

Course Study Guide

NT219

Luke-John: Two Interpretations of Jesus

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Updated 2014



Our Daily Bread
Christian University

Lesson 1 Study Guide

NT219

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Luke - John:
The Gospel According to Luke & John

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Objectives

This lesson studies Jesus' life as recorded in Luke and John. Their purpose, background, emphases, and audiences are explored. Similarities and differences between each writer's record and the Gospels are presented and explained to give you a fuller understanding of the incomprehensible Jesus.

When you complete this lesson, "Luke – John: The Gospel According to Luke & John," you should be able to:

- Discuss authorship, audience, dating, and purpose for writing Luke and John.
- Name and explain the major themes and the outlines of Luke and John.
- Explain how Luke and John each portray Jesus and why they did so.
- State and describe differences between John's gospel and the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke).
- Gain greater appreciation for who Jesus Christ is.

Scripture Reading

Read Luke 1-12.

Transcript

Course Title: Luke—John: Two Interpretations of Jesus

Lesson One: Luke—John: The Gospel According to Luke & John

I. Gospel of Luke

In this lesson, we turn from Mark and Matthew to introduce the gospels of Luke and John. Again, we begin with distinctive theology.

A. Theology

In the case of the gospel of Luke, many readers have sensed that Jesus' humanity, indeed His compassion particularly for social outcasts, shines through as clearly as any other theme. There are numerous categories of outcasts whom Jesus pays special attention to in the gospel of Luke. These include Samaritans and Gentiles, outsiders to the people of Israel. It is only in the gospel of Luke where we read the famous parable of the good Samaritan. It is only in the gospel of Luke where we read the story of the ten lepers whom Jesus has healed, the only one of whom comes to return thanks being a Samaritan. "Tax collectors and sinners" is an interesting phrase that punctuates the gospel of Luke and reflects another category of social outcasts—this time not the "down and out," but we might say the "up and out," upon whom Jesus lavishes particular attention in Luke. It is only in Luke that we read the story of little Zacchaeus, a converted tax collector who climbed a sycamore tree to see our Lord.

Women form yet another category of social outcasts that receive special attention from Jesus. Luke's birth narrative focuses primarily on the perspectives of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke is known for pairing examples of men and women in parallel fashion throughout his gospel. Both Anna and Elizabeth, in those same birth narratives, sing hymns of praise and proclaim the arrival of the Messiah and the events surrounding Jesus' birth. It is only Luke who pairs the parable of the lost sheep with the parable of the lost coin, where in one case the main character is the male shepherd and in the other case a woman or householder. Perhaps the most famous story about women in Luke is the story of Mary and Martha, where Jesus takes on a counter-cultural perspective by commending, not Martha for her conventional hospitality and domestic role, but Mary who sits at his feet and wants to learn as a disciple would from a rabbi, a practice, for the most part, forbidden to women among other rabbis.

Yet another category of social outcasts and those in need of Jesus' special attention are the poor more generally. It is only in Luke that the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Plain focus attention on the poor per se rather than the poor in spirit, as in Matthew. It is only in Luke where we read Jesus' Nazareth manifesto in which he claims to be fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1 that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to, among other things, preach good news to the poor. It is only Luke, who contains the famous parables of the rich fool and the rich man

and Lazarus, who are condemned because they have selfishly focused on their riches in ways that not only ignored the poor but also meant that they had never repented; their hearts had never become right with God. A title that fits in very naturally with this emphasis on Jesus' humanity and compassion is a title that is quite distinctive to the gospel of Luke, and that is the title of "Savior."

Likewise, the terms in the Greek for "salvation" and the verb "to save" occur with much greater frequency in Luke's gospel than elsewhere. Several commentators have made a good case that salvation is, in fact, the single-word theme that best sums up the theology of the gospel of Luke. Luke 19:10 might be a single-verse summary of this theme, when Jesus says that He came to seek and to save that which was lost. Jesus also teaches in parables about twice as much in the gospel of Luke as in any other place. Indeed, we have already mentioned several of the parables as illustrations of themes that we have cited thus far.

B. Luke: The First Christian Historian

Luke has also been called the first Christian historian. Not that Matthew and Mark, if indeed they preceded him, did not recount history, but that Luke may have been the first gospel writer to think self-consciously along the lines of a Greco-Roman historian. It is only Luke who, in the opening chapters of his gospel, approaches the events surrounding Jesus' birth and the beginning of his adult ministry in the context of the larger events of the Roman Empire: who was the emperor, who was governor in Syria, who were the various ruling Jewish high priests, and so forth.

In his second volume, Acts, Luke is particularly concerned with such chronological and synchronic precision. It has often been said that Luke writes, in conjunction with this sense of being the first Christian historian, as the first person who seriously envisaged perhaps a considerably lengthy period of time for church history. Certainly he is the only evangelist that we know of who penned a second volume, a sequel to his gospel—in this case the Acts of the Apostles—and who writes with an ongoing sense that the church may be around for a while despite Jesus' statements that led some of His first followers to believe that He was coming back within their lifetimes, within one generation. Luke may have perceived more clearly than others that Jesus' words were not so precise and that there was an indeterminate amount of time until Christ returned.

C. Distinctive Themes in Luke

A simple glance at a concordance can point out several distinctive themes in Luke, including a preoccupation with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the disciples teaching and learning about prayer, and the theme of joy. Again after a survey of the theological emphases of a gospel, it is natural to ask what circumstances might have elicited such a document? There are those who have so emphasized the theme of the apparent delay in Christ's return that they have been convinced that this book could not be a first-century document. The details in Luke's account of Jesus' predictions about the destruction of the temple are also much more explicit than they are in either Matthew or Mark. Instead of the cryptic desolating sacrilege, we read in Luke 21:20 and following that Jerusalem will be surrounded by armies and that indeed

it will be overrun until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled—apparently a clear allusion and, some would think, after the fact, to make more precise the way in which Jesus’ prophecy about the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem was fulfilled. On the other hand, if we allow for the genuine supernatural predictive prophecy to be an element of Jesus’ teaching, it is not impossible that he could have stated these words more explicitly, as well as his other more cryptic utterances.

D. Luke and Acts

The abrupt ending of the book of Acts may in fact be the single most significant telling point as to the context in which Luke wrote. If one reads the two books Luke and Acts sequentially, one discovers that almost a third of Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, is preoccupied with Paul’s travel to Jerusalem: his arrest and imprisonment; various hearings and trials there and ultimately his appeal to the emperor in Rome; the ill-fated voyage which was shipwrecked, but later another ship took Paul and his fellow prisoners to Rome where he awaited the results of his appeal to the emperor. The book of Acts, chapter 28, closes with Luke writing that he remained in house arrest for a two-year period, preaching the gospel freely and unhindered—that is, unhindered except that he could not leave the premises and was constantly chained loosely to a Roman soldier. Nevertheless, one comes to the book of Acts and to its end wondering what finally happened with this appeal to the emperor. We are never told.

There are plausible reasons why Luke may have wanted to end this story where he did without going into further explanation. Rome was the capital, the largest city, the heart of the empire, and much of the sequence of the book of Acts is about the gospel and its progress outwardly from Jerusalem, finally arriving in Rome. Perhaps that is where Luke wanted to end, but it still does not entirely answer the question: If he knew more, why did he not tell us about the outcome of Paul’s life? For many commentators, historically, therefore, the most significant feature of the end of the book of Acts is its pointer to the probability that Luke wrote almost immediately following the last events he narrated, and for this reason had nothing further to tell.

E. Date and Authorship of Luke

If we synchronize the information that we get from other non-Christian historians to a time with the information from the book of Acts, it is very difficult to date the end of the narrative of the book of Acts to any later than 62 A.D. And if this is so, then the gospel of Luke, as the first volume in his two-volume series, must have been written a little before, perhaps in 61 A.D. If all these presuppositions make sense, then we cannot date the gospel of Luke after 70 A.D., after the fall of Jerusalem, and the greater and more explicit detail concerning the fall of Jerusalem must be explained in some other way. Additional circumstances are somewhat speculative as well.

