Jesus say about Himself?
- How does the historical and cultural background of the Roman overlords in Judea help us understand the drama of Jesus' life and the radical nature of His teaching?

- What unique perspective do each of the four Gospel writers add to our understanding of Jesus, the Savior who perfectly satisfies the yearnings of every class, culture, and age of human being who has ever lived?

By the end of this study, students will see how each of the Gospels—coming from four different perspectives—enrich our understanding of who Jesus claimed to be and why He came to the world. There’s something for everyone. In fact, God divinely inspired these four books to provide just the right words so that any reader of any age can understand the gospel and be saved. May this 13-week survey of Christ’s life and message launch your students on a lifelong adventure learning what it truly means to be a passionate disciple of Jesus!

In This Study

This study contains the teacher’s lecture material, including discussion questions. Additional background information you may want to share, as time allows, appears as indented text prefaced with a question in bold lettering. Each lesson also includes a reproducible lesson outline with blanks for the students to fill in while listening to the lesson. An optional Scripture memory list and weekly reading schedule are included in the table below.

Note: You can also download a free presentation of the Teacher’s Lessons at positiveaction.org.

Suggestions for Teaching

Typically, one lesson can be covered in one week. However, feel free to adjust the study to your own schedule.

To prepare for the lesson, prayerfully read through the Scripture text for that lesson, and then read the lesson itself.

A Scripture memory list is available. Consider having students memorize the passage to recite or write out at the next class gathering.

Study Objectives

- Explain the many claims the Bible makes about Jesus.
- Explore the historical and cultural background of the Gospels.
- Recognize the importance of following Jesus as His disciples and being a witness for the gospel.

Scope and Sequence

Teacher's Lesson Objectives	Primary Text(s)
Lesson 1: What Are the Gospels?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The gospel is the good news about Jesus' death on the cross as the payment for sin. • Four Gospels give us four different perspectives on the life of Jesus. • Each Gospel was written by a different author who emphasized a different theme. 	<p>John 20:30–31</p>
Lesson 2: The Early Life of Jesus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unique birth of Jesus confirms His identity as the Messiah. • Jesus' baptism helps us better understand His identity. • John the Baptist prepared the people of Israel for the coming Messiah. 	<p>Matthew 1:18–25</p> <p>Luke 2:1–21</p>
Lesson 3: The Early Ministry of Jesus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus presented Himself as the Messiah from the beginning of His ministry. • Jesus performed many amazing signs. • Many people, including religious leaders and even Jesus' own family, rejected Him. 	<p>Mark 1:14–6:6a</p>
Lesson 4: The Sermon on the Mount	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Sermon on the Mount includes moral teachings from Jesus. • Following Jesus is more than simply obeying a list of commands. • The Sermon on the Mount teaches us how to please God with our obedience, wisdom, and prayer. 	<p>Matthew 5–7</p> <p>Luke 6:17–49</p>

Teacher's Lesson Objectives	Primary Text(s)
Lesson 5: Teaching in Parables	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus used stories about everyday life to teach spiritual lessons. • Jesus taught in parables to fulfill prophecy and to share the truth with His followers. • Jesus' parables have much to teach us today. 	<p>Matthew 13:1–23, 31–35</p> <p>Luke 10:25–37</p>
Lesson 6: The Miracles of Jesus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The miracles of Jesus were supernatural. • Jesus performed miracles to show people that He was the Messiah. • The Gospels record many kinds of miracles. 	<p>Mark 1:32–34</p> <p>John 20:30–31</p>
Lesson 7: Ministry in Galilee	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The early phase of Jesus' ministry took place in Galilee. • The Pharisees' opposition toward Jesus escalated during His ministry. • Peter made an important statement when he confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. 	<p>Matthew 10:5–15</p> <p>Mark 6:6b–8:38</p>
Lesson 8: Traveling Toward Jerusalem	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus revealed His Messianic mission to His disciples. • Jesus predicted His crucifixion and resurrection. • The disciples misunderstood the predictions of Jesus. 	<p>Mark 9:1–10:52</p>
Lesson 9: Lessons on Discipleship	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciples of Jesus should not be concerned about status and popularity. • Disciples should concern themselves with humility and service. • Jesus provided strategies for dealing with temptation and sin. 	<p>Matthew 18:1–17</p> <p>Mark 9–10</p>

Teacher's Lesson Objectives	Primary Text(s)
Lesson 10: Teaching in the Temple	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At His Triumphal Entry, Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the coming Messiah. • Jesus demonstrated that the Temple was a place of worship, not a place for religious authorities to take advantage of people. • Many of the religious leaders in Jerusalem opposed Jesus and tried to trap Him. 	Mark 11–12
Lesson 11: The Olivet Discourse	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus prophesied about future events including the destruction of the Temple, end times events, and His own return. • Although we cannot know when Jesus will return, we should always be prepared. 	Mark 13
Lesson 12: The Crucifixion of Jesus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A woman performed a symbolic act of anointing Jesus, anticipating His death. • Jesus observed the Last Supper with His disciples and gave us an example to follow. • The Crucifixion confirmed that Jesus is the Son of God. 	Matthew 26–27 Mark 14–15
Lesson 13: The Resurrection of Jesus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After Jesus' death, He was buried in a sealed tomb. • Jesus appeared to His followers after His resurrection. • Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave His followers a mission to share the gospel. 	Matthew 28 Mark 16:1–8 Luke 24 John 20–21

