

BIBLE STUDY

The Life of Jesus Christ

Introduction and Background

Study Section 1



Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Jesus Christ: Study 1

A Nation in Darkness

Before we begin a study in the New Testament and the life of Jesus Christ, we must first consider the background and conditions prevailing at the time of His birth. This will help our understanding of the setting in which the Gospels were written, and how His ministry began.

Four hundred years had gone by since God's voice was heard in the land of Israel through the prophet Malachi. As the prophet Micah had previously foretold, about 300 years prior to Malachi, the time of the prophets had come to an end.

“Therefore, it will be a night for you - without vision, and darkness for you - without divination. The sun will go down on the prophets and the day will become dark over them.” Micah 3:6

Thus as was declared in the Proverbs:

“Where there is no vision, the people perish”. Proverbs 29:18

God was silent, and Israel was perishing. However, during the 400 years between the close of the Old Testament revelation and the coming of Christ, several important events occurred.

1. **The Greeks under Alexander the Great and his successors ruled the world for a time.**
2. **Under the Maccabees, (which means the “Hammer”) the Jews revolted and attempted to break away from the rule of the Greeks.**
3. **The Roman Empire succeeded the Greek, and ruled the known world when Christ was born.**
4. **The Jewish Synagogue, the Sanhedrin, and Sects such as the Pharisees and Sadducees developed.**

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

All of these events and developments set the stage for the birth, the ministry, the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It gives a background to the lives of the disciples and subsequent preaching of the gospel message.

A Bible Echo

The condition of God's people in the land of Israel, living in the darkness of sin, with no direct word from God's prophets, serves as a Bible echo taking us right back to the beginning of the book of Genesis.

“And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep...” Genesis 1:2

Just as darkness prevailed in the earth in those early days, awaiting the Spirit of God to provide the light that would be separate from the darkness, Israel awaited the activity of God to bring about the birth of the Son of Righteousness, who would bring light to a dark, lost and sinful world.

The Failure of Man

For 4,000 years, men had struggled, unsuccessfully, against sin. We read “All had sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Time, and time again, God's chosen people the Jews had forgotten the message that God had provided under conditions of suffering and affliction that came upon them as a result of their sinfulness and turning from His way.

A pattern was established that resounds as an echo throughout the record of their history. The Jewish nation would begin to forget about God in times of blessing and bounty, and turn to the sinful ways of the nations around them. Because of this sinful activity, they would enter into a period of affliction at the hands of their enemies. Then from the depths of their oppression, they would realise their sinfulness, and cry out to God, seeking His deliverance. In response to their appeal, and their repentance, because of His great love and mercy, God would send a deliverer.

The record in the book of Judges clearly demonstrates this pattern, describing 6 such occasions in chapters 3 through 16. The record of the history of God's people consistently follows this sequence, as they fail, again, and again, before finally turning to God as their only hope.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Salvation Only Through God and His Son

As you consider the despair into which the people of Israel had fallen during the time between the book of Malachi, and the birth of Jesus, you might turn to the writings of **Isaiah, chapter 59**. Read the words of God recorded through this prophet, as these 400 dark years were anticipated. Read the prophecy of the people's vain longing for deliverance and peace, **verses 9 to 11**. Read and examine the sinful conditions and denial of the Lord that lay at the base of their misery, **verses 12 to 15**.

Humanity could not provide the deliverer needed to release them from their enslavement to sin, so, at the end of verse 15, we see that God Himself promised to undertake the work of salvation (verses 15 to 17). He alone could and would provide a Saviour.

In Bondage to the Nations

Like all history, the times before the advent of Jesus Christ had left their mark upon the Jewish nation. Following the Babylonian captivity, after the Babylonian Empire had been overthrown by the Medes and the Persians, they went back to Israel to rebuild the temple. However, although allowed to do this, they remained under Persian rule.