Luke clearly seems to have been a Gentile. The only place in which his name appears explicitly in the Scriptures is at the end of the epistle to the Colossians. In 4:10-14, Paul apparently distinguishes between his Jewish companions and those who are not, and includes Luke among the latter. Luke also appears implicitly in the book of Acts when, on five different occasions,

the narrator stops writing in the third person but writes in the first person plural: “We did this and we did that.” And where we are first introduced to Luke and for the most part where we meet Luke is among Paul’s travels in Gentile territory. There is little from church history to supplement these inferences from the documents themselves. Irenaeus does give a detailed discussion of Luke’s activities, but the only time frame into which he places them is sometime after the writing of Matthew and Mark. It seems like a date sometime in the 60s is the best we can do, and, if a different explanation were given for the end of the book of Acts, perhaps even after A.D. 70.

F. Audience and Purpose of Luke

There is also speculation that Luke’s preoccupation with the theme of riches and poverty fits a trajectory that we can trace from Acts and the Epistles, mainly that the largely impoverished group of first followers of Jesus over time, as the church developed, gave way to a more urban clientele and to at least a significant minority of Christians who were at least what we would call middle-class, if not occasionally well-to-do. It may well be, therefore, that Luke’s audience is not only a more Gentile audience, but a more socio-economically mixed audience and that Luke is very concerned that more well-to-do Christians not forget their responsibility to their poorer brothers and sisters.

If much of this is admittedly inferential, Luke does give us one piece of data that is stronger and different than anything we have seen in Matthew or Mark thus far; namely, he is the only one of the three Synoptic Gospel writers to give an explicit statement for the purpose of his gospel. And this purpose comprises his preface, the first four verses of Luke 1: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,” Luke writes, “just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

This preface closely resembles the prefaces or prologues of various other Greco-Roman historians, and should inspire confidence in Luke’s historical purposes in writing the document. He was functioning as a faithful historian, he has interviewed eyewitnesses, he is aware of previous written accounts, he has consulted all of these sources including the traditions that have been passed down by word-of-mouth, and now he is compiling in a sequential and orderly fashion, thematically arranged, a gospel that is designed to convince readers of the certainty of the things that they have been taught.

It was customary for expensive projects such as the composition of a gospel in the ancient world to be funded by well-to-do patrons, to whom the books were then dedicated. Theophilus, therefore, whether or not he is a Christian, is almost certainly the patron, the one who had funded Luke’s historical research and helped him to write the book. Perhaps he is what we would call an inquirer, wanting to know more about the Christian faith, or perhaps he is a new convert. In any event, Luke wants to inspire in him the confidence of the truth of the events that he is about to record. Again, modern scholars have debated many of these conclusions, just as claims of Markan and Matthaean authorship have been doubted. There are those who

wonder whether or not Luke, the “beloved physician,” using Paul’s description in Colossians, truly was the author of this work, but again the relative obscurity of the character in question would favor the traditional view.

G. Structure of Luke

When one looks at Luke’s gospel in terms of structure, one sees an interesting alternation between sections in which he follows Mark and those in which he does not, and also a geographic progression that is more unified in Luke than in the other accounts. Moving from the beginning, in which he sets the context of the birth of Jesus in the events of Roman history, the first part of Jesus’ adult ministry is located almost exclusively in Galilee. Then, only Luke describes Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem, setting off first of all to Samaria, finally nearing Jerusalem through Judea. And only Luke’s gospel has the climax of Jesus’ ministry exclusively in Jerusalem; no resurrection appearances anywhere else, as Matthew or John are narrated. It seems that Luke is creating a geographical sequence that is precisely the inversion of the sequence with which he will narrate the book of Acts. “Beginning in Jerusalem,” in Acts 1:8, “you will be my witnesses first to Judea and Samaria, and then to the outermost parts of the earth.” When we remember that Galilee was also known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” in the first century, we can see the progression through Galilee as part of moving out into the entire Roman Empire.

II. Gospel of John

That leaves only the gospel of John, then, for these brief introductory surveys. As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, John is much more unlike the Synoptics, and we could give a lengthy list of differences, but we will be brief and itemize just a few.

A. Theology of John

In terms of the theology and the views of Jesus, it is interesting that John also gives a purpose statement, much shorter than Luke’s, in John 20:31—that he has written these things “that you may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that in believing you may have life in his name.” Interestingly, those same two titles—“Son of God” and “Christ”—were the ones with which the gospel of Mark began, reminding us that there is considerable overlap among the Gospels even as we are focusing on distinctives here.

But if we turn to emphases found only in the gospel of John concerning Jesus alone, we find only in John that he is called the Logos, the Word, the Word incarnate, the Lamb of God—that it is only in the gospel of John that some of the strongest and most explicit statements equating Jesus with God Himself, with deity, are found. Not only “was the Word God” (John 1:1), but Thomas confesses, “My Lord and my God!” after the resurrection, in 20:28. Jesus describes the unique oneness that He has with the Father in 10:30, and it is only John that has the famous “I am” sayings in which Jesus says, “I am the bread of life...the living water...the resurrection and the life...the way and the truth and the life ... the true vine.”

Other themes unique to John’s gospel include the emphasis on eternal life, beginning now

in the present time, not just in the future; an emphasis on miracles as signs meant to point people to belief in Jesus; private teachings with the disciples in more intimate occasions, particularly the long “farewell discourse” of John 13-17 in the upper room on the last night of His life. Themes that emerge from that discourse particularly unique to John’s gospel include the unity between Son, Spirit, and Father, the beginnings of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the unity that the disciples should have with God and with one another. John’s gospel also has very strong declarations of what is often called the eternal security of the believer, in such passages as 6:39 and 10:29, but yet he balances that with commands to remain and to abide in Jesus.

John’s gospel speaks of the death of Christ as an exaltation. Jesus says in 12:32, “If I be lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.” And it is only John’s gospel that speaks of the ministry of the Holy Spirit as that of a “Paraclete,” one who is a helper, an interpreter or a witness, a prosecutor and a revealer. Interestingly, John says nothing about Jesus’ baptism or His institution of the Lord’s Supper, even while at the same time giving more description of the events immediately surrounding those sacraments or ordinances. Some have inferred from this that John, at the end of the first century, was combating what was already becoming an overly exalted view of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, perhaps among circles who believed that those rights in and of themselves conferred salvation. Other themes that appear uniquely or uniquely emphatically in the gospel of John include opposition between light and darkness, life and death, judgment and love; and words that recur frequently include “the world,” “testimony,” “truth and abiding.”

B. Uniqueness of John

Why is John so different? What circumstances produced this very different gospel? For many years it was believed that because early church tradition said John was the latest, his was also the last in a long line of development of Christian thought, well away from the genuine teaching of Jesus the Jew. With the discovery of the Qumran scrolls we have found out that some of the terms that have been thought in the past to be very Greek or Gnostic—a strong contrast between light and darkness, between the children of light and the children of darkness—in fact, they have cropped up as seen in very Jewish contexts as well.

What we do learn from early church tradition is that John wrote this gospel in and around Ephesus as a very old man, probably in his eighties or even nineties, perhaps under the reign of Domitian, the emperor in a time when Gnosticism was coming to the fore. And if John shares some language from very Greek philosophical or Gnostic circles, it may well be because he was using the language that the people understood but then trying to re-explain or re-contextualize it. Gnostics believed that Jesus was God; they had trouble with Jesus’ humanity because if you recall from our lesson on Gnosticism they believed the material world was inherently evil.

So John begins his gospel where they are: the Word was God, was with God and was God. But by the time we reach 1:14, he is stressing that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. There are other things going on, however, in Ephesus at the end of the first century, and one of those is great hostility with the local Jewish synagogues. We can read about that in Revelation 2:9. So there is another whole strand of Jesus’ teaching, distinctive to his gospel, involving

conflicts with the Jews. Only John has Jesus going up to Jerusalem more than once in His life, and pointing out how He is the true fulfillment of all of the major Jewish festivals. This makes sense if, much like the gospel of Matthew, another dimension to the community to which John was writing was one of having to combat rather overt hostility among non-Christian Jews nearby. Why is John's gospel so different? There are numerous other answers that can be given as well. One is that he is probably the only one who is writing largely independently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Perhaps John would not have seemed so different if we actually had four independent witnesses.