Scripture Memory and Suggested Reading

Lesson	Scripture Memory	Suggested Reading
1	John 20:30–31	<i>No Assigned Reading</i>
2	Luke 2:52	Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 2
3	Mark 1:14–15	Mark 1–5
4	Matthew 5:13–15	Matthew 5–7
5	Matthew 13:34–35	Matthew 13:1–52
6	Luke 4:40–41	Matthew 8
7	Mark 8:27–29	Mark 6–8
8	Matthew 17:5	Mark 9–10
9	Matthew 18:3–4	Mark 9–10
10	Luke 19:37–38	Mark 11–12
11	Mark 13:5–8	Mark 13
12	Mark 15:37–39	Mark 14–15
13	John 20:28	Mark 16

Feedback

As a non-profit publishing ministry, we consider teachers our co-laborers in the faith. Each curriculum remains a work in progress, and the people who teach these studies have a great impact on the scope and format of every new edition. If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact us—we'd love to hear from you.

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Lesson One

What Are the Gospels?

Primary Text

John 20:30–31

Content Objectives

- The gospel is the good news about Jesus' death on the cross as the payment for sin.
- Four Gospels give us four different perspectives on the life of Jesus.
- Each Gospel was written by a different author who emphasized a different theme.

Introduction

When you read a biography, you expect the author to report facts. But you do not expect the author to share every detail of the person's life. Otherwise, you'd get lost in all the details and miss the big picture. The author must pick and choose what to include.

You also don't expect every biography of the same person to share the same details. Which details will the author pick? The author decides based on the goal of the book. Every biography is different—even if it is about the same person.

The authors of the four Gospels told four different stories, even though they were writing about the same person. Why? Each author had different goals. To get the most out of each book, we need to understand first the writers' goals. For example, John tells us exactly why he wrote his Gospel: so that the reader will come to life-giving faith in Jesus (John 20:30–31). The other authors had distinctly different goals.

To read a book correctly, it is also important to understand what kind of literature, or genre, each book is. Just because an author is writing about a person, we cannot assume it is a biography. Did Matthew intend to write a biography as we understand it today? Did he put together a collection of Jesus' sayings similar to the sayings of Confucius? Did Matthew write a theological textbook to explain Jesus' nature and religious significance? We need to answer these questions if we want to read the four Gospels as the original authors intended.

What Are the Gospels?

The Gospels are good news.

Mark tells us all about the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But why? The first sentence of Mark's book gives the answer: "the gospel." **Read Mark 1:1.** Later in the same chapter, Mark tells us that Jesus preached and called people to believe "the gospel" (Mark 1:15). His book explains the gospel.

The word *gospel* means "good news." In the Roman world, the word *gospel* was used to announce good news about the emperor, such as his birthday or a military victory. For Christians, the word *gospel* refers to preaching about Jesus' death on the cross as a payment for our sins and His resurrection from the dead (1 Thess. 1:5; 4:14).

Discuss: Have you ever heard someone announce "good news"? What was the good news? In what sense are the four Gospels "good news"? If we really believe our message is good news, our belief should affect our enthusiasm and how we expect people to respond. Rather than leaving others in darkness and sin, without hope or knowledge about a way to escape God's judgment, God intervened in history to make sure we could see and hear the only way to find eternal life. That is our exciting message as Christians.

Each of the four Gospels includes the teaching of Jesus and the amazing story of His life on earth and His death on the cross. In fact, the four Gospels are our primary source of information about Jesus. Even though we cannot see Him in person, we can read about Him through the infallible words inspired by the Holy Spirit of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). John's Gospel tells us explicitly that by believing Jesus is the Son of God and Messiah, we can have eternal life (John 20:30-31).

The Gospels are different from modern biographies.

Most Christians assume the four Gospels are biographies about Jesus. Although the Gospels have some biographical elements, they are not like modern biographies. In fact, the Gospels are missing most of the personal details we would expect to see in a typical biography. For instance, only two Gospels mention Jesus' birth, and only one Gospel tells a brief story about Jesus' childhood. They skim over his first decades in a few words or open directly with His adult ministry.

The Gospels are historical documents.

Luke opens his Gospel by giving his sources: eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. **Read Luke 1:1–4.** A list of eyewitness sources is precisely what you would expect from an historical document. We will later see how the other three Gospels also based their reports on eyewitnesses.

Discuss: How important is it that the Gospels rely on eyewitnesses? Why do reliable sources force the reader to take the Gospels seriously? When these books were written, eyewitnesses who saw and heard what Jesus did and said were still alive. If someone were to fabricate a story about Jesus, eyewitnesses would reject that story because they knew what really happened. But instead, the early followers of Jesus spread this message to the ends of the known world, willingly giving their lives for its claims. People wouldn't choose to die for their fabricated story.

The Gospels contain the teaching of Jesus.

The Gospels also contain the actual teachings of Jesus. Much of His words concern how to live as His disciple. But being His disciple means to follow Him, not just to hear Him. So the Gospels include His life, not just His Words. He did not just talk about the Father, but He showed us the Father (John 14:8–10). In the closing words of Matthew, Jesus commissioned His disciples to go to the nations with His commands to hear and follow Him. **Read Matthew 28:20.** Jesus wanted His followers to spread His teaching so others could become His disciples. Scripture provides our only access to the teaching and life of Jesus.

The Gospels are theological documents.

Even though the Gospels contain the factual history and genuine words of Jesus, the Gospels are much more. They are theological documents that enable us to know God.