As had been prophesied by Daniel, from the image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Persia was then overthrown by Greece. Under the rule of the Greek Empire the people of Israel were subject to intense suffering, which had only been partly relieved by the exploits of the Maccabees. The Maccabees were a family of Jews who resisted the authority of Antiochus Epiphanes and his successors, who had completely conquered Jerusalem and strove to introduce idolatrous worship into the temple.

However following these events the iron rule of Rome penetrated the East and bound the land and its people. Israel groaned under the rule of Rome and longed for a deliverer. Unknowingly, they were under a greater bondage than that of Rome, for they were as are all men enslaved to sin. Now however the time was coming for their awakening and deliverance, as had been prophesied many times in the Old Testament. As the last prophet recorded in the Old Testament, a thorough reading of the book of Malachi offers a wonderful summary of God's love for His nation, opposed by the sinfulness of the people, ending with the hope and promise of future redemption. This final message of judgement is directed to a people plagued with corrupt priests, wicked practices, and a false sense of security. Malachi probes deeply into their

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

problems of hypocrisy, infidelity, mixed marriages, divorce, false worship and arrogance.

Judaism and Greek Culture

Of the three powers who ruled over them, the Jews were most influenced by Greek culture, or “Hellenism”. This was the result of a process of systematic Hellenisation, or the spreading of Greek culture, which began with Alexander the Great. It is for this reason that the Hebrew writings, or the Old Testament, were translated into Greek. This was completed more than 150 years before the time of Christ. The synagogues found in Palestine give evidence that Hellenistic culture was accepted to a surprising extent. Greek mythology provided the subject matter for many of the decorations in the synagogues, although Jews resisted the actual idolatry of the Greeks in regard to worship. But they did adopt some of the Greek mysticism which finds its way into the dialogue recorded in the Gospels between Jesus and the religious leaders of His time.

It is against this background and under these conditions that we shall explore the Life of Jesus Christ as recorded in the gospel record.

LESSONS FOR US

1. Without the word of God, and acceptance of His Son, Jesus Christ, exerting an influence on our lives, we, too, live in darkness and are subject to the influences of the world around us.
2. As we look to the example of Israel, learn from the lesson that they failed to see.

As a memory aid, think of the sequence of the five S’s in our lives:

<u>Sin:</u>	Realize your sins
<u>Suffering:</u>	Remember that death and suffering are the results of sin
<u>Seek God:</u>	Turn to Him in repentance
<u>Salvation:</u>	Have confidence in His forgiving mercy and grace to those who seek Him

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Saviour: Accept Jesus His Son, as your deliverer and your Saviour.

Write down any questions that you may have about this section or that you have thought of whilst reading the various passages mentioned so that you will remember them. It might help to discuss them with the person helping you go through this series of studies.

Test Yourself

- 1) Isaiah 59 speaks of why God's people were punished by Him. What had they done?
- 2) God said that He would provide salvation which city was redemption to come from?
- 3) After speaking about the corruption of the Priests and Levites in chapters 1 and 2 Malachi speaks of one who would come and purify them that the offering of Judah and Jerusalem would once more be acceptable. At the end of this chapter Malachi describes certain characteristics of those who were righteous, what are they?

Jesus Christ: Study 2

Leaders of the Land

During Jesus Christ's life and ministry, His greatest opposition came from the leaders and authorities in the land, especially from the religious groups from within His own people, the Jews. As God's Holy people, their worship had deteriorated. The priesthood was in the hands of the Hellenistic Sadducees, who said that "...there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit" (Acts 23:8). To support their idea that there was no life possible other than that of the current mortal state, and keep the profits flowing into their treasury through the offerings made under the sacrificial code, they accepted as authoritative, only Genesis to Deuteronomy. The priesthood was dominated by them. Thus it was in the hands of people who, by precept and performance were materialistic, indeed they were little more than atheists.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, accepted the law, the Psalms and the prophets. They regarded the Oral Law, consisting of the decisions and judgments of learned Scribes, or Lawyers, as of equal (if not greater) authority than the written law. This made the Pharisees the natural allies of the Scribes, and directly opposed to the Sadducees. They tended to hold the letter of the law, and altogether miss its spirit. They were also materialistic. This sprang from their inability to offer God more than lip service and ritual. The concept of deep inward contrition and repentance was lost to them.