C. Authorship of John

Who is John? Church history strongly favors the apostle by that name although one quotation from the early Christian writer Papias makes it uncertain as to whether or not there was a second man named John, who was an early Christian elder distinct from the apostle. If this second John were a disciple of the first John one could much more plausibly date all of the Johannine literature to the end of the first century without having to make John an extremely old man at the time that he was an author. But the weight of church history and traditional evidence is in favor of the apostolic authorship. Many modern scholars go further and believe they can discern stages of editing or redacting to the gospel of John, more so than in the Synoptic Gospels, but increasingly the tide seems to be shifting in favor of recognizing its stylistic unity throughout this particular gospel.

D. Structure of John

The structure of John, much like Mark, falls neatly into two halves—the first half focusing on seven miracles or signs, linked closely with seven long narratives, discourses or sermons. And again many of these are unique to John's gospel perhaps self-consciously not repeating what the early Christians had taught well in previous generations. The second half of the gospel then turns to the passion—the events of Christ's final week, and, as in Mark, narrates them in great detail; and here there is the greatest overlap with the Synoptic Gospels. However many differences there are, we are reminded at the end that miracles and suffering, glory and shame, triumph and the cross, together well-summarize Jesus' ministry, no matter which gospel we read it in.

Discussion Questions

Cite several instances of Jesus' treatment of outcasts as recorded in the gospel of Luke. How do these accounts influence your thinking in how we should deal with outcasts today? What are some of the "outcast" groups in your culture?

After learning about the gospel of John, why do you think he chose to focus the first half of his book on seven miracles or signs from Jesus? How did this help John accomplish his purpose that was discussed in the lesson?

Dr. Blomberg says, "Luke clearly seems to have been a Gentile." What significance do you see in this? How might this have affected how Luke's gospel was written and how it was received at the time it was written?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 52: “The God-Man” (John)

Philip Yancey Devotional Coming Clean - John 10

Even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father. (John 10:38)

Every few years an author or movie director comes out with a new work raising questions about Jesus’ identity. Often such portrayals show Him wandering around the earth in a daze, trying to figure out why He came and what He is supposed to be doing. Nothing could be further from the account given us by John, Jesus’ closest friend. According to him, Jesus was no “man who fell to earth,” but God’s Son, sent on a mission from the Father. “I know where I came from and where I am going,” Jesus said (8:14).

Of the four gospel writers, John dwells most prominently on Jesus’ identity as the true Messiah, the Son of God. He states his purpose in writing very clearly: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). His book includes incidents from no more than twenty days in Jesus’ life, arranged so as to demonstrate who Jesus is. Significantly, most of these incidents come from the final days of Jesus’ life, when He was declaring His mission openly.

“I am the gate,” Jesus says in this chapter; “I am the good shepherd.” Jews who heard those words undoubtedly thought back to Old Testament kings like David, who were known as the shepherds of Israel. When some challenged Him bluntly, “If you are the Christ, tell us plainly,” Jesus answered with equal bluntness, “I and the Father are one.” The pious Jews understood Him perfectly: They picked up stones to execute Him for blasphemy.

Not even these hostile reactions surprised Jesus. He expected opposition, even execution. As He explained, a truly good shepherd, unlike a hired hand, “lays down his life for the sheep.” He was the only person in history who chose to be born, chose to die, and chose to come back again. This chapter explains why He made those choices.

Life Question: What difference does it make that Jesus is God and not just a man?

Glossary

Ephesus — An important seaport city of the Roman province of Asia. The site of ancient Ephesus is south of the Cayster River and about 3.5 miles upstream from where it enters the Aegean Sea at the point opposite the island of Samos. The temple of Artemis was situated about one mile northeast of the city.

Logos — The Greek term *logos* embraces a wide semantic field, including the ideas of account, proportion, explanation, principle, reason, thought, as well as continuous statement (e.g., narrative, story, speech, history), individual utterance (e.g., proverb, maxim, command), discussion, debate, and, as a grammatical term, phrase or sentence. Normally it is not used in the sense of a single word.

Paraclete — A transliteration of Greek *parakletos*. The word has been translated as “Comforter,” “Counselor,” “Advocate,” “your Advocate,” and “Helper.” The Lord applied the term to the Holy Spirit in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7. John uses it of Jesus in 1 John 2:1.

Trinity — The word *trinity* is not found in the Bible, but the New Testament does contain the foundation for the later doctrine. In particular, while insisting on one God, it presents Jesus Christ as the divine Son distinct from God the Father, and seems to present the Holy Spirit or Paraclete as a divine person distinct from both. This term is used to express the doctrine of the unity of God as subsisting in three distinct persons.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is a doctrine that begins to emerge only in the gospel of John?
 - A. The Resurrection of Christ
 - B. Doctrine of Sin
 - C. Doctrine of Salvation
 - D. Doctrine of the Trinity
2. Of all the Gospels, this book offers the most precise prophecy about the destruction of the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem:
 - A. Matthew
 - B. Mark
 - C. Luke
 - D. John
3. Some commentators have stated that they felt the best single-word theme for Luke could be:
 - A. Love
 - B. Salvation
 - C. Repent!
 - D. Rejoice!
4. The author of Luke is thought to be:
 - A. A disciple of Jesus who later became a doctor
 - B. The first Christian physician, and a close friend of Jesus
 - C. The first Christian historian, and a companion of Paul's
 - D. A Jewish physician who was once a Pharisee
5. The Greek term "logos" normally does **not** mean:
 - A. A single word
 - B. An explanation
 - C. A story
 - D. A discussion
6. The term "Trinity":
 - A. Is not found in the New Testament, but is found in the Old Testament
 - B. Is not found in the Old Testament, but is found in the New Testament
 - C. Has a foundation in the New Testament for the later doctrine
 - D. Is never found in the writings of the early church fathers
7. This is the only gospel that has the famous "I am" statements made by Jesus:
 - A. Matthew
 - B. John
 - C. Luke
 - D. Mark

8. What are the main views of Jesus in the book of Luke?
 - A. Judge of the rich, prayer, Savior
 - B. King of the Jews, fulfillment of prophecy, miracle worker
 - C. Compassion for outcasts, forgiveness, parables
 - D. Teacher, Messiah, Son of God
9. What does the second half of John's gospel focus on?
 - A. Seven miracles and seven narratives
 - B. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem
 - C. The events of Christ's final week
 - D. The persecution of the apostles
10. Which of the following is **not** a prominent view of Jesus in the gospel of John?
 - A. Son of God and Christ
 - B. The Logos
 - C. Lamb of God
 - D. Royal King

Answers: 1. D 2. C 3. B 4. C 5. A 6. C 7. B 8. C 9. C 10. D

Lesson 2 Study Guide

NT219 *Luke-John: Two Interpretations of Jesus*

Jesus & John: Two Miracle Births

Updated 2014



Our Daily Bread
Christian University

Objectives

This lesson presents a time-line of Jesus' life and ministry and helps you gain an overview of Jesus' life on earth. It then focuses on His birth as presented in both Matthew and Luke.

When you complete this lesson, "Jesus & John: Two Miracle Births," you should be able to:

- Identify and discuss chronological questions about Jesus' birth and ministry, so that you can think more clearly about the events of His life.
- Compare and contrast accounts of Jesus' birth as presented by Matthew and Luke.
- Discuss the key relationships between John the Baptist and Jesus in relation to their births and ministries.
- Gain a greater appreciation for the miraculous event when "The Word became flesh."

Scripture Reading

Read Luke 13-24.

Transcript

Course Title: Luke—John: Two Interpretations of Jesus

Lesson Two: Jesus and John: Two Miracle Births

I. Introduction to the Life of Christ

In this lesson, we are at last ready to come to a survey of the life of Christ Himself, putting together the information that we find in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is important to keep in mind what we stressed in the last two lessons, that as one reads any biblical account from any one of the four Gospels, one needs to keep in mind the larger historical context of the distinctive concerns of whichever gospel writer is the one that is being read at the time. Nevertheless, in a survey series such as this, it is also helpful to combine the information together to create a chronological sequence as best we can reconstruct it of the events of the life of Jesus that the four Gospels narrate.