The Apostle John explains why he wrote his Gospel. No one can read the Gospels without encountering theological questions such as . . .

- Who is Jesus?
- Who did Jesus claim to be?
- Is Jesus the Son of God?

The Gospels are best described as historical-theological documents which challenge nonbelievers to become disciples and teach disciples how to live out their faith in Jesus.

Are Jesus' miracles historical?

If someone wanted to test the miracles of Jesus using the scientific method, could they confirm any of Jesus' miracles? Would they declare any to be plausible? Scientifically speaking, it is impossible to turn water into wine or to raise the dead. To make matters more difficult, Jesus' miracles happened 2,000 years ago, and all we have are the reports in the Gospels.

Yet all four of the Gospels present Jesus as a miracle worker. He walked on the water, healed all kinds of diseases, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. Our skeptical modern world, which accepts only physical reality that we can see and test scientifically, refuses to accept these accounts because they include supernatural elements and miracles that we cannot repeat or test in the laboratory. Their own biased perspective is based on unproven (and unprovable) assumptions, which they accept by faith. Their belief that only reality is observable and testable is a matter of faith, not of science.

Christians have no problem with the idea that God does miracles in the Bible or today. Christians believe God works within history to accomplish His goals, whether through natural, explainable means or through supernatural events such as miracles. In fact, most people who heard Jesus preach in the first century expected Him to do a miracle to confirm His preaching (see Matt. 12:28). In a later chapter, we will study Jesus' miracles in more detail, but for now, it is important to understand that the Gospels are eyewitness reports of Jesus' miracles.

Why Four Gospels?

Each Gospel tells part of the same overall story.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell many of the same stories. Scholars use the technical term *synoptic*, meaning “view together,” to describe these three Gospels. Even though they share the same basic outline, each of the three synoptic Gospels has unique elements.

Discuss: Why do you think God revealed Jesus’ life in multiple books rather than just one?

Theologians have identified several reasons why God might have revealed Jesus’ life in multiple books rather than one. For instance, the Old Testament put a premium on multiple witnesses to verify a message (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1). Also, God chose to spread the gospel through the mouth of multiple witnesses—sharing the gospel is a team effort. Furthermore, God knows that different audiences respond to different types of presentations.

The Gospel of John follows a similar outline to the synoptic Gospels but narrates several events that are not found in the others. John also included some miracles not found in the other Gospels, such as turning water to wine and raising Lazarus from the dead. In the Book of John, Jesus delivers several long speeches not found anywhere else. Also, John makes no reference to Jesus’ exorcising demons or teaching parables.

Why is the Book of John so different? John likely wrote his Gospel last and knew that the contents of the other Gospels were already available to the church. He probably included things he remembered and had taught for many years because those stories helped to make his theological point that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

Each Gospel offers a unique perspective.

Think about a group of people who witness a traffic accident. Each sees the same event but recalls different details. A mechanic may notice something about the cars that no one else did. A doctor might observe something about a driver’s medical condition. A mother might notice a child distracting the driver. They all report the same event accurately, but each brings their own unique experience and perspective. This illustrates the benefit of reading four perspectives on the life of Jesus.

Each of the Gospels offers a different perspective. Matthew describes Jesus as a new Moses and as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. Mark presents

Jesus as the suffering servant who gave His life as a ransom. In Luke, Jesus taught like a philosopher, often discussing the nature of reality over a meal. But He was more than a philosopher; in Luke, Jesus was also the perfect man who became Savior of the world. John begins his Gospel from a heavenly perspective, telling readers that Jesus is God the Creator who has come to live in human flesh to reveal the glory of God.

We can study the overlapping details of these four Gospels in many ways. One possibility is to focus on one Gospel at a time, looking closely how the details enhance the author's unique perspective on Jesus' life. Or we can harmonize information from all four Gospels to tell a more complete story—the whole recorded life of Jesus. Both approaches have advantages, but in this course, we will focus on a harmony of all four Gospels. The general outline will come from Mark, but we will fill in details from the other Gospels.

Discuss: Imagine that you were asked to write a biography of Jesus. What stories would you include? Are there things never mentioned in the Gospels that you are curious about? Why do you think God left these out?

Students might like to know more about Jesus' teen years or His struggles with temptations that they also encounter. What was it like living with imperfect siblings? How did He learn that He was the Messiah? We can imagine many reasons why God did not include these details in the Bible. We already know everything that matters—He obeyed His parents but put God's mission first. While He matured both physically and mentally, like every human should, He proved that He was fully human but sinless, a suitable sacrifice for other sinful humans.

Are there more than four Gospels?

Read Luke 1:1. Luke mentions that many others wrote about Jesus. In fact, several books have survived from the first four centuries A.D. telling stories about Jesus or claiming to record His words. Few scholars, however, believe these accounts were written in New Testament times. Nevertheless, some of these apocryphal gospels became popular among some factions in the early centuries of the early church, though they were never considered on the same level as the four Gospels and were rejected by church leaders as God's inspired Word. *The Gospel of Thomas*, for example, is a collection of Jesus' sayings reflecting the theology of a heretical movement of the second and third century called *gnosticism*. Some of these gospels were lost until quite recently. *The Gospel of Judas* is a fictional dialogue between Jesus and Judas after the resurrection. A gnostic gospel was written about A.D. 150, but this document was not discovered until 1978 and not published until 2006.

