

Bible Study # 30  
January 24, 1989  
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The Gospels and Acts Series—Matthew 1—4:11;  
Mark 1:1-13; Luke 1—4:13; John 1—2:12

The Bible study material we **are focusing on this evening is the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ and immediately thereafter.** The events that surround the birth of Christ are often read over and not properly understood.

To begin with, God prophesied many of the details of the coming of the Messiah centuries before—details involving time and place. God brought about these events, right on down to moving the Gentile king Caesar Augustus to institute a special taxing system so as to bring Joseph and Mary to the right place at the right time.

Think about that for a little bit. Caesar didn't know why he got this brainstorm as a new way of taxing people. All he knew was kind of like "a little bird" told him something. An idea popped into his head, 'You know what I could do? I'll bet there are people who are evading taxes. We need to crack down on taxes. What we need is this system where we make everybody go to their home city, the city to which their particular clan is attached. We will take a census, and in the process of this census, we will tax everyone.'

Generally, one of the main reasons for taking a census is to see that nobody evades their taxes. So Caesar Augustus came up with this great idea at this particular time. He may have thought it was just to raise more money. But, in reality, God stirred him up to do that to make sure that Joseph and Mary were at the right place at the right time. God worked through circumstances to bring about fulfillment of the prophecies that prophesied that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

The birth of the Messiah—think about the way that Christ's birth was announced. To begin with, the angels announced the birth to shepherds in a distant field. The result was that these shepherds journeyed into Bethlehem looking for the newborn Messiah. What do you think they did? They were stopping people all along the way and inquiring where they could find the newborn Messiah. You better believe this set the whole city of Bethlehem astir. Everything was in an uproar because of these shepherds. The angels didn't tell them exactly where it was; they had to

hunt through the city, which means you get the whole city abuzz. Within the next couple of days, they probably had Jerusalem "abuzz," too.

I might mention in terms of the "manger"—most people misunderstand and the traditional pictures are generally incorrect. There have been a number of recent things that have