II. Chronological Overview

Obviously, we need to begin then with some chronological overview. It may come as a surprise to many people to learn that scholars are agreed that Jesus Christ was born no later than the year that today we call 4 B.C. How could Jesus have been born four years “before Christ?” Well, the answer, of course, is that in the time of Jesus nobody used the terms A.D. or B.C. If one was a Roman, approximately the first year of what we call A.D. would have been 754 by the Roman counting—that is 754 years from the date they believed the city (and later, then, the empire of Rome) was founded.

A. Date of Christ’s Birth

If one was a Jew, one calculated the year from the date one believed the world was created. It was only in the 500s when a Catholic monk and a chronographer by the name of Dionysius Exiguus tried to recalculate the events of the beginning of the Christian era and came up with the date that ultimately became the rationale for recalculating the calendar that is now almost universally adopted throughout the world dating from the year that they thought in those days that Christ was born. Unfortunately Dionysius did not have a variety of historical information available to him that he could have used.

It was later discovered from the writings of Josephus (that had been preserved ever since the first century) that, according to the dates of that Jewish historian, Herod the Great, the leader and ruler in Galilee and Judea—land of Israel at the time of Christ’s birth—actually died in the year that had been now named 4 B.C. Therefore, since the Christ child was alive and perhaps even up to two years in age during Herod’s lifetime, Jesus’ birth had to be dated earlier. I say up to two years of age because we read in the gospel of Matthew that Herod the Great had all the babies in and around Bethlehem massacred up to that particular age, and unless this was just

a case of massive overkill (pardon the bad pun) it may be that Herod knew it had been close to the couple of years since this apparently royal child had been born. Therefore we may date Jesus' birth to sometime between 6 and 4 B.C.

B. Dating of Christ's Childhood and Ministry

The only other event that the Gospels described dealing with Christ's childhood is His teaching in the temple at age 12, which may therefore correspond to roughly 7 A.D. Then, we jump immediately to Christ's adult ministry. Here there is information that is not completely harmonizable, at least based on the sources that are currently available to us. Luke 3:1 says that Jesus began His ministry at the time that John the Baptist was also ministering—in the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius' reign. Unfortunately, Tiberius began a co-reign with his predecessor Augustus in approximately 12 A.D.; he began to reign solely, by himself, in about 14 or 15 A.D. and so we are not exactly sure which year to start from; nor is Luke's wording precise, because he says Jesus was about 30 years of age.

Another verse that is relevant is John 2:20, which finds Jesus early in His ministry on a Passover in Jerusalem in the forty-sixth year since Herod the Great had ordered the temple to be rebuilt. Dating from roughly 19 or 20 B.C., according to the information of Josephus, this would put us somewhere around the year 28 A.D. So a good guess is that Jesus began His ministry, following a time in which He perhaps was a follower of John the Baptist for a short period, in about 27 or 28 A.D.

There is also uncertainty as to the date of the crucifixion, because Passover falling on a Friday occurred on that day in both the years 30 and 33. When we try to put together the information from the book of Acts and the later Christian chronology, there are ways in which both of those dates are plausible, although the later date of 33 perhaps crowds the amount of material that we have to include just a little bit. It is fair, then, to say that scholars are fairly evenly divided between the years 30 and 33 for the crucifixion, although there is perhaps ever so slight a weight of evidence, in favor of the earlier date of A.D. 30.

That also fits, then, the gospel of John's information: it alone tells us that Jesus went to Jerusalem at Passover time repeatedly, and it is from John's gospel that we are enabled to assume that Christ's ministry lasted for a period of slightly less, to up to slightly more, than a three-year frame of time. Beyond those ballpark figures it is difficult to fit all of the gospel material together into one, and only one, exact chronology. Harmonies of the Gospels have been written; it is not that the information is hopelessly contradictory. In fact, it is that there are several ways of fitting the information together, and the Gospels themselves often group material topically as well as chronologically. Apparently they were not concerned, as was the case with many ancient historians, with the precision of chronology that we modern people often are.

C. Chronological Outline of Jesus' Ministry

We will then simply follow this rough chronology of the life of Christ and talk about major stages of His ministry as we proceed. One very popular way of breaking Jesus' ministry down

into three stages, each comprising roughly a year's period of time, is to speak of: the initial year as one of obscurity (John's gospel gives us the greatest amount of information about this period, and we will return to it in our next lesson); a year of great popularity embracing His predominantly Galilean ministry; and then the year that culminates in His crucifixion in the springtime Passover festival, a year that we might describe as a year of rejection. So now let us go back to the beginning, and for the rest of this lesson and the next several lessons proceed roughly sequentially through the major stages of the life of Christ, pointing out what happens in each stage and key interpretive issues and theological emphases that we find in the four Gospels.

III. Jesus' Birth and Childhood

There are two gospels that describe Jesus' birth and childhood, the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke each devoting two chapters to that particular topic. But these two gospels are quite different in the information that they provide for us concerning the events surrounding Jesus' birth and childhood.

A. Matthew and Luke: Two Different Genealogies

In Matthew's gospel, Matthew begins with the genealogy; Luke includes one too, but he does so later, in his third chapter, and not all the names are the same. The two most popular explanations or harmonizations of this phenomenon are that Matthew is concerned with Jesus' ancestry through his adoptive father, Joseph, while Luke is concerned with Jesus' ancestry through Mary, His human and biological mother. Alternately, others have suggested that Matthew is portraying Jesus' legal genealogy while Luke is portraying His human genealogy, but both through the line of the adoptive father Joseph, from whom He derives His royal ancestry and hence His Messianic credentials.

B. Matthew's Account

At any rate, Matthew is very concerned to tie Jesus in with the Old Testament. One way of explaining his choice of material in Matthew chapters 1 and 2 has been to say that he is concerned with the who and the where of Jesus' birth. In the genealogy, he stresses Jesus as the son of Abraham and the son of David, and then in the remaining prose portions of chapter 1 he describes Jesus as Immanuel, "God with us"—the one who fulfilled completely the prophet Isaiah's prophecy of one who would be born to and conceived by a virgin. Chapter 2 continues with additional fulfillment of prophecy, here all related to various geographical locations important for Jesus' birth and the events surrounding it: Bethlehem (2:1-12); Egypt and the holy family's flight there in 2:13-15; Ramah, just outside Bethlehem (2:16-21); and finally Nazareth in the closing two verses of the chapter.

Matthew is concerned with the who and the where of Jesus' birth, and he is concerned to show five different times, once in chapter 1 and four times in chapter 2, how Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Sometimes these are very straightforward predictions that have come true, such as Micah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In other cases, Matthew employs the ancient and common Jewish practice of typology—taking a passage which is not necessarily a prediction at all but a reference to some important pattern of God's

redemptive activity in Old Testament times. A clear example of this is Matthew's quotation of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." In the context of Hosea that is not a prediction of anything; it is a reference back to God's people Israel, corporately God's son, being liberated from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. But Matthew finds that it is not merely coincidental but providentially designed that Jesus, the ultimate and complete liberator of God's people, should also flee to and then come out of Egypt, even as a baby boy.

This then is another way that Matthew, following a typical Jewish mind set, believes that prophecy is fulfilled or, as we might translate it today, "filled full." Several other prophecies in these chapters and elsewhere in the Gospels are perhaps best explained as combining both predictive and typological elements. Much controversy, some of it probably unnecessary, has surrounded Isaiah's famous prophecy of the virgin who would conceive and bear a child—Isaiah 7:14. In context it is clear that that child refers to someone who is alive in Isaiah's day, because the text goes on to say that before the child is old enough to know right from wrong the two kings that Israel fears will no longer threaten them. And yet the young woman was not strictly a virgin in Isaiah's day, and Matthew sees that that prophecy was not exhausted by any fulfillment in Isaiah's time. He believes that there is a more complete fulfillment that Jesus Himself brings with the birth to Mary without the help of any biological father.

