

Introductory Lecture – Life of Christ

I add my “welcome back to People of the Word Bible Study.” As you already know, I’m sure, this year we’ll be studying the synoptic (that means “seeing together”) gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, which, when studied together, gives us precious insight into the life of Jesus of Nazareth – The promised Messiah, the Christ, the prophesied King, the Servant of the Most High, the Perfect Man, the Savior of the World, the Son of God.

There are three things I want to talk to you about briefly: 1) **reviewing** the purpose of this study; 2) **refreshing** our minds about the world and environment into which Jesus was born; and 3) **responding** to the Word of God.

A couple of Sundays ago, as we left for church, I didn’t want to go upstairs to get my study Bible off my desk, so I grabbed my first Bible (a New American Standard version), and typically it was full of what has so aptly been named in the past as “biblidue.”

- There was an old copy of a September 28, 1983 Eastside Evangel (our old church weekly newsletter) with the announcement of our fall study and a picture of Pat Merold, Beth Neuenschwander, and me working on it.
- There was a letter from Sue Unger of the Taking Christ to the Millions organization saying, “I want you to know that we are using three units for Women’s work behind the Iron Curtain. --

The Writings of Paul, Acts and General Letters and the Life of Christ. We will be translating the three into possibly eight different languages. Pray for us as we use what you've provided to glorify the Lord there.”

- And third, there was an old Lookout article (remember when we used to get those in Sunday School?) dated July 24, 1983. It was written by Steve Dennie and I want to paraphrase it because it makes the point humorously that I want to share with you. Here it is:

And it came to pass that First Church held a Sunday school contest.

Now, there was one among them called Zealous, who straightway hastened to the highways and byways compelling people to drop by for the big day. And lo, when the figures were tallied, the superintendent awarded him a new popcorn popper for the toils which he did undertake for the Lord.

Amongst those Zealous brought was one named Seeker. Much to the bewilderment of all, Seeker didn't depart after Sunday school, but stayed for the worship service. Seeker didn't comprehend the meaning of grace, or of redemption, or of justification, or of substitutionary atonement, as used in the sermon. Yet his heart was soft, and in the fullness of the hour he walked to the front when the invitation hymn was

sung. And behold, Seeker asked Christ to invade his heart and to remove his sins as far as the east is from the west. In the same hour of the morning he was baptized, straightway. And Seeker's name was added to the Book of Life.

Now there were abiding in the pews certain church members who murmured amongst themselves saying, "Who is this stranger who openly admits himself a sinner, and who rudely prolongs the service while our roasts burn?" But others praised God, saying, "Surely the Lord has blessed our Sunday school contest."

Zealous, who stood afar off in the further-most pew guarding his long-sought popcorn popper, turned to his neighbor and whispered to him, "Blessed be me, for this day hath the Lord bestowed upon me two rewards: this popcorn popper, and a heavenly reward to be received at a later date." His neighbor nodded his head, and pondered in his heart which reward was more valuable.

After these things were finished, several people greeted Seeker, saying, "Glad to have you with us this morning."

And behold, one of them gave Seeker a Bible, saying, "The Lord has blessed me with all manner of Bibles. Take this one for yourself and may it be a comfort to you in sickness and in health." The book's cover was dull of color and frayed of edge, and Seeker could barely read the words "Placed by the Gideons."

Yet several of the congregation saw his thankfulness, saying, “He sheds a tear and is grateful for his Bible.”

Then Seeker asked, “How shall I then live?”

The man considered the question, then answered, “Except a new convert read the Gospel of John 37 times and memorize the activities schedule printed in the bulletin, he can in no wise enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

Seeker did as he was told, and that week attended every meeting listed. Then, when his labors and trials were o'er, he returned to church the following Sunday.

Looking about during the service, Seeker realized with dismay, even with embarrassment, that he yet lacked much to be righteous. For his brothers and sisters in whose midst he worshipped were attired in three-piece suits of many colors, and carried Bibles of many diverse and splendid versions, proclaiming “amen” simultaneously at all the appropriate places while the minister smiled with satisfaction at his well-trained sheep.

Seeker felt alone. Yet he continued steadfastly in the fellowship of First Church week after week, all the while wondering if there wasn't more that he should know.

In the fullness of time, a new quarter began, and the Sunday school sorely needed new teachers. “Where shall we find workers for the harvest?” they anguished.