These were the main religious forces during the lifetime of Christ in first century Israel. Other, less influential groups existed among the Jews, however, such as the Essenes, the Herodians and the Zealots. Among many in these groups, with the exception of the Sadducees, the Hellenistic influence led to an acceptance of the Greek dogma of an immortal soul. Religious activity centred in, around, and through, the temple, the synagogues, and the Sanhedrin. The exception to this is the Essenes, who lived apart, unable to affect the mass of society and the political groups. The Essenes, although referred to in most commentaries relative to first century Israel, are not actually mentioned in the Bible.

Without the pure, complete, and active word of God in their lives, the general population of Israel, led by religious leaders who had corrupted and lost the true meaning and principles behind the word of God, given to them throughout the

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

centuries, had truly become like lost sheep. Oppressed by the conditions under which they lived, and without an active, true hope in God on a personal basis, they had lost sight of personal redemption and repentance, and longed only for the peace and materialistic strength of an Israel returned to a national state of political power.

Although, as we shall see in the Gospel record, there were some who longed for the coming of the Messiah on the basis of personal salvation, the majority thought only in terms of political relief and power, seeing this as the only way in which they could have peace. Do we not see an echo of this in the nation of Israel today, in particular, and in general, among the nations of the world as we stand in the shadow of Christ's second coming?

One Bible tip that will prove invaluable during Bible study is that a better understanding of God's word can be reached if we consider its relationship to the background and conditions under which it was given. As an aid to gaining an insight into the opposition, jealousy, and hatred, that our Lord Jesus Christ encountered during His ministry, ultimately leading to His rejection and death, it is worthwhile to consider and understand these religious and political groups, movements and individuals who dominated the daily life of the Jews in the first century. These are names with which we become familiar in the New Testament, but which were entirely unknown in the Old, having developed during the 400 dark years.

Recognition of these differing elements will especially help in understanding the significance and meaning underlining the dialogue between Jesus Christ and those to whom He tried to present the Gospel Message and the Truth of God's Word.

Jewish Groups and Movements

PHARISEES

About 200 years before the birth of Christ, the Scribes, who were faithful to the law, re-instituted by Ezra, began to actively oppose the Greek philosophical trend among the people. Early in the 2nd century B.C., this group was called the Hasidim. (God's loyal ones) As time progressed, they grew in influence and power, and appeared under a new name of Pharisee, "the separated ones". This name first appears before the revolt of the Maccabees.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

The Pharisees strongly resisted the abandonment of certain traditions of the Mosaic Law and Rabbinical teaching. Their fervent opposition to anything non-Jewish was a factor in preserving the doctrines and practices of the Jewish nation's way of life under Gentile state rule. By the first century, they were a powerful influence among the people in general, and although they were soundly condemned by Christ, they had performed an important function in preserving the Law of Moses for the Jewish people.

They were bitter enemies of the Sadducees and both Scribes and some Priests could be found in their group. By the time of Christ, there was some latitude among the Pharisees with regard to how strictly the Law of Moses should be applied. There were dedicated enemies of Jesus numbered among the Pharisees, because they were not only able to appreciate His teachings, they also saw and recognized the threat He represented to the status quo and their own position. It is noted that from among their class, **did** come some sincere and devoted followers of Christ, such as Paul, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. (See for example John 19:38-39) The record in the Acts of the Apostles also notes that some Pharisees were numbered among the early Christians in Jerusalem.

SADDUCEES

This group constituted priestly aristocracy. Under the Herods and under the Romans, they held the predominate place in the Sanhedrin. They had little in common with the people of Israel, but were politically acceptable to Herod and the Roman rulers.

They were noted as conservatives and were constantly in conflict with the Pharisees on religious and political grounds. This is an important point to remember in relationship to the death of Christ, as we will see in the Gospel record later in this study.