We may speak here perhaps of multiple fulfillments or some would speak of prophetic foreshortening, just as one looking at a mountain range straight on often does not see the multiple peaks that lie one behind another. All of these were commonly understood and accepted Jewish techniques of giving prophecy and understanding it to have been fulfilled, and would have been convincing to the Jewish audience that Matthew was addressing that in fact something supernatural, something God designed, was taking place here. If we compare Matthew's opening two chapters with Luke's two chapters we see the same basic characters, the same basic events, but a choice of largely distinct details.

C. Luke's Account

Luke's pattern in Luke chapters 1 and 2 is to describe the events leading up to the births of two key characters: John the Baptist, the one who would be the forerunner for Jesus, and then Jesus Himself. A thumbnail outline of the gospel of Luke in these two chapters then would be that, after Luke's preface, 1:5-25 predicts the birth of John the Baptist; 1:26-38 predicts the birth of Jesus; in 1:39-56 the two mothers-to-be who have each received these predictions then visit each other so that the lives of the children soon to be born begin to intersect; 1:57-80 then narrates the birth of John the Baptist; 2:1-40 in great detail the birth of Jesus, and then one feature unique to Jesus' life as a child is teaching in the temple at age 12 in 2:41-52.

It is interesting to note both the similarities and differences between the events surrounding the birth of these two characters. In the case of John the Baptist and Jesus, there are parallels that involve Luke describing them both as being born of godly parents; having miraculous conceptions; being announced by angels and being described as having coming prophetic and redemptive significance; initial disbelief followed by acceptance and praise to God. In fact, one of the things that stands out in Luke 1 and 2 are the number of times that poetic-like language is used on the lips of Jesus or John's parents or the aged prophet and prophetess in the temple, Simeon and Anna.

Some have understood these to be, as was common in ancient Judaism, almost hymn-like in nature—outbursts of praise to God for what He is about to do through two children. And indeed in the more liturgical wings of the Christian church many of these prayers and praises have taken on great significance in Christian history, the most famous undoubtedly being Mary’s hymn of praise known as the *Magnificat* from the Latin translation of the first word of her hymn. Despite all of these various parallels there are obviously clear differences: John will simply be a forerunner pointing the way ahead to Jesus; John is supernaturally conceived by one who has been barren, but Jesus is far more supernaturally conceived by one who has not even sexually known a man; and even the amount of attention that is given to Jesus makes it clear that He is the focal point of these two chapters and the one as the angels celebrate in 2:11—“Today is born to you in the City of David a Savior who is Christ the Messiah and also the Lord.”

The one other detail that Luke includes at the end of these two chapters is the famous incident of Jesus astounding the teachers in the temple with His wisdom and His questions and answers at the age when a Jewish boy would have come of age, would have taken on himself the yoke of the commandments, what still today is called in Hebrew the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. And yet it is interesting that apart from this one incident we learn nothing in the Gospels about Jesus’ life as a young person, as a child, as a teenager, even as a young adult. We assume that He worked as an apprentice to His father Joseph and eventually, perhaps, as a full partner in his carpenter’s workshop. But unlike later apocryphal gospels, which tried to celebrate, magnify, and glorify Jesus the child by attributing to Him all kinds of prodigious and miraculous feats, apparently His childhood was otherwise relatively normal.

He was a good obedient Jewish boy, but not one who astounded the masses with the types of miracles that He would work later. Luke confirms this in the closing verse of his opening few chapters, Luke 2:52, which says that after Jesus returned with His parents to Nazareth He grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men, the four ways that all human children naturally grow—intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially.

D. Comparison of Matthew’s and Luke’s Accounts

Matthew and Luke then, each in their own way, have key themes in common: Jesus is the one who will be the hope of Israel and the fulfillment of the Old Testament, but He will also be one who will extend God’s blessings to the Gentiles and to others who are ostracized. Matthew in particular emphasizes Jesus as the legitimate king, over against Herod the usurper, despite Herod’s attempts to exterminate the young Christ child; whereas Luke emphasizes more Jesus’ universality, His coming as Savior and Lord, and, in the hymns of praise that the characters sing in these opening chapters, the fact that He will bring both spiritual and socioeconomic liberty, inverting the world’s standards and beliefs. So now, the Gospels jump forward to the beginning of Christ’s adult ministry when His life again intersects with John the Baptist and culminates in His baptism by John, thus setting the stage for the approximately three-year, more public phase of His life.

IV. John the Baptist

All four Gospels, in fact, introduce us to John the Baptist, who next to Jesus Himself apparently is the most prominent character—at least in terms of the amount of text devoted to Him—of any in the Gospels. John is described as a prophet, a prophet particularly reminiscent of Elijah in terms of his dress, in terms of his location, his ministry in the wilderness, in terms of his message, at times an austere message of judgment. That message, in fact, is summed up particularly in Mark and Matthew as one of calling for repentance and baptism, leading to the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance in the Jewish context meant a change of behavior as well as a change of heart and for a Jew to call fellow Jews to such radical contrition and change before God was largely unprecedented, at least since the age of the great prophets who had rendered God's judgment of faithlessness against the majority of the people of Israel. He also called people to be baptized primarily in the Jordan River. Baptism was known from rituals practiced by the Essenes at Qumran and although we are not exactly sure when its date began the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism, of asking Gentiles who converted to Judaism seems to have formed another precedent for John's call and ministry.

But what was unique was the call for all Jews, even those who seemingly had been faithful, law-abiding ones, to undergo this ritual as if in fact they were not right with God. John speaks also of a baptism of the Spirit and of fire that the one who follows Him will produce, apparently a reference to the simultaneous cleansing and judging element of the ministry of Jesus depending on people's responses to Him. Jesus appears in the Gospels at one stage as virtually a follower of John; in fact, Jesus comes to John to be baptized by him. But the gospel of Matthew in particular makes it clear that Jesus is not being baptized because of some sin of His, as He explains in 3:15, but rather to "Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, He is putting His divine stamp of approval on John's ministry.

Discussion Questions

Why do you think the incident of Jesus astounding the teachers in the temple (Luke 2:41-52) is the only significant detail the Bible provides concerning Jesus' childhood and youth? Why do you think that incident was included?

Describe some of the parallels between John the Baptist and Jesus, particularly their births. What significance do you see in these parallels?

Describe, in your own words, the ways in which Matthew's account of Jesus ties Him to the Old Testament. Why do you think Matthew was concerned with doing this? Why is it important?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 51: “The Perfect Man” (Luke)

Philip Yancey Devotional God’s Disguise - Luke 2:1-40

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. . . . Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)

Nearly every time an angel appears in the Bible, the first words he says are “Don’t be afraid!” Little wonder. When the supernatural made contact with planet earth, it usually left the human observers flat on their faces, in catatonic fear. But Luke tells of God making an appearance on earth in a form that would not frighten. In Jesus, born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough, God found at last a mode of approach that we need not fear. What could be less scary than a newborn baby?

Imagine becoming a baby again: giving up language and muscle coordination, and the ability to eat solid food and control your bladder. That gives just a hint of the “emptying” that God went through.

According to the Bible, Jesus was both God and man. As God, He could work miracles, forgive sins, conquer death, and predict the future. Jesus did all that, provoking awe in the people around Him. But for Jews accustomed to images of God as a bright cloud or pillar of fire, Jesus also caused much confusion. How could a baby in Bethlehem, a carpenter’s son, a man from Nazareth, be the Messiah from God? Jesus’ skin got in the way.

Puzzled skeptics would stalk Jesus throughout His ministry. But this chapter shows that God confirmed Jesus’ identity from His earliest days. A group of shepherds in a field had no doubt—they heard the message of good news straight from a choir of angels. And an old prophet and prophetess recognized Him also. Even the skeptical teachers in the temple were amazed.

Why did God empty Himself and take on human form? The Bible gives many reasons, some densely theological and some quite practical. The scene of Jesus as an adolescent lecturing rabbis in the temple (2:41-5:2) gives one clue. For the first time, ordinary people could hold a conversation, a debate, with God in visible form. Jesus could talk to anyone—His parents, a rabbi, a poor widow—without first having to announce “Don’t be afraid!” In Jesus, God came close.

Life Question: The scene of Jesus in the temple as a boy reveals a communication gap between Jesus and His parents. What other problems do you think He faced by being both God and man?