Several infancy gospels tell fanciful stories about the birth and childhood of Jesus, such as Him making birds out of clay and breathing life into them. Why were these books written? Some of these gospels promoted a particular theology or heresy. But others may simply have recorded rumors that had spread with human-interest details that people would naturally like to know about Jesus. We have no reason to believe any of them.

Who Wrote the Four Gospels?

All four Gospels are technically written by anonymous authors. The books themselves do not give the authors' names. The names that are now associated with the Gospels were not added until at least A.D. 125, and most surviving details about their authorship were not written until about A.D. 325.

Discuss: Does anonymous authorship of the Gospels make them any less true? Most modern readers understand that anonymous authorship does not diminish the historical value of a book. The writers did not publish their books to make money or to gain prestige; they wanted to present the good news about Jesus accurately. In most cases, the first recipients of the handwritten books already knew who wrote them.

So how can we know if these traditions are accurate? Like any good mystery, we must follow clues found in the books themselves. Although we cannot be 100% certain in every case, some powerful internal evidence affirms the longstanding traditional views of the Gospel authors. We will now examine the traditional views of each book's author, date of writing, and the author's original audience.

Discuss: Why does it help to know who wrote each of the Gospels? By understanding something about each author, we can better understand the writer's unique perspective on the life of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew was written before A.D. 70 by one of Jesus' disciples who was also known as Levi (Luke 5:27). Matthew was a former tax collector. His Gospel begins with a unique genealogy of Jesus' descent from King David and an account of wise men—or Magi—from the East coming to worship the new King—Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus' command to go to the nations to make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20).

Although the Gospel of Matthew includes the need to share the gospel with the nations, most scholars think Matthew wrote to a Jewish-Christian audience. Matthew

often cites Old Testament prophecy to prove that Jesus was the Jews' long-awaited Messiah. One hint that Matthew wrote to Jews is his sensitivity to Jewish norms and traditions. For example, Matthew is the only Gospel to substitute the phrase "kingdom of Heaven" for "Kingdom of God" because many Jews avoided using the holy name of God out of fear of accidental blasphemy. Another clue that Matthew intended his Gospel for Jewish readers is the style of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of Christ's full messages to appear in Matthew's Gospel. In this sermon, which is found only in Matthew, Jesus comes across as a new Moses. Just as Moses went up on the mountain and returned with the Law, Jesus sat on the mountain and interpreted the Law for God's people (Matt. 5:1).

Another special emphasis in Matthew is persecution. Jesus told His disciples that they would be betrayed and persecuted (Matt. 5:11-12; 10:21-23). It is possible that Matthew's first readers were already facing severe mistreatment because of their faith in Jesus, and Matthew wanted to encourage them with Jesus' words and example.

It helps to know more about the author of a book to understand his perspective. **Read Matthew 9:9-13.** As a tax collector, Matthew was likely fluent in Greek and skilled in arithmetic, writing, and notetaking. His Gospel includes unique details about money and tax-collectors found only in this book. By virtue of his profession, he would have also been wealthier than most people living in Galilee. To host a meal for other tax collectors and sinners to meet Jesus, he would need a home large enough to host a large gathering.

Matthew is a role model for all of us. When Jesus called Matthew, he left his lucrative job immediately and followed Jesus (Matt. 9:9). The first thing Matthew did was to arrange for Jesus to meet other people that he knew in his own social class, who needed to hear about the Savior. He is a wonderful model of Christian discipleship and witnessing.

The Gospel of Mark

According to tradition, John Mark, a companion of Paul and a later companion of Peter, wrote his Gospel from Rome in the early-to-mid A.D. 60s. We know from Acts that Mark was with Peter in Jerusalem as a young man (Acts 12:12), and he joined Paul on his first missionary journey but abruptly returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). His uncle, Barnabas, wanted him to rejoin the ministry team, but Paul refused (Acts 15:36-41). Many years later, John Mark became a helpful companion to Paul while he was in prison at Rome (2 Tim. 4:11). Peter also referred to him as "my son" (1 Pet. 5:13).

Another detail lends support to the tradition that John Mark is the author of Mark. If someone wanted to invent an author for a Gospel to give it credibility, why choose

a relatively minor individual from the early church? If Mark was with Peter, why not claim Peter as the author instead of Mark?

Mark was probably the first Gospel to be written, possibly around A.D. 60 from Rome. In the second century, Christian writer Irenaeus said that Mark wrote during the reign of Nero (A.D. 64–65). According to tradition, Nero executed Peter in A.D. 64. There is a well-attested tradition that Mark's Gospel is based on Peter's preaching. If the early disciples believed Jesus would return within their lifetimes, it may have been a shock when Peter was killed. For the first time, it seemed likely the first generation of believers were going to die before the second coming of Christ.

Mark gives his reason for writing the Gospel in the first verse. **Read Mark 1:1.** In the first half of Mark's Gospel, various characters encountered Jesus and wondered who He is. In Mark 1:24, a demon got it right. **Read Mark 1:24.** But the Pharisees did not know who Jesus was. When Jesus claimed to forgive sin, the Pharisees wondered, "Who is this fellow?" and thought He was blaspheming God (Mark 2:7). This led to the important turning point in the book. In Mark 8:27–30, Jesus asked Peter who he thought He was. Peter responded, "You are the Christ." Peter got it right: Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. (*Christ* is the Greek word for the Hebrew word *Messiah*, or "anointed," a term for someone set aside for God's purpose such as a king or prophet anointed with oil.) Jesus then revealed that the Messiah would die shamefully in Jerusalem, something neither Peter nor the other disciples would understand until after the resurrection. When Jesus died on the cross, a Roman centurion declared Jesus was surely the Son of God (Mark 15:39).