SCRIBES

The activities of the Scribes came into prominence following the time of Ezra. This is really the name of an occupation, rather than a position of authority or membership in a particular group. (See Matt. 7:29). Originally, they were looked upon as the experts in the exposition of the Law of Moses. They had tremendous prestige among the common people and were consulted in all religious matters.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

In early history the Scribes were drawn from the Priests, but later, were accepted from all the educated classes. The Scribes' early education generally started at a very young age and continued through Rabbinical Schools. At the age of 30, a Scribe would be qualified to teach as a Rabbi in the Synagogue. They were sometimes called lawyers of religious law and people gave them recognition and respect in public places. Jerusalem was the centre of great Rabbinical Schools of philosophy.

Scribes could read and write, and therefore by the first century, they were in demand as teachers and secretaries. Since Scribes had different employers, or no fixed employers, they had various sympathies. Because the Scriptures were so important to the Jews, the Scribes were often to be found in leadership positions.

PRIESTS

Priests were also a professional class, (Mark 11:18; 14:10) who had official duties in the temple. The High Priest was also head of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Under Roman rule, the High Priest was appointed by the Roman Governor which of course was contrary to the Law of Moses.

SYNAGOGUE

The word means congregation, just as the Greek word ecclesia in the New Testament describes a body of believers or 'church'. Synagogues probably had their origin during the exile in Babylon when worship according to temple ritual was impossible. It developed as a place of prayer and instruction in the Scriptures, serving a three-fold purpose:

- Worship
- education
- and the government of the civil life of the community.

Every city, town and village had its Synagogue and connecting school, where children were taught the traditions of their people and the principles of the Law of Moses. It was also the gathering place for the community on the Feast Days and the Sabbath. (See for example Acts 15:21).

HERODIANS

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

This was a Jewish political party that saw Herod as the last hope of retaining a Jewish National Government. They believed that co-operation with Rome was the most practical way to maintain a Jewish identity.

ESSENES

These were the fundamentalists, devoted Old Testament scholars, living a semi-monastic life in their wilderness communities and striving to maintain the purity of the Law. The Dead Sea Scrolls are a part of their records. The Essenes were looking for the coming Messiah. They hated the priesthood, and despised the hypocrisy of their times. They believed in immersion as baptism and went through a daily purification ritual.

Although this sect is not actually mentioned in the Bible, it most certainly had its effect on some people in the area. It is conjecture in some commentaries that John the Baptist might have been a member of their community. There is no Biblical evidence to support this conjecture, although he did emerge from the wilderness area of Judea, where they were most strongly represented. This and his insistence upon a baptism of repentance are at the root of such conjecture.

ZEALOTS

The Zealots, (see Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13) were armed resisters who fought against foreign rule and taxation. They were not a single organization, but, rather, the name could refer to any group or band that resisted foreign domination. Opponents of the Zealots simply called them, “bandits”. According to Josephus, the Zealots were the leaders in the defence of the temple in Jerusalem when it was destroyed by Rome in A.D. 70.

SICARII

The Sicarri, or “assassins”, (Acts 21:38) engaged in a particular kind of armed resistance. Using daggers, (Sicarri, in Latin) concealed in their clothing, they assassinated their enemies in crowded places, and then ran away before they could be apprehended.

Political Leaders

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

The Herodian Dynasty:

Due to the fact that there was more than one King Herod, some confusion sometimes exists regarding their identities when we read of them. Herod was the family name of several rulers appointed by Rome to serve as Provincial Governors of Palestine, and surrounding regions during New Testament times. This family, although of Idumean origin, (Edom - descendants of Esau,) and thus alien by race, was Jewish by faith. The first Herod, known as Herod the Great, was the ruler of Palestine, appointed by Rome in the days of the Roman Emperor, Ceasar Augustus, at the time Jesus was born in Bethlehem. (Matt. 2:1; Luke 3:1). All the other different Herods mentioned in the New Testament were the sons or grandsons of this Herod.