Glossary

Bethlehem — (Hebrew “house of bread”) - Bethlehem-Judah, or Ephrath or Ephrathah, is a town located on the edge of the desert of Judah, five miles south of Jerusalem. It is 2,500 feet above sea level, situated on a rocky spur of the mountains of Judah just off the main road to Hebron and Egypt.

Dionysius Exiguus — A Scythian monk who lived in Rome c. 500-550. He is famous for his contributions to ecclesiastical chronology and canon law.

John the Baptist — He was a prophet of priestly descent. His father Zechariah was a priest from the “division of Abijah,” and his mother Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron (Lk 1:5). Their home was in the hill country of Judea (Lk 1:65).

Quiz

1. Jesus' ministry on earth lasted approximately:
 - A. Three years
 - B. Two years
 - C. Four years
 - D. None of the above
2. Of the Synoptic Gospels, which book emphasizes Jesus' universality?
 - A. Matthew
 - B. Mark
 - C. Luke
 - D. John
3. The Hebrew word Bethlehem means:
 - A. "God's house"
 - B. "house of bread"
 - C. "big house"
 - D. "house of a servant"
4. The purpose of the book of Matthew is to:
 - A. Present Jesus Christ as king in Israel in exact fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies
 - B. Center on the person and mission of the Son of God
 - C. Give an accurate, chronological, and comprehensive account of the life of Jesus
 - D. Present the church
5. What did John the Baptist come to preach?
 - A. Sacrifice and obedience
 - B. Freedom and power
 - C. Judgment and patience
 - D. Repentance and baptism
6. What were the stages of Jesus' ministry?
 - A. Obscurity, popularity, rejection
 - B. Acceptance, acclaim, unpopularity
 - C. Popularity, secrecy, revelation
 - D. Openness, caution, silence
7. When Jesus began His ministry, this man was emperor of Rome:
 - A. Anthony
 - B. Tiberius
 - C. Augustus
 - D. Caligula

8. When was Jesus most likely born?
 - A. 0 B.C.
 - B. 1 B.C.
 - C. 6-4 B.C.
 - D. A.D. 2-4
9. Which gospel is concerned to tie Jesus with the Old Testament?
 - A. Matthew
 - B. Mark
 - C. Luke
 - D. All of the above
10. In which years of the time surrounding Jesus' crucifixion did Passover occur on a Friday, pointing us to believe that He was crucified during one of these years?
 - A. A.D. 31 and 34
 - B. A.D. 29 and 32
 - C. A.D. 20 and 23
 - D. A.D. 30 and 33

Answers: 1. A 2. C 3. B 4. A 5. D 6. A 7. B 8. C 9. A 10. D

Lesson 3 Study Guide

NT219

Luke-John: Two Interpretations of Jesus

Who Is This Man?
The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry

Updated 2014



Our Daily Bread
Christian University

Objectives

In this lesson you will study Jesus' baptism and temptation. Then you will survey the early days of Jesus' ministry where He introduced His unique message and approach. The lesson covers Jesus' year of popularity during His Galilean ministry.

When you complete this lesson, "Who Is This Man? The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry," you should be able to:

- Explain the significance of Jesus' baptism and temptation.
- Explain how Jesus' early days of ministry introduced the unique approach His ministry would take.
- Describe Jesus' year of popularity in Galilee and why it ended.
- Discuss the significance of Jesus' use of parables.
- Explain how to read, interpret, and apply Jesus' parables to your life.

Scripture Reading

Read John 1-21.

Transcript

Course Title: Luke—John: Two Interpretations of Jesus

Lesson Three: Who Is This Man?: The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry

I. Introduction to the Earthly Ministry of Jesus

A. Wilderness Experience

After being baptized by John, Jesus goes further into the wilderness. One might have expected Him to embark immediately on His more public and popular phase of ministry after this commissioning. Instead we read in the opening verses of both Matthew 4 and Luke 4 that God allowed Him to be tested by Satan, the famous temptation of Jesus over a forty-day period of His sojourning in the Judean wilderness. It is interesting to note the three specific types of temptations that Matthew and Luke describe here. Jesus is encouraged to turn stones miraculously into bread to satisfy His hunger, to receive all of the kingdoms of the world in response to worshiping the devil, and to throw Himself off the portico of the temple to be supernaturally rescued by angels. All of these temptations test and tempt Jesus to bypass the way of the cross, to take a purely triumphalist approach to His ministry, and yet one which would have fatally compromised His mission.

B. Three Human Temptations

It is also interesting to compare these three temptations to the descriptions of the full range of human temptation to sin in 1 John 2:16, described there as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. There is also a fairly close correspondence with the elements that tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden in Genesis 3:6, when that first pair saw that the forbidden fruit was desirable and pleasing to the eyes and able to make one wise. It seems therefore that the temptations of Jesus teach us what the writer to the Hebrews in 2:17-18 puts more didactically, namely that Christ was tempted in every way like unto ourselves, yet without sin. Because of that, He is able to intercede for us, and He is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses in whatever form of human temptation we experience.

II. Jesus' Initial Ministry

Following the temptations, Jesus' public ministry does begin; but as we mentioned in the previous lesson, the initial phase of His ministry is still largely one of obscurity, one in which He is not well-known by all of the masses throughout Israel. This phase of Jesus' ministry is described uniquely in the gospel of John, chapters 2-4.

A. Jesus' First Disciples (John 1)

John 1, to which we have already alluded in the context of John the Baptist, does give

additional information about Jesus' first disciples. Several are mentioned by name there: Simon Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael who is often equated with Bartholomew of the Synoptic Gospels' lists. From the second half of John 1, we learn that disciples were not all called by Him suddenly for the first time without any previous exposure to Him, as one might think if one read only the Synoptic Gospels.

B. Cana to Cana (John 2-4)

But the particularly distinctive contribution of John's gospel to the early phase of Jesus' public ministry comes in chapters 2, 3, and 4. In fact, there is a literary unity to these chapters in that they begin in the city of Cana in Galilee and they end in the city of Cana in Galilee, each time with Jesus working a miracle there—the only two references to Cana anywhere in the four Gospels. If one takes a brief overview of this three-chapter sequence of John 2–4, one in fact sees the beginning of the pattern that will characterize the first half of John's gospel more generally: signs and discourses, or miracles and sermons if you like, interspersed—often relating to one another.

Each of these key elements of John 2–4, the initial phase of Jesus' ministry, focuses on one of the ways in which Jesus is bringing something distinctively new to the Judaism and to the culture more generally of His day. The miracle of new wine, of wine when the old wine had run out, miraculously transformed from large jars of water, when interpreted in light of Jesus' own parable-like teaching in Mark 2 and elsewhere of new wine for new wineskins, suggests the symbolism of a newness to the religion that Jesus was bringing. Specifically, a new joy as wine in the context of wedding festivities symbolized joy and rejoicing for the ancient Israelites.

Continuing on in John 2, we read of Jesus cleansing the temple, apparently from John's perspective a different event from the temple-clearing incident that occurred in the final week of Jesus' life as narrated in Matthew and Mark. Although some of the details are similar, the main point in John 2 seems to be against the temple being used as a place of commerce, particularly those precincts of the court of the Gentiles that were designed to be the one place where people who were not Jews could come and worship and pray to God. It also becomes an opportunity for Jesus cryptically to predict His death and resurrection, although John makes it clear that even His followers did not understand that saying until after those events had transpired.

In John 3, we read of the famous discourse between Jesus and a prominent Pharisee, Nicodemus. Here in John 3:3 and 3:5 are the famous passages about being “born again,” or another way to translate that same expression is to be “born from above.” So after a new joy at Cana in Galilee and a new temple and a new place of worship, namely Jesus Himself in Jerusalem in the second half of chapter 2, John 3 proceeds to speak of a new spiritual birth. Physical birth, genealogy, ancestral descent are not enough to confirm one's religion, one must have a relationship with God through Jesus for him or herself. Following the discourse with Nicodemus appears also the very famous text of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever would believe in Him might not perish but have eternal life.” John 3 continues with a reference to the ministry of John the Baptist, with the recognition that John's ministry must increasingly give way to Jesus' in prominence.