So the superintendent called at the house of Seeker saying, “Seeker, you’re in luck, for I’m coming to your house today.” He did as he had warned, and tarried with Seeker nigh unto five minutes before asking, “Seeker, will you heed the Lord’s call and teach the Primary class?”

Seeker rejoiced and was exceedingly glad, thinking, “Surely this is a sign that I have grown in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; or else they wouldn’t entrust God’s little ones into my care.” And he answered and said to the smiling superintendent, “Sure, I’d love to.”

As soon as the superintendent heard that, he hastened to the car and brought back a box of Sunday school workbooks, construction paper, crayons, and a host of marvelous teaching aids, and dumped them on Seeker’s lap, saying, “Great! Gotta go now. Bye.”

And when he had reported these things to the Christian Education committee, they rejoiced with one accord, saying, “Praise be to God, for He hath blessed our discipling efforts.”

Then Seeker said to himself. “How shall I teach, except someone show me how?” Yet he studied the material and presented it to his class the next Sunday, and for every Sunday thereafter.

But in time, his heart grew weary and his confidence waned and he despaired crying, “Don’t the children know more regarding the Scriptures than I do? Can’t they not quote sundry verses from memory? I must need to be first taught myself.”

Yet there was no one to instruct Seeker. And when his teaching days were accomplished and the smiling superintendent came again to him, asking, “Will you serve the Lord as teacher for another year?” Seeker replied to him, “Nope.”

Thereafter Seeker no longer went to church, but stayed home. And Seeker remembered how the year before he’d found unbounded joy in God’s house. He wondered why such a strong fire, once kindled, should be so easily extinguished, and why he had not been taught to feed the flame himself.

And nobody came to inquire concerning his absence, supposing his commitment to have been insincere.

Thus passed another convert in and out of First Church; but the popcorn popper of Zealous works faithfully to this very day.

I guess I saved that article because it struck a personal note with me. “Why he had not been taught to feed the flame himself.” Point number one –**Reviewing the purpose of this study:** To teach you to feed yourselves from the Scriptures; to become intimately acquainted with your Bible through verse by verse study. God’s Word is THE source for instruction, inspiration, encouragement and comfort. From Genesis to Revelation, God reveals Himself to us as an intimate, personal God who has a plan that He is working for His creation. And

the only way we can know what God wants for us and from us is to know our Bible.

One of the reasons we ask that you use a translation of the Bible instead of a paraphrase like the Living Bible or The Message, is that you need to train your ear to God's Word. We encourage you to commit verses of Scripture to memory, and we all develop favorite ones as we grow in the Lord. But one of the things that usually scares people most about witnessing for our faith is the fear of being asked, "Where does it say that in the Bible?" Commitment to Bible Study doesn't mean that you're going to know chapter and verse necessarily off the top of your head, but you'll learn to use the Bible helps, the concordance . . . and if you're like most of us, you'll mark your Bible for future reference. This book is a friend, an endless wealth of knowledge, a constant teacher and the ultimate counselor. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to quicken our spirits and helps us develop our own individual passion to know more about our Creator.

Every year as we come to the start of this study (and as most of you know, we spend one year in the Old Testament and one year in the New Testament alternately), I start thinking back to where we ended in May. We finished the United Kingdom, a study of the books of 1 & 11 Samuel and the lives of the prophet Samuel, and King Saul, King David and King Solomon.

Contained in our study from 2 Samuel 7:16 was God's promise to David – “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” (That's the Davidic Covenant.)

Let's refresh our minds about the world and environment into which Jesus was born.

In the world, China had developed thriving trading routes with India. In Egypt, Antony & Cleopatra had committed suicide in Alexandria in 30 B.C. and Octavian made Egypt a Roman province under direct control of the emperor. And by 15 B.C. the Roman conquests reached to the Danube River.

When we think of our Bible, we think of the history of the Jews, and rightfully so. From God's calling of Abraham in Genesis, through Isaac and Jacob (the patriarchs), through Moses and the Exodus and establishment of a nation, through the prophets and kings, the united kingdom and the divided kingdom, the dispersion into Babylonian captivity and the restored kingdom . . . God has used nation after nation interacting with the Jews to further His plan.

Historians have dubbed the four hundred year bridge that connects the Old Testament and New Testament as the “silent years” but they were anything but that. God's voice was at rest, but His hands were busy building the stage upon which He would deliver His grandest, most eloquent, most moving speech – Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

When Malachi wrote his book, the land of the Jews belonged to the Persian Empire. It remained so until about a century later when Alexander the Great's military machine rolled eastward across Asia Minor, eventually reaching Palestine and as far as Egypt.