Herod the Great (ruled 37 B.C to 4 B.C.), was known as a master builder, organizer, and developer, although his policies were considered cruel and ruthless by the Jewish people. His most notable achievement was the re-furbishing of the temple in Jerusalem, a project that required almost 50 years. In the Gospel record, we find the astonishment of Jesus' Apostles when He replied to their boasts regarding this great structure with a prophecy of its complete destruction. Herod also re-built and enlarged the City of Caesarea into a port city on the Mediterranean Sea. This city served as the Roman Provincial Capital for Palestine during the New Testament era. The magnificent aqueducts that he built in this city are still visible today.

Herod the Great is also responsible for the massacre of the male children in Bethlehem in his efforts to destroy the child Jesus. (Matt. 2:16)

Herod's son Antipas, succeeded him as Roman Governor of Galilee and Perea (Matt. 14:1). Antipas was responsible for the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist (Luke 3:19, 20; Matt. 14:1-12). Herod the Great's grandson, Agrippa, was named ruler over all of Palestine by the Roman Emperor Caligula. Agrippa is known as a persecutor of early Christians. He had James put to death and he had Peter arrested. Because of his cruelty and blasphemy, Agrippa was slain by an Angel of the Lord. (Acts 12) In A.D. 50, Agrippa's son, known as Agrippa 2, was made ruler of the territory of the King of Chalcis. Later, he was given Abilene, Trachonitis, Acra, and parts of Galilee and Perea. The only reference to this Herod in the New Testament occurs in Acts 25:13 through Acts 26:32, which deals with Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea. Agrippa listened to Paul's defence, but the Apostle appealed to Rome. Thus Agrippa had no power to set him free.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

The other two Herods mentioned in the New Testament are Herod Archelaus (Matt. 2:22) and Herod Philip (Luke 3:1). Both of these rulers were sons of Herod the Great. They ruled parts of the territory previously administered by their father.

Roman Emperors and Appointed Rulers of Palestine

Augustus Caesar was the Roman Emperor at the time of Jesus' birth and Tiberius Caesar was emperor at His death. Probably the most infamous Roman ruler appointed in Palestine, associated with the death of Christ, is Pontius Pilate who ruled Judea from A.D. 26 to 36.

The Influence of these Groups in the Gospel

As we follow Jesus' life through the Gospel we will watch for the significance of some of these groups and individuals, and the part they played in the rejection, and death of the Saviour of the World. As we look at the challenges that some of these presented to Christ, and His response to them, it will be helpful to look back on this section and refresh our memories regarding their positions. This will often explain the way in which challenges were presented and the manner of response given by Jesus. Sometimes the response of Jesus was expressed in terms of their own lack of understanding and belief in the true word of God, but presented to them in such a manner that they would clearly understand His message.

As a Bible tip, we should always look for the message that Jesus intended to convey, rather than simply focus upon the manner in which it was presented.

LESSON FOR US

1. The people of Jesus' day failed to recognize Him and His manifestation of God's true Word because they followed the corrupted teachings of false religious leaders, and, therefore, did not see or follow Christ's direction toward the purity and principles of His Word.
2. We must beware of falling prey to fables of men presented to us as the Word of God. It is our personal responsibility to seek the Truth of His Way in His Word. Paul writes:

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”
2Tim 4:1-4

“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good (true).” 1Thess: 5:21

Write down any questions that you may have about this section or that you have thought of whilst reading the various passages mentioned so that you will remember them. It might help to discuss them with the person helping you go through this series of studies.

Test Yourself

1. Why do you think the worship of God at the time of Jesus Christ had deteriorated?
2. Most of the religious leaders at the time of Christ rejected him as the Messiah but some believed in him. Who went to Jesus by night as recorded in John 3 and which religious group did he belong to?
3. What behaviour and attitude of mind did Jesus condemn the Pharisees for as recorded in Luke 11?