Then in chapter 4 comes another very famous discourse between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria; here Jesus very clearly reveals Himself as the Messiah. He glosses over the debate that separated Jews from Samaritans as to which mountain they should worship God on by speaking of the day that was coming, and now was, in which one would worship neither on this mountain, Mount Gerizim in Samaria near where the discussion was occurring, nor in Jerusalem, but all those who would worship God would worship Him in spirit and in truth.

The story about Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman is perhaps most striking however because of who it was that Jesus was talking to. Not only was she a woman who a good man in ancient Israel would not have a conversation with alone in an open place unattended to (John tells us the disciples had left at this time); but also she was a Samaritan, and John makes it clear that Jews had few intimate dealings with Samaritans if they could avoid them. She also was a woman with an immoral reputation. We do not know the precise circumstances of the five husbands she had had or the man she was now living with, but at the very least she would have had the stigma that is associated with one who is an immoral woman.

Jesus overcomes all three of these barriers, in striking contrast to His much less promising conversation with Nicodemus who is berated for not understanding, even though he is a Jew, a man, and a very moral and prominent, upright Jewish religious leader. The striking contrast could scarcely be stronger. As we mentioned, John 4 then closes with another healing miracle, this time of a Gentile nobleman's son in Cana in Galilee. So the two parts to John 4 together combine to stress the new universal offer of salvation that Jesus' ministry was bringing. Although Jesus is not yet prominent during this opening phase of His ministry, it is very clear that He is bringing something new through all of these stories that are narrated in John 2-4.

III. Galilean Ministry - Part 1

A. Introduction

As Jesus finally returns to Galilee and begins to minister in an itinerant fashion there on a regular basis, for approximately a year's time, he finally becomes much better known. This initiates the much more public phase of what has been called His year of popularity. As they did with John the Baptist, the Synoptic Gospel writers begin with an introduction to the summary of Jesus' message.

B. Kingdom of God Is at Hand

Mark and Matthew both describe Jesus as preaching, as John had, that the kingdom of God was at hand. Mark says explicitly in 1:14,15 that Jesus goes on to command people to repent and to believe in the Gospel. Luke in his own way, as we mentioned in our introduction to Luke, begins his description of Jesus' public Galilean phase of His ministry by describing Jesus preaching in Nazareth. The parallels in Matthew and Mark suggest that this actually occurred a bit further into Jesus' public ministry, but Luke narrates it up front as a kind of headline or programmatic introduction to Jesus' claim of what he was all about. Here we recall Jesus' words quoting Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, the Year of Jubilee is at hand, the year of the Lord's favor." He is proclaiming release to the captives, sight to the blind, healing for many different kinds of sick and injured people, and good news to the poor.

We may follow Mark's account for the skeleton outline of Jesus' Galilean ministry. We do not have the time or space to include reference to every detail, particularly those that appear in the supplementary and fuller versions of Matthew and Luke, but it seems here that Mark is following an outline for the first roughly eight chapters of his gospel that proceeds thematically. It proceeds at times according to the different forms of Jesus' teachings and ministry. Most of Mark 1 has been called by some commentators a typical day in the life of Jesus the Healer (and also, we might add, Jesus the Exorcist.) We read in Mark 1:21 to the end of that chapter of several miracles of healing and of one exorcism that characterized one 24-hour period of time early on in Jesus' Galilean ministry. When we come to questions of miracles a number of issues face the modern person: Can we believe in such apparently supernatural stories?

C. Question of Authenticity

If one is closed to the possibility of the miraculous in the first place, based on one's worldview, then one will seek to explain these stories in some other fashion. Perhaps the most common alternate explanation is that they are myths similar to the well-known myths of ancient Greece and Rome. But in fact those myths primarily dealt with gods or goddesses, who did not take on human form, of centuries past; and those that did involve human beings still referred to the heroes of old so many centuries removed from the time in which the myth circulated that no one could ever check the accuracy of the stories. In striking contrast, the stories about Jesus began to be narrated immediately during His lifetime and in the decades that followed, being put, as we discovered in earlier lessons, in written form within perhaps a thirty-year period of Jesus' lifetime.

This was a period in which hostile eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus still remained in Israel and could very easily have debunked these accounts if they were false. In fact, there is curious but significant backhanded testimony to the reality of Jesus' miracle-working ministry in some of the later Jewish writings, the Mishnah and the Talmud, that codified and put in written form many of the oral traditions that began to circulate in the time of Jesus. In several different places in these Jewish writings we read from a Jewish perspective, a non-Christian Jewish perspective that is, that Jesus was a sorcerer, a magician who led Israel astray.

Even the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, notes that Jesus was credited for being a miracle worker. Apparently these other historians and gatherers of tradition knew that they could not dispute that Jesus had the reputation for working miracles and exorcising demons; they merely tried to explain the source of His power differently. In fact, the first known occasion of such a claim appears in the Gospels themselves—in Mark 3 and Matthew 12, in parallel accounts where Jesus is accused of working exorcisms by the power of Beelzebul or Satan rather than by the power of God. There is good historical reason therefore for believing in the authenticity of the miracle accounts: Jesus, a healer, healing a wide variety of diseases. Although, we must be careful not to superimpose a rigid pattern on Jesus' miracles of healing. In John 5, for example, there is one prominent occasion when Jesus encounters a large crowd of sick people by the pool of Bethesda all waiting to be healed and He only heals one of them. Apparently it is God's sovereign will and timing when and whom He chooses to heal.

D. Pronouncement Stories

Mark 2 forms a transition to the next package of illustrations of Jesus' Galilean ministry that the Synoptic Gospel writers provide: a series of stories that scholars have often called pronouncement stories because they climaxed in a significant, short, proverb-like pronouncement of Jesus. The first of these is actually a combination of a healing—Mark 2:1-12, the famous healing of the paralyzed man—and a pronouncement story. But it seems that the latter is the climax and the more significant element because Jesus pronounces this man's sins forgiven. He has healed his physical malady, but the more outrageous is His divine-like pronouncement of the man's sins forgiven. In fact, it is the power to work the healing that justifies this claim to be able to do what Jews believe only God ultimately had the right to do—therefore at least an implicit claim to deity, to the attributes and the prerogatives of the divine.

The subsequent pronouncement stories are perhaps not quite as dramatic or radical as that and yet all point in some way again to Jesus' newness over the old forms of Judaism, but also in a pointed way create some kind of conflict or controversy with the Jewish leaders. His pronouncement that it is not the righteous who need healing but the sick, His pronouncement that the Son of Man Himself is Lord even over the Sabbath: challenging in a variety of ways—through teaching about what can and cannot be done, through healing—to the various oral interpretations of the Jewish law, and therefore setting the stage early in Jesus' career for conflicts with the authorities that, although they would wax and wane, would ultimately culminate in His arrest and His crucifixion. In Mark 3, the bulk of this chapter deals also with further controversy over His ability to heal and to exorcise, to which we have already alluded.

E. Discipleship and Opposition

But in this context Mark 3 frames the controversy with the Pharisees and scribes with references to the question of who Jesus' true family is. Already early on, in Mark 1:16-20, we have read of the Synoptic version of the call of Jesus' first disciples, and we recall from John 1 that this was not necessarily the first time that Jesus' followers had met Him. But it is in Mark 3, apparently at a certain distance into Jesus' Galilean ministry, when we first receive the names of all Twelve when apparently now the formal call to Jesus' followers is given, and from this point on these Twelve will uniquely follow Jesus almost everywhere He goes.

Rabbis were commonly known to have disciples in Jesus' day and the decades and centuries thereafter, but what was striking about Jesus was that He took the initiative to call the disciples and not vice versa. It was also striking that He called twelve, the same number as the tribes of Israel; almost certainly an implication here is Jesus is constituting or reconstituting a new or true Israel. It will only be as people come to Him, rather than through the Jewish law, that they will have a right relationship with God.

F. Parables

The final literary form and portion of Jesus' teaching that Jesus' great Galilean ministry in its opening phases introduces us to comes in Mark 4 (and parallels), which largely comprise a chapter of teaching in parables. The parable, a short story designed to drive home in sharp

rhetorical fashion an important theological truth, was a well-known rabbinical form. But the rabbis used it largely to exegete and interpret Scripture, whereas Jesus uses it to explain about the kingdom of God, God's dynamic reign or rule, breaking into human history through the ministry of Jesus.