Alexander dreamed of building a new world bonded together by Greek language and culture. This policy, known as Hellenization, eventually established common or koine Greek – the language of the New Testament. Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C. at the age of 33. For the next 150 years, his successors played tug-of-war for control of the empire – with Israel stuck in the middle.

One of these successors, Antiochus IV Epiphanes ruled from 175-164 B.C. As an arrogant tyrant he tried to eradicate the Jewish religion. He prohibited some of the central elements of Jewish practice, attempted to destroy all copies of the Torah and required offerings to the Greek god Zeus. His crowning outrage was the erection of a statue of Zeus and the sacrificing of a pig in the Jerusalem temple itself. This triggered the Maccabean revolt from 166-142 B.C. Succeeding power struggles eventually brought the step-son of Julius Caesar, Octavian, to the throne of Rome and he renamed himself Caesar Augustus.

Sometimes we forget that Herod the Great was a contemporary and supporter of Antony and Cleopatra, but he could see the handwriting on the wall as Octavian's army was sweeping down on Egypt, and he switched his allegiance to Octavian, pledging loyalty and offering huge

gifts and was allowed to keep his position of power in Palestine and he effectively controlled it for Rome. Before he died, Herod made out a will naming Archelaus king of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; Antipas tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and Philip tetrarch of the region northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

These three sons had varying degrees of success as rulers. Herod Antipas is the Herod that Jesus describes as “that fox” in Luke 13:32. Philip built Caesarea Philippi as his capital and named it in honor of Caesar. Archelaus had the most trouble of all. He proved utterly incapable of handling the Jews of his realm and finally was banished by Augustus to Gaul in A.D. 6. At that time the emperor changed the status of Judea and Samaria to that of an imperial province and appointed a procurator to govern the territory. This arrangement lasted until A.D. 41.

There were five procurators and four of them have little significance to the life of Christ. The fifth, Pontius Pilate, as we all know, permitted the crucifixion of Jesus.

When we arrive at the New Testament era, we see a new expression of the Jewish community – such as the synagogues and religious sects – that weren’t mentioned in the Old Testament. However they originated, they were well established in Jesus’ day, having become the regular Jewish assembly for prayer and worship. It’s no surprise

then that Jesus went to the synagogues as well as to the temple to teach and heal.

During the era between the Testaments a variety of influences splintered the Jewish society into religious factions. The primary groups were the Essenes, the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees.

The Essenes were a small separatist group that grew out of the conflict of the Maccabean age. They stressed strict obedience to the Law, similar to the Pharisees. However, they were repulsed by the corruption of the priesthood, so they largely rejected the temple system. They're not mentioned in Scripture, but the community that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls very likely belonged to this sect.

The Pharisees were the party of the synagogue. They were the keepers, copiers, and interpreters of the Law. Unfortunately, they also reinterpreted the Law. In the vigorous attempts to apply the Law to everyday life, the Pharisees constructed a maze of regulations that came to be known as the Oral Law. Ironically, their man-made traditions obscured the Scripture they so zealously guarded.

The exact origin of the Pharisees is uncertain. In the writings of Josephus, they first appear in connection with the period of Jewish independence under the Maccabees around 135 B.C.

The Herodians were a political party (rather than religious). They were supporters of the dynasty of Herod, particularly Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. Like the Pharisees, they stood to lose their position if

the status quo were destroyed by the institution of Jesus' kingdom. Therefore, they joined the Pharisees in an effort to trap Jesus and obtain His arrest and conviction.

Greek thinking and culture had made inroads into Jewish society through the Sadducees, the party of the temple. This group was closely associated with the Greek intellectual movement and adopted the Epicurean belief that the soul dies with the body. They didn't believe in the resurrection. Curiously, the Sadducees rejected oral traditions and accepted only written law, but they readily applied their Hellenistic logic to their understanding of the Torah.

They were relatively small in size. The aristocratic Sadducees wielded great political power and controlled the high priesthood and, because of their position, also had a vested interest in the status quo.

So into this clashing fray of ideologies stepped Jesus of Nazareth. He dared to challenge the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees and to condemn the snobbery, corruption and worldliness of the Sadducees.

Before we leave this little review, let's refresh our minds about the contents of the gospels.

