

Introduction

The Gospels are synopses (brief overviews), not moment-by-moment biographies that record every event in Jesus' life. They reveal a PERSON and a PURPOSE—Jesus Christ and God's ultimate plan to rescue the world from itself.

The Gospels answer two fundamental questions: WHO IS JESUS? and WHY DID HE COME TO EARTH? Each person on earth must answer those questions—and live with our answers forever...

All of the Gospels tell the Good News about Jesus Christ from slightly different angles, corresponding to the uniqueness of the narrators and their listeners, and this reminds us that the message of God's gift to the world has marvelous and varied implications for us individually. How fascinating to realize that God's Spirit inspired and directed four *different* men to record their awareness of the natural/spiritual happenings surrounding Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

While the focus in each of their accounts is Jesus, their narratives reflect His glory through lenses shaped by personal history, education, intended audience, etc. That's why it is a mistake to try pressing the Gospels into a *uniform* sequence of events, and to puzzle over why one writer includes certain facts when others leave them out. Have you noticed how difficult it is to pin down a precise itinerary and timeline for Jesus' life when you hop from one account to another?

That is not to say that the Gospels contradict one another; they do not! Instead, they are like "surround-sound" speakers, filling the air with enough sound-waves to be sure that no corner of the room is a dead-zone. Remember, the authors were real people, each overcome in the most magnificent and profound manner by the love, mercy, grandeur and grace of Jesus, the only begotten Son of God —so much so that they had utterly surrendered their lives to Him.

When you begin to appreciate that the Gospels are not just detached, objective reports penned by disinterested observers, but that they are examples of how Jesus changes everything in our lives, then you see the real focus of the Christmas story: not an accounting of which stores we went to when to get what; not recipes, a grocery list and a shopping cart; not the trek to the tree lot, nor the late-night wrapping—but being gathered close around the Tree, catching sight of our name on the tag of a gift that will forever change our lives.

We begin our study with Matthew's account of how it all began.

God's Plan for the Ending

A. MATTHEW (LEVI) THE TAX COLLECTOR (LUKE 5:27-32)

1. The New Testament begins with narration by a social outcast and collaborator whose life has been forever altered.

2. From the outset we're introduced to an essential, but *heretofore* inconceivable reality: Jesus—fully Son of Man and Son of God.
 - a. Born not of Adam's *seed*, but of a woman's (only)
 - b. Descended of ABRAHAM (covenant), DAVID (kingdom) and exiles (deliverance)
 - c. Descended of *women*, none of whom were off to a good start!!
 - 1) Tamar
 - 2) Rahab
 - 3) Ruth
 - 4) Bathsheba
3. Writing primarily to his fellow Jews, Matthew draws upon Old Testament passages to convince his listeners that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.
 - a. *A virgin bearing a Son called Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:14)
 - b. *The star of the One who will have dominion* (Numbers 24:17-19)
 - c. *Out of puny Bethlehem will come a Ruler/Shepherd* (Micah 5:2)
 - d. *God's Son called out of Egypt* (Numbers 24:8 and Hosea 11:1)
4. Real people facing real life also experience supernatural revelation and guidance; God is still in control of the ultimate outcome even in the midst of life's sordid and mundane elements.
 - a. Joseph
 - b. Magi

B. PEOPLE RESPONDING TO THE UNEXPECTED

1. MARY, as yet unmarried, is found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.
2. JOSEPH, uncertain what to do, risks ridicule and *takes her as his wife*.
3. Seeing a new star, MAGI travel far rejoicing in its guidance, and fall down in worship to an infant.

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4. HEROD, fearing the loss of his powers and prerogatives, slaughters everything that even resembles a work of God in his life.

C. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' NAME

1. JESUS = Yeshua = God-saved; the Lord saves; God who is salvation
2. IMMANUEL = *God* [living] *with us* [identifying with our present condition]