Mark 4:11-12 describes Jesus' purpose or strategy in teaching in parables, and paradoxically there was not only an illuminating function—revealing truth—but there was also a concealing function, as Jesus explains that the insiders, His disciples and the others with them who are open to Jesus and His person and His claims, will gain further understanding about the kingdom through this form of teaching, but to those who are outside He says everything in parables. Then He goes on to allude to and to quote portions of Isaiah 6—that He speaks to outsiders in parables lest they hear and understand, see and perceive, turn and be forgiven. What is going on here? Well, in the context of Isaiah it is clear that certain kinds of prophetic and sometimes cryptic speech can be used by God to confirm in judgment those who have already begun to resist His will. It is not an irreconcilable predestination to eternal life without Christ. Isaiah 6 ends with a prophecy of the return of a remnant, and as long as people are open to Jesus they may return to Him.

Perhaps it is worth commenting here that in the context of Mark 3, and in the parallel passages in Matthew 12 and Luke 11, we learn of an unforgivable sin that is called blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But in context that is something that is not said to actually have happened, only that Jesus' opponents are in danger of it and those who are given this strong warning are those who are not His followers—not His would-be followers, not even interested inquirers, but those who have not followed Jesus but opposed Him virtually from the outset of His ministry and will continue to oppose Him implacably to the cross. No passage in Jesus' ministry or anywhere in the Gospels, whether in parables or in more straightforward teaching, ever says that anyone who genuinely wants to become a follower of Jesus is prevented from doing so in this life.

G. Responses to the Kingdom

The parables also introduce us to the revealing function of explaining the kingdom of God—the parable of the sower that describes the various responses to the kingdom. Not all will respond positively, but some—perhaps a surprisingly large number—will: The seed growing secretly, which describes how we do not understand how God's spiritual seed takes root and grows throughout this life and yet a harvest is assured; in Matthew 13, the parallel account of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet that promised Jesus' kingdom triumphing despite opposition in many forms; the little parables of the leaven and the mustard seed, also found in Matthew and in other places in the gospel of Luke; the promise of the kingdom's growth to surprising proportions despite inauspicious beginnings; and back in the gospel of Mark, the parable of the lamp and its need not to be hidden under a bushel so that all might hear. These and other parables, despite their at times cryptic functions that required Jesus to illustrate and to explain and to decode them, also gave—in some very practical, down-to-earth fashion—explanations for first-century Jewish peasant Galileans of what Jesus understood the kingdom of God to be about.

Discussion Questions

Review Jesus' experience of temptation as told in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13. To what extent is Jesus' experience unique? What are ways in which Jesus' experience gives us help when we are tempted to sin?

Choose one of Jesus' parables to study - perhaps choose one of your favorites or, alternatively, one that you haven't studied as deeply in the past. What do you think Jesus was trying to tell the 1st-century Jewish people He first addressed it to? How does the parable apply to your life today?

How was Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-26) countercultural in His day? Why is this of significance? What type(s) of people might it seem odd for you to have an intimate conversation with in your culture today? Why?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 60: “Christ, Our Confidence and Our Strength” (Philippians)

Philip Yancey Devotional Of Two Worlds - Luke 16

No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (Luke 16:13)

A story is told about Rabbi Joseph Schneerson, a Hasidic leader during the early days of the Russian revolution. The rabbi spent much time in jail, persecuted for his faith. One morning in 1927, as he prayed in a Leningrad synagogue, secret police rushed in and arrested him. They took him to a police station and worked him over, demanding that he give up his religious activities. He refused. The interrogator brandished a gun in his face and said, “This little toy has made many a man change his mind.” Rabbi Schneerson answered, “This little toy can intimidate only that kind of man who has many gods and but one world. Because I have only one God and two worlds, I am not impressed by this little toy.”

The theme of “two worlds,” or two kingdoms, emerges often in Jesus’ teaching, and two stories in this chapter draw a sharp distinction between the two worlds. “What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight,” Jesus said, commenting on the first story. The second story, of the rich man and Lazarus, elaborates on that difference in values between the two worlds. The rich man prospered in this world, yet neglected to make any provision for eternal life and thus suffered the consequences. Meanwhile, a half-starved beggar, who by any standard would be judged a failure in this life, received an eternal reward.

Jesus told such stories to a Jewish audience with a tradition of wealthy patriarchs, strong kings, and victorious heroes. But Jesus kept emphasizing His stunning reversal of values. People who have little value in this world (the poor, the persecuted—people like Lazarus) may, in fact, have great stature in God’s kingdom. Consistently He presented the visible world as a place to invest for the future, to store up treasure for the life to come.

Jesus once asked a question that brings the two worlds starkly together: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

Life Question: How would you rate yourself, using the standards of success and failure in this world? What if you used Jesus’ standards?

Glossary

Miracle — An extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs

Mishnah — The Mishnah contains a written collection of Jewish oral law handed down from teacher to student. The laws were developed over several centuries, with the written form codified in around A.D. 200. The collection makes up the first and basic part of the Talmud. The Mishnah ranks second in authority only to the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures for Jews.

Parable — (Greek *parabole*) - A “placing beside;” a comparison; equivalent to the Hebrew *mashal*, a similitude. A metaphor or simile often extended to a short narrative. In biblical contexts, parables are almost always formulated to reveal and illustrate the kingdom of God.

Pool of Bethesda — The pool of Bethesda has been identified at the north end of Jerusalem, in what are now the grounds of the Church of St. Anne.

Talmud — The Jewish compilations that embody the Mishnah, or oral teaching of the Jews, and the Gemara, or collection of discussions on the Mishnah.

Quiz

1. Jesus almost always used parables to:
 - A. Rebuke the Pharisees
 - B. Teach about Jewish customs
 - C. Reveal and illustrate the kingdom of God
 - D. Confuse the crowds
2. Jesus' miracles were written down:
 - A. Within a thirty-year period of Jesus' lifetime
 - B. Within a three-year period of Jesus' lifetime
 - C. Within a seventy-year period of Jesus' lifetime
 - D. Only by anti-Christian sects of Judaism
3. Matthew and Mark teach that:
 - A. The kingdom of God is near.
 - B. The kingdom is in heaven.
 - C. The kingdom of God is at hand.
 - D. The kingdom cannot be understood.
4. Rabbis were known to have disciples in Jesus' day. What was different about the way the Twelve were called?
 - A. They were all called without any previous exposure to Him.
 - B. They asked Him if they could be disciples first.
 - C. Jesus always performed a miracle before calling out to one of the Twelve.
 - D. Jesus takes the initiative to call them and not vice versa.
5. What is the Mishnah?
 - A. A book also known as the Talmud
 - B. The body of Jewish oral law
 - C. A Jewish commentary written by rabbis
 - D. A collection of Jewish myths
6. What were the purposes of Jesus' parables?
 - A. To show and tell
 - B. To simplify and make clear
 - C. To reveal and conceal
 - D. To entertain and compel
7. Which is **not** a significant part of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman?
 - A. She was a woman.
 - B. She was a Samaritan and had an immoral reputation.
 - C. She later converted her entire family.
 - D. Jesus called Himself the Messiah with a Samaritan before He did so with a Jew.

8. Which of the following disciples are mentioned in John 1?
 - A. Simon Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael
 - B. James, John, and Cephas
 - C. All twelve disciples
 - D. Philip, James, and John
9. Which of the following was not one of the temptations Satan posed to Jesus in the wilderness?
 - A. Turning stones to bread
 - B. Lying with a woman
 - C. Ruling all kingdoms of the world
 - D. Jumping off the temple safely
10. Which statement does **not** reflect a point mentioned in John 2?
 - A. Jesus shows concern regarding how the court of the Gentiles was being used.
 - B. Jesus predicts His death.
 - C. Jesus is against the temple being used as a place of commerce.
 - D. If one has enough faith, God promises healing.

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. C 4. D 5. B 6. C 7. C 8. A 9. B 10. D