The Gospel of Luke

Luke, a physician and companion of Paul, wrote both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts some time before A.D. 70. Although he did not use his name, Luke appears in the story when a traveling companion joins Paul and the word *we* appears (see Acts 16:10–17). At that point in Luke's account, the amount of colorful detail multiplies because the author himself was there. Paul called Luke a coworker (Philem. 1:24) and a physician (Col. 4:14). Luke was with Paul when he was in prison for the last time in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11). Because of the style of his writings and Colossians 4:14, most scholars believe Luke was a Gentile.

Assuming he wrote Luke before Acts, the Gospel of Luke was likely written from Rome no earlier than A.D. 64–65. This date makes sense because Acts ends without any hint of Paul's imminent death. Traditionally, Emperor Nero executed Paul no later than A.D. 65. Luke reports that Paul had a relatively good relationship with the Romans during his imprisonment at the end of Acts, implying that the emperor had not yet begun his persecution of Christians in Rome.

Unlike the other Gospels, Luke's Gospel and Acts are addressed to an individual—someone named Theophilus (Luke 1:1; Acts 1:1). *Theophilus* means “friend of God,” but both pagans and Christians used the name. Because Luke calls Theophilus “most excellent,” he may have been a person of some distinction. A common suggestion is that he was Luke's literary patron or publisher.

It is possible that Theophilus was a Christian who needed reassurance of the things he had been taught. Luke mentions other accounts of Jesus in his prologue, and he says this book is going to be an orderly account based on eyewitnesses. Luke does not say that the other accounts were wrong. He just wanted to tell the story of Jesus in a way that would resonate with a Roman reader.

From other books in the New Testament, we know more details about Luke. He was a doctor (Col. 4:14), so he must have been well-educated. From Paul's letters, we know he was a companion of Paul on some of his missionary journeys and was with Paul near the end of Paul's life.

Discuss: How do you think Luke's occupation as a physician affected the way he told the story of Jesus? It's likely that he was more detailed in some of his descriptions of healing miracles. Since he was well educated, he knew how to present Christ's life in a way that appealed to educated Greco-Romans such as Theophilus.

The Gospel of John

John, the son of Zebedee, wrote his Gospel from Ephesus around A.D. 85–90. The crucial identifying clues of the author of this Gospel are the repeated references to the mysterious “disciple whom Jesus loved.” He is included among those present at the meal Jesus shared with His disciples before His betrayal (John 13:21). This disciple runs with Peter to the empty tomb of Jesus (John 20:2–9). He was also with the other disciples when Jesus appeared after His resurrection (John 21:7). Most agree this disciple is the author of the Gospel. James also appears with Peter in the other Gospels, but James was killed soon after Jesus' resurrection (Acts 12).

There is a strong tradition that John left Judea in the A.D. mid-60s, settled in Ephesus, and lived a long life ministering in Asia Minor. Earlier, Paul had spent nearly three years in Ephesus, a major center of Christian activity, and it is logical that John made this city his base of operations. In addition to his Gospel, John wrote three brief letters that became part of Scripture (1–3 John) and the book of Revelation. John addressed Revelation to seven churches in Asia Minor, including Ephesus (Rev. 2–3).

John describes Jesus in much more theological terms than the other Gospels, and he may have chosen words about Jesus to challenge specific heresy during his day. John

informs his readers explicitly why he wrote his Gospel. **Read John 20:31.** As mentioned earlier, John wrote so that his readers would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If John wrote his Gospel as late as the A.D. mid-90s, he would be writing to second- and third-generation Christians who struggled against false teachings about Jesus. We see evidence of this rampant error in 1 John. Some had left John's churches and were teaching false doctrine (1 John 2:18-19).

Conclusion

Although this lesson contains a lot of history, it is important to know what genre of books we are reading if we want to interpret them correctly. The four Gospels are historical-theological biographies, which emphasize how to live as disciples of Christ. Most importantly, they tell the essential elements of the gospel itself: Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:1-11).

Lesson One

What Are the Gospels?

What Are the Gospels?

The Gospels are **good news**_____.

The Gospels are different from modern **biographies**_____.

The Gospels are **historical**_____ documents.

The Gospels contain the **teaching**_____ of Jesus.

The Gospels are **theological**_____ documents.

Why Four Gospels?

Each Gospel tells part of the same overall **story**_____.

Each Gospel offers a **unique**_____ perspective.

Who Wrote the Four Gospels?

The Gospel of Matthew	
Author	Matthew (Levi)
Date	Before A.D. 70
Audience	Jewish Christians
Main Message	Jesus is a new Moses and the fulfillment of the OT Messianic prophecies.

The Gospel of Mark	
Author	John Mark
Date	Early-to-mid A.D. 60s
Audience	Romans
Main Message	Jesus is the suffering servant who gave His life as a ransom.

The Gospel of Luke	
Author	Luke
Date	Before A.D. 70
Audience	Theophilus, apparently a man of distinction and possibly Luke's patron
Main Message	Jesus taught like a philosopher, but He was more—the perfect man and God who became the Savior of the world.

The Gospel of John	
Author	John
Date	A.D. 85–90
Audience	Second- and third-generation Christians struggling against false teachings about Jesus
Main Message	Jesus is God the Creator who has come to live in human flesh to reveal the glory of God.