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Jesus Christ: Study 3

The Four Gospels

The Four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - tell us about the life of Jesus. Yet they are not true biographies. They say little about Jesus' family background, youth, and nothing about His physical appearance. They concentrate almost totally on the years of Jesus' ministry. Even here, they do not give enough information to reconstruct the full history of those years. Rather, attention is focused on the person of Jesus and His teaching, and all four Gospels climax with the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. The Gospel writer John concludes his record with the words:

“and there were also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written.” (John 21:25)

Yet even though the detail about the ministry of Jesus is relatively brief and these studies can only begin to scratch the surface of his ministry and the wealth of information in the gospel records, hopefully they will help you gain an insight into the ministry of our Saviour, his teachings and all that he accomplished. We will endeavour to follow his story from the time of his birth until, at the age of 30, John baptizes Jesus, and his public life begins. We shall watch Him grapple with sin for 3½ years until his crucifixion, death and burial. We will stand before his empty tomb and hear the Angels proclaim:

“He is risen!”

Finally, we shall go to the Mount of Olives, when Jesus ascended to his Father in heaven, and listen to the echo of the Angels proclaiming that Jesus would return. (Acts 1:11)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “Synoptic Gospels.” The term “Synoptic” means that they view the life of Jesus from a common perspective. After introducing Jesus in different ways, depending on their purpose, they record the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism and temptation of Jesus, his ministries in Galilee and in Judea.

The Life of Jesus Christ

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

They include his final week in Jerusalem, his death and resurrection. In these 3 records, Jesus characteristically refers to himself as the Son of Man, and he proclaims the Kingdom of God.

Despite the similarities in these 3 accounts, they do vary in what material they include and in the arrangement of specific events. Furthermore, each Gospel was written to emphasize certain aspects of Jesus' person and works. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the true Messiah and the object of Old Testament prophecy and expectation. Mark's fast moving account was written to appeal to Roman Christians, and Luke's Gospel was addressed to a cultured Gentile, personified in the Greeks, and stresses Jesus' concern not only the Jews, but for all people who are willing to listen and accept his message.

The Gospel of John differs in a number of ways. It tells more about Jesus' early ministry in Judea. He also records long discourses by Jesus instead of the shorter sayings typical of the other 3 accounts. In John, Jesus refers to himself as God's Son and speaks of salvation as eternal life. In addition to this, John includes more reflection on the meaning of Jesus' life and death.

Four Gospels

Much has been written about the reason for four Gospels. In reviewing all of God's Word, it becomes apparent that numbers maintain a consistent significance in God's plan. In considering the number four, in relationship to the Gospels, it is interesting to note, among many other examples of the number 4, the following points:

1. **Of the four houses of God (those erected on the basis of divine plan), in the earth, 3 were, or will be, of a material nature - the Tabernacle, the Temple, (Solomon's), and Ezekiel's. The fourth one is a Spiritual House. (1 Peter 2:5)**
2. **Four houses were built by Solomon. Three were for himself, - his own house (1 Kings 7:1), the house of the forest of Lebanon (verse 2), and the house for Pharaoh's daughter (verse 8). The fourth was the house of the Lord. (1 Kings 6:37)**
3. **Of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have emphasis on the Son of Man, and proclamation of the Kingdom of God on earth. The fourth (John) emphasizes Jesus' position as God's Son and relates to the Spiritual aspects of life in Him.**

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Isaiah spoke of the Messiah as the ideal Israelite (Isaiah 49:3-6), implying by this that he would manifest all the qualities of virtue to which Israel, as a nation, was called. The Israelites were taken out of Egypt to glorify God (Jeremiah 13:11; Isaiah 43:7) by manifesting His characteristics both individually and nationally. To that end they encamped around the Tabernacle and in the shadow of four standards that reproduced the faces of the Cherubim, which overshadowed the Mercy Seat in the Tabernacle. The nation of Israel was divided into four sections under the leadership of the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, Reuben and Dan with the standards of a Lion, Ox, Man and Eagle (Ezekiel 1:10), representing royalty, service, humanity and divinity.