Matthew presents Jesus as Messianic King of the Jews:

As we've studied the Old Testament, we've learned for ourselves what the Jews already knew . . . God had promised a Messiah, a Savior, a coming kingdom based on God's Word to David and confirmed in Isaiah's writing and that of the other prophets. More than any other

gospel writer, Matthew showed how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. Also, he made no effort to explain Jewish customs, assuming his readers already understood them. It was an era of anticipation and Matthew used the phrase “The Kingdom of Heaven” 32 times. Jesus was the expected fulfillment of God’s promise.

Mark presents Jesus as the Suffering Servant:

The usual perception of a king is master of all, servant of none. Jesus, however, set aside His royal robes, tied a servant’s towel around His waist, and tended to the needs of mankind. People were in darkness, so He enlightened them with His teaching. People were broken and sick, so He healed them. They were hopeless, so He encouraged them. They were in bondage to satanic control, so He liberated them. They were lost in sin, so He forgave them. He served humanity with a passion that could only come from a heart full of love. Ultimately, that love led to the greatest sacrifice a servant could make – to give His own life for those He served.

Many scholars believe that Mark was written to the Roman church suffering the persecution of Nero (certainly it was written to Gentiles as Mark explains the Jewish customs). It’s also believed that Mark’s source of information was the apostle Peter. Mark emphasized the actions of Jesus . . . His miracles and personal encounters, more than His discourses and sermons. And he gives us the insight into the inner life of Jesus – his emotions like compassion, anger, love . . . feeling hunger

and needing rest. In Mark we'll learn about discipleship and the contrast between belief and unbelief.

Luke, the doctor, presents Jesus as the Son of Man:

While Luke's gospel was addressed to Theophilus (whose name means "Lover of God"), probably a wealthy benefactor, in a broader scope he wrote to all Christians. He portrays Jesus less as the Messiah of the Jews and more as the Savior of everyone, regardless of race or nationality. Luke tints his gospel with the themes of prayer, ministry of the Holy Spirit, and praise. He gives a special place to women in Jesus' ministry and deals extensively with the themes of poverty and riches.

Without obscuring Christ's deity, Luke displays His humanity in ways not found in the other gospels . . . details about His birth and the agony of Gethsemane – "sweating drops of blood."

No matter how often we've read these gospels, or studied them, the Holy Spirit is ready to reveal something new to us. That brings me to my third point:

First, we've **reviewed** the purpose of this study – to teach you to feed yourself from Scripture; **second**, we've refreshed our minds about the world and environment into which Jesus was born; and now third, **responding** to the Word of God.

There's been a lot of focus on the crucifixion of Jesus in movies such as Mel Gibson's "The Passion." In no way do I want to minimize the importance of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – it's what

purchased our salvation and made us heirs with Jesus to eternal glory. But that was one week of Jesus' life and His ministry was over a three-year period. We have so much to learn from this study about the nature of God, prayer, the Holy Spirit, grace, discipleship, servanthood, and compassion . . . we need to guard against that "I've heard / read all this before" attitude that can creep in when we reread the familiar.

Responding to God's Word is the challenge set before us this year. We can read about Jesus **or** we can fall in love with Him all over again. We can just do our homework **or** we can allow the Holy Spirit to stir us and help us grow in our faith.

If real estate is location, location, location – Bible Study is application, application, application. The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, is alive and active and able to meet you where you are this very day. Even if you did these lessons with us in 1981, 1990, or 2004 the world has changed, you have changed and there's new insight for you, I'm sure.

These lessons have been designed to be a DAILY Bible Study. It gives us time to think and apply the Scripture to our own lives. It should take about ten minutes a day. Day 1 is an overview and it will always be easier to work the lessons if you'll read all the Scripture before you start answering questions. You'll see the Lesson Scripture in the upper right hand corner of the lesson.

We've tried not to jump around. Use the little bookmarks we gave you. The answers will be from the main Scripture unless told to turn to another book. I thank Brenda/Royce for the memory verse she/he did for us and I encourage you to look at that verse on each lesson and think about your own application – what you'd say if you were giving a devotion. Needless to say, Scripture memorization is a strong defense against Satan.

In your lesson packets, Dan Leppo has prepared a sheet on how to access our lessons and lectures on line at his website dictationsfromthespirit.com. if you prefer to do them electronically.

Now, I want to introduce to you your leadership team for this year.