Lesson Two

The Early Life of Jesus

Primary Texts

Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 2:1–21

Content Objectives

- The unique birth of Jesus confirms His identity as the Messiah.
- Jesus' baptism helps us better understand His identity.
- John the Baptist prepared the people of Israel for the coming Messiah.

Introduction

The Christmas season brings holiday cheer, decorations, music, and—of course—Christmas movies. Many Christmas movies include Santa, elves, and reindeer, but few get to the heart of the season. Christmas commemorates the most momentous birth in the history of humanity. Jesus was not just a cute baby in a manger. He is the biblical Messiah whose arrival fulfilled over a thousand years of Old Testament prophecies that God gave to Abraham and his Jewish descendants (Luke 1:68–70).

Only two Gospels recount Jesus' birth—Matthew and Luke—from strikingly different perspectives. As you read these stories, imagine what it would have been like to hear each of them for the first time, long before the modern commercialized Christmas season. How did the young Jewish couple Mary and Joseph understand what their son would do in the future? How did the Jewish shepherds react to the angels' announcement of a newborn child?

Pay close attention to the common thread in these stories—Jesus fulfilled God's promise of a Messiah. But what kind of person would He be, and how would He save His people?

The Birth of Jesus

An angel made two important birth announcements.

An angel announced the birth of John the Baptist.

The Gospel of Luke opens with the announcement of the birth of the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist. John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were an elderly, childless couple much like Abraham and Sarah of the Old Testament. While Zechariah was serving as a priest in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that his wife would have a son, a prophet "in the spirit and power of Elijah" as foretold in the Old Testament, who would prepare the way for the Lord (Luke 1:16–17). Because Zechariah did not believe the angel's words, Gabriel gave him a sign: He would not be able to speak again until the child was born. When John arrived as promised, his dumb father could now speak. The Holy Spirit came upon Zechariah, who prophesied concerning his son and the coming Savior, who was promised to Abraham (Luke 1:67–79).

An angel announced the birth of Jesus.

Six months after the announcement of John's birth, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, a virgin living in Nazareth who was betrothed to Joseph (Luke 1:26–38). Gabriel announced that Mary would give birth to a son who would be the Son of the Most High. Her son would inherit the throne of His ancestor David, and His kingdom would never end (Luke 1:32–33). Mary wondered how this was possible because she was a virgin, so Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her.

The Gospel of Matthew gives us a very different perspective on Jesus' birth. When Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, discovered that she was pregnant, he planned to break off their engagement quietly. But an angel warned Joseph in a dream not to divorce Mary because her child was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18–21). Matthew highlights how God orchestrated these events to fulfill God's prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. **Read Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22–23.** The name *Immanuel* means "God with us."

After hearing Gabriel's announcement, Mary traveled to Judea to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, John leaped for joy in his mother's womb. Mary then glorified the Lord with a prayer rejoicing in the coming of the promised Messiah (Luke 1:46–55).

Shepherds visited Jesus at His birth.

Read Luke 2:8–20. When the time came for Jesus to be born, a group of shepherds were out in a field nearby, protecting their flocks from predators. Most of us are so familiar with this story that we do not stop to realize how surprising it would be for a host of angels to announce the birth of a great King to lowly shepherds rather than the nation's rich and powerful leaders. Yet this scene sets a pattern for the Messiah's ministry. As Mary had previously announced (see Luke 1:46–55), the promised Messiah would humble the proud and exalt the humble. It is no accident that David in the Old Testament was a shepherd before he became king of Israel. Moses was also a shepherd for 40 years before he led Israel out of Egypt. Scripture even calls God a shepherd (see Ps. 23), who chooses the humble of heart to rule His people.

The song of the angelic host draws on common Old Testament themes such as God's magnificence as the bringer of peace (Ps. 29:11; Isa. 9:5–6). But peace has a double allusion. Augustus, Rome's first emperor, established the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, by the power of the sword, but the Messiah's peace would come by His own self-sacrifice.

When was Jesus born?

The year of Jesus' birth is unknown. However, since Roman history indicates that Herod the Great died around 4 B.C., Jesus was most likely born before 4 B.C.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem? God chose a boy named David from the village of Bethlehem to be king of Israel, and He promised that David's son would rule forever (2 Sam. 7:11–16). This son of David would be victorious and rule the nations (Pss. 2 and 110).

The Messiah is the ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies. **Read Micah 5:2.** In the first century, many Jews believed that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem based on this Old Testament prophecy. They also believed that David's heir would liberate the nation from their oppressors and prepare the way for true worship in the Temple.

God's plan surprised everyone and proved to be far grander than anything the prophets had ever imagined. Notice how the Gospel writers build the details of their narrative toward the greatest "surprise ending" in all human literature.

Jesus was born to a virgin.

The beginning of the story is just as surprising as the ending, but also necessary. For the Messiah to be a perfect sacrifice for sinful humans, He had to be born of a virgin. There are several theological reasons why.

First, Jesus needed a unique birth, highlighting God's special choosing. In the Old Testament, special people were often born to elderly parents or barren wives. For example, Sarah did not have her son Isaac—the heir of God's promises to Abraham—until she was 90 and past childbearing age. Hannah was also barren before the Lord gave her the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 1). Even John the Baptist's parents were old and barren (Luke 1:7). Jesus is even more special since Mary was a virgin and had never had relations before Jesus was conceived.