Many Bible students have long recognized that these same four aspects are exhibited in the four accounts of Christ's ministry. Matthew emphasizes his royal dignity, constantly drawing upon the prophecies of the Old Testament in confirmation of his majesty. Mark gives attention to the Lord's work of service, recording what he did for others, including the miracles and acts of love that he rendered. Luke treats his ministry from the standpoint of his humanity, tracing his genealogy back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38). John shows Christ as divine--the Word made flesh (John 1:14), the Son of God (John 20:31) and the manifestation of the Father (John 14:9)--the means by which the foundation for the righteous character he revealed was provided.

The four Gospel records, therefore, are like the four standards of Israel, exhibiting the Lord in four different aspects. The four accounts show that he rules (Matthew--the Lion), because he served (Mark--the Ox), and though he was flesh (Luke--the Man), he conquered through the spirit (John--the Eagle).

At another level, the four Gospel accounts can be distinguished by their intended readers. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, Mark wrote for Roman readers, Luke crafted his account for the Greek mind and John appears to have written for all believers. It is significant that these groups represent major peoples in the cosmopolitan world of the first century Mediterranean: the Gospel is for everyone, regardless of background.

Thus the four accounts of Christ's life, though not in themselves complete (see John 21:25), provide a much fuller and more balanced presentation of the Lord than would be possible in a single account. Yet at the same time, the accounts *compliment*, rather than contradict, each other. All this is a testimony to an important feature of inspiration. Together, the four Gospel accounts portray the Lord Jesus Christ from four perspectives as the image of God.

Miracles and Parables in the Gospels

The Life of Jesus Christ

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Although this study will look at an example of the miracles and parables of Jesus, space will permit only a limited review and we recommend a more detailed personal study of the many miracles and parables of Jesus contained in the Gospel accounts.

Study Tips

1. When considering the miracles or the parables recorded in each of the Gospels, look to the settings in which they have been positioned in the individual records. Remember that the writers do not present them in the chronological order in which they were given. Many times, they are grouped to present an overall message that they are emphasizing from Christ's ministry.
2. For the same reason, look into the surrounding verses to determine to whom Jesus is speaking, or what people are present as witnesses to these miracles or to His teaching. Are representatives of specific groups, such as the Pharisees or Sadducees, etc. present at that time?
3. Take into account the position taken by the groups to whom He is talking. As an example, are they Apostles, Pharisees, Sadducees, Romans, etc? This will quite often reveal a specific bias when questions are presented to Him, and, certainly offer a guide to the terms of reference from within which He is presenting His message.
4. When considering the message to be determined from a specific miracle or parable, always determine whether or not it appears in more than one Gospel. If so, read each account, putting them together in order to provide the full message.
5. As always, use the cross-references provided in your Bibles relating to these accounts as they frequently throw additional light on the teaching being presented.
6. Look for Bible echoes, or fore-shadows, in these references, which might provide additional understanding.

As an example of the foregoing, let us look at one miracle recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke that of the **healing the haemorrhaging woman**. We first encounter this account in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 9 verses 20-22. If we read only this account, we can perceive it simply as another miracle of Christ, demonstrating that he was, indeed, the Son of God. He provides evidence of this by manifesting the power of God given to him in order to heal. In his loving mercy, in response to the woman's faith, Jesus made her well. This, in itself, is an encouraging lesson.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

But, like all his miracles, it was performed under a particular set of circumstances, for particular persons and reasons, and under the conditions involved, provided a message. It was to serve as a lesson to all those who witnessed it. It was recorded to provide a message for all those who receive the Gospel Word throughout the centuries. As readers of the Gospel, we seek that message, to give us greater understanding of Jesus and the hope that we have, through, and in him.

So let us look at the points we can derive from this miracle if we consider it in detail. Understanding these points is necessary if we are to determine the complete message that was being provided.