Second, some scholars suggest that the virgin birth separates Jesus from Adam's sin. They believe Adam's sin nature was passed down through the male line along with the father's genes, but Jesus did not receive genes from a human father. Therefore, since God used a miracle to conceive Jesus' body in Mary, Jesus did not have Adam's sin nature (Rom. 5:12–14). This means Jesus could live a sinless life and be the perfect lamb of God.

Third, recent evangelical scholars see the virgin birth as highlighting Jesus as a unique person in all human history. He had a real human body, but His body was God's special creation. No other person is like Jesus.

The Infancy of Jesus

Jesus' parents obeyed God's Law.

Jesus was circumcised according to Jewish Law on the eighth day after His birth (Luke 2:21). Luke reports that Joseph and Mary did everything the Law required for a child of the Mosaic covenant.

Two prophecies were made in the Temple.

Forty days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary brought Him to the Temple to complete the purification rites required by the Law. They encountered two people who made stunning announcements about what Jesus would accomplish. A godly man named Simeon proclaimed that Jesus was the Savior. Second, an elderly woman named Anna thanked God for the birth of Jesus and spoke to everyone looking for Israel's redemption. Simeon and Anna were two more witnesses who confirmed that Jesus was the Messiah.

The Magi visited Jesus.

Read Matthew 2:1–12. The Gospel of Matthew focuses on different details that show Jesus was King David's heir. Wise men from the East saw a sign that the promised king of the Jews had come, so they headed toward Jerusalem on a long journey.

When the wise men arrived, they visited the reigning King Herod to ask where the new king was born. After Herod's advisors told him that Micah had predicted the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, Herod ordered all boys two years old or younger to be killed. This fact indicates that the wise men's journey did not arrive until Jesus was up to two years old (Matt. 2:16–18). Meanwhile in Bethlehem, God warned Joseph in a dream to flee with Jesus and Mary to Egypt. They later returned to a town far in the north, Nazareth of Galilee, after Herod had died.

Where is Nazareth?

In the first century, the village of Nazareth in Galilee was small and unimportant. It is not mentioned in any other ancient literature, and it is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Modern excavations at Nazareth have uncovered very little, although it is interesting to note that Galilee was located at a crossroads of international Gentile trade and cities, unlike the more remote province of Judea where Jerusalem sat.

Nazareth was a poor agricultural village in the lower Galilean hills, about 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee and 20 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea. At the time of Jesus, the village would have been no larger than 1,600 people.

The Bible does not say much about the childhood and early life of Jesus.

Luke, who wanted the educated Greeks and Romans to see what a great person the Messiah was, gives us the only recorded event between Jesus' infancy and His adult ministry. Jesus' family traveled down to Jerusalem to observe the Passover, but when his parents headed back home, they accidentally left him behind. Mary and Joseph found the twelve-year-old boy three days later in the Temple, discussing the Law with an amazed group of religious teachers.

Luke's one-verse summary is the only other reference to this period in Jesus' life. **Read Luke 2:52.** Jesus matured in every way, earning respect by all.

Discuss: What do you think it means that Jesus grew in these four ways? How do these four areas of growth correspond to our own growth?

This means Jesus grew up like most people do. He grew up physically and in wisdom, the ability to live successfully. Since He grew in both wisdom and stature, He gained favor, or respect, from both people and God.

It is possible to evaluate whether we are maturing in a biblical way based on Jesus' example of the perfect child. Physical health is important along with education and wisdom. Are we learning to live the right way? Do our choices cause people to respect us? What does God think of our choices as we grow older?

The only other allusion to Jesus' early life is a passing comment in Matthew 13:55. After hearing Jesus speak during his later adult ministry, people in Nazareth were surprised by his skill with words since they knew Him as a young man. In Mark 6:3, the crowd calls Jesus "the carpenter." This implies Jesus worked alongside his earthly father as a common laborer. According to Luke 3:23, about thirty years passed before Jesus left his private life and began His public ministry.

Matthew and Luke carefully selected birth and infancy stories that present Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah from the Old Testament. Some stories would appeal to Jewish readers and others to Greek and Roman readers.

Discuss: Why do you think there are not more stories about Jesus as a child? We can be certain that God gave us everything we need to know (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Why God did not give us more is a matter of opinion. Some suggest that eyewitnesses simply did not pass along any other details. Joseph probably had died before the Gospels were written, but Mary was still with the disciples in Acts 1:14, and Jesus' brother James became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13). So, they could easily have shared more, but if so, the Gospel authors chose not to include them. Although we are naturally curious about Jesus' childhood, the early church was far more concerned with His death and resurrection, which we must understand to be saved.

John's Preaching and the Baptism of Jesus

Before Jesus began His earthly ministry, John the Baptist preached to prepare the way for Him. **Read Mark 1:4–8.** John's preaching had four key elements to prepare his listeners' hearts.

John warned of God's approaching judgment.

God's judgment was approaching (Matt. 3:7). Because God was about to break into history and judge Israel, the people needed to prepare for the Messiah's coming. John compared Israel's situation to a tree root about to be chopped by an ax (Matt. 3:10). This comparison meant the time of God's judgment was already on Israel.

John urged the people of Israel to turn from their sins.

John called Israel to repent of their sin (Matt. 3:8). John quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah to announce that he was preparing the people for Jesus' ministry (Luke 3:3).

The people were to show their repentance through baptism.

John called Israel to submit to water baptism to prepare for the Messiah's arrival. For John, baptism equaled forgiveness. Baptism was a declaration of repentance and of a person's willingness to submit to God.

John proclaimed the coming of the Messiah.