- 1. There was a great crowd around Jesus at that time, all interested in seeing this miracle worker.**
- 2. The woman was “unclean”. She should not have been in the crowd, let alone reach out to touch Jesus.**
- 3. This illness had been with her for 12 years, during which time, she had sought help from physicians who were unable to cure her, but subjected her to false treatments until they had reduced her to poverty.**
- 4. She had heard about Jesus, and in final desperation, sought Him out in this crowd, believing that he could heal her.**
- 5. She was instantly healed and filled with a spirit of well-being when she reached out and touched him.**
- 6. She was reluctant to publicly confess her condition, and that she was the one who had reached out to him.**
- 7. Jesus forced her to acknowledge her condition and her actions, even though he already knew that she was the one he sought in the crowd.**
- 8. In a state of awe-filled trembling, she fell at his knees, admitting all, and acknowledging before the whole crowd that she had reached out to him seeking a cure. In so doing, she confessed that Jesus had healed her, and was the only one who had been able to do so.**
- 9. Jesus confirms that her faith has freed her from the burden of this affliction, and that she could go on her way in peaceful assurance of health through him.**

All of these points emerge when we compare the details of the miracle from each of the three accounts (Matt. 9:20; Mark 5:25; Luke 8:40), looking at them in the setting of the surrounding verses.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

As this composite picture emerges, a wonderful and exciting message or lesson is presented to each one of us, as it must have been to all those who witnessed it 2,000 years ago. Under Mosaic Law, the woman's terrible disability rendered her unclean (Lev.15: 25). Unclean conditions, as identified under the Law, were representative of a state of sinfulness. These were conditions subject to laws of cleansing and purification, pointing forward to the time when, through Christ, mankind could be cleansed of the results of sin through his obedience and sacrifice.

The woman's illness was an extension of a natural function of a woman's body. Her continual affliction with this condition made her perpetually unclean, and the rituals of the law were not sufficient to overcome the status of "unclean".

This is not to suggest that her condition was a result of her personal sins, and, therefore, a punishment. She is a "type" or "foreshadow" for all of us. As a natural part of our human tendency, we all sin. Without some form of cleansing, we are in a perpetual state of sinfulness, subject to separation from God, and ultimately, to everlasting death. Nothing in the natural world of men can change this state. Thus we read:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord". Romans 6:23

If we listen to the message provided by Jesus in this miracle, and reach out to him, we find healing and the free gift of God through Jesus.

We realize that, because of sin, our ultimate position is hopeless and desperate. We hear about Jesus Christ through the Word. We believe that He, alone, can save us. In our desperation, we translate that belief into action, and reach out to Jesus in faith, longing to be healed. Out of the masses of the people in the world around us, he then recognizes each of us as individuals who have that faith, and act on it.

We acknowledge our sinfulness, falling on our knees before him, and confess our faith in him, before all. As a result, if we follow his instructions, we are healed, and live out our lives in the peaceful assurance of eternal life, through his sacrifice. This is the wonder of the Gospel, and the hope for each one of us that emerges from the simple record of the "Healing of the Haemorrhaging Woman".

It is our privilege to seek out this hope, and allow the record of Jesus to re-affirm our faith and our desire to follow him to his Father.

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

Background to the Gospels Study Section 1

LESSON FOR US

Those who truly seek to be disciples of Jesus and seek salvation through his saving name must always remember the purpose for which Jesus' life was recorded. This should be the object of reading and Bible study. If, we learn to read the Bible effectively with an open mind, we will find the truth that is presented in God's Word.

In the opening remarks of his Gospel, Luke states:

“... many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us”. Luke 1:1

“So that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:4

Write down any questions that you may have about this section or that you have thought of whilst reading the various passages mentioned so that you will remember them. It might help to discuss them with the person helping you go through this series of studies.

Test Yourself

1. Why do you think that there are four Gospel records?
2. Write down five points about the woman who was healed as described in the account.
3. Write down three spiritual lessons that can be learned from this miracle.
4. Now read the account in the same chapter about the blind men who were healed (Mathew 9:27-29) and write down any lessons that you think can be learned from this event.