John's preaching declared the coming of the Messiah (Mark 1:7). John said the One who was coming would be greater than he was and would bring a baptism of fire instead of water.

John was the last of the prophets and the introducer of a new age—an age of salvation. So he fulfilled another prophecy found in the Old Testament (Mal. 4:5–6). On one occasion, Jesus' disciples asked about this prophecy, and Jesus stated that John was like Elijah (Mark 9:11–13). John built a following of repentant Jews who were waiting for the Messiah to come. John prepared the way for the Messiah (Matt. 3:10–11). Indeed, most of Jesus' early followers were John's followers.

John was surprised when Jesus showed up to be baptized. In Matthew 3:13–14, John hesitated, presumably because Jesus did not need to repent of sin. Since they were cousins, John likely knew Jesus as they grew up. As a prophet, John knew Jesus was the Messiah and far superior to him. Why would Jesus seek to be baptized if He did not need forgiveness for sin? Rather than representing forgiveness of sin, Jesus' baptism prepared Him for His ministry as Israel's Messiah.

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened and a voice from heaven announced that Jesus is “my Son whom I love.” The Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove, empowering Him for His ministry (Matt. 3:16–17; Luke 3:21–22). All three members of the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were involved in Jesus’ baptism. It marks the beginning of His Messianic ministry. He did not become the Messiah at His baptism—He already was the Messiah—but His official mission began then.

The Temptation of Jesus

After His baptism, the Holy Spirit directed Jesus into the wilderness. **Read Matthew 4:1–11.** After not eating food for forty days, Satan tempted Jesus. His resistance of this temptation also confirmed He was the Messiah. Think of the baptism as the coronation as Messiah, and the temptation as the confirmation. Scripture portrays Jesus as the new Adam, facing temptation alone in the wilderness and resisting it (Rom. 5:12–21; Heb. 4:15). The temptations also dispel any doubt that Satan was the source of Jesus’ power. Later, the Pharisees accused Jesus of being in league with the devil. The temptations show this is clearly not the case. Matthew and Luke describe three similar temptations, though in a different order, apparently to make a different emphasis. Mark mentions Jesus’ temptation but without details.

Jesus’ first temptation was to turn stones into bread.

First, since Jesus had been fasting for forty days, He obviously was extremely hungry (Matt. 4:2–4). Satan told Jesus to turn stones into bread. He answered by quoting Scripture to demonstrate His priorities. Jesus did not do miracles for His physical benefit but for God’s glory.

Jesus’ second temptation was to jump from the Temple.

Second, Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and told Him to jump if Jesus believed that God would send angels to protect Him (Matt. 4:5–7). Remarkably, Satan himself quoted Scripture. If Jesus were to perform this miracle, He would announce His messianic mission with a public demonstration of power. A Jewish tradition also suggested that the Messiah would reveal Himself from the roof of the Temple. Yet Jesus responded once again by quoting Scripture.

Jesus' third temptation was to bow down to Satan.

Third, Satan said he would give Jesus all the kingdoms of this world if He bowed and worshiped him. According to Philippians 2:5–11, everything in heaven and under the earth will one day kneel and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. But Satan's temptation offered Jesus all the glory without suffering on the cross. Again, Jesus responded by quoting Scripture. Jesus would not compromise His mission to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Immediately following the period of temptation, Jesus began His public ministry in Galilee.

Discuss: How can Jesus' response to Satan's temptations serve as a model for our own response to temptations?

Jesus answered Satan's temptations by quoting Scripture. Christians need to know Scripture that applies to various temptations before those temptations even begin. For example, if you are being tempted to cheat on a test, that is not the time to start looking up verses on honesty. Knowing what the Bible teaches about ethics and morality is part of being a disciple of Christ.

Jesus memorized Scripture and was able to quote it when tempted. As Christians, we should memorize key verses so that the Holy Spirit can help us recall them during temptation.

According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus was tempted as we are. **Read Hebrews 4:15.** It seems difficult to relate the temptations Jesus could have faced to the temptations we face today. For example, Jesus was never tempted to look at pornography on the internet, cheat on a test, or break traffic laws. So how could Jesus really understand our modern-day temptations?

First, notice that Hebrews 4:15 uses a broad term to describe how he was tempted the way we are, not our specific temptations. So, for example, we might expect that Jesus was tempted sexually in the same general way every other human is tempted, but the specific temptations vary from culture to culture and at different periods of time. Was Jesus tempted to break traffic laws? Of course not, but He certainly experienced temptations to disobey other laws.

Second, these three temptations are not the only temptations Jesus faced. If He grew up like every other boy in the first century (which He did), He was tempted in all the ways a boy of His time and place was tempted. However, Jesus never gave in to those temptations.

Conclusion

Both Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus as a miracle fulfilling Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament. John the Baptist and two members of the Trinity confirmed that Jesus was the Messiah at His baptism. The temptations demonstrated Jesus was the new Adam who did not yield to Satan. Jesus was about to begin His ministry in Galilee, proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand, so the Jewish people needed to repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:14–15)

Lesson Three

The Early Ministry of Jesus

The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry in Galilee

Jesus called His first _____.

Jesus was _____ in His hometown.

The Activities of Jesus' Public Ministry

He cast out _____.

He healed the _____.

He forgave _____.

He instructed people in the _____.

Jesus clarified the _____ of the Sabbath.

Jesus _____ on the Sabbath.

Negative Responses to Jesus During His Early Ministry

His family tried to _____ Him.

The Pharisees _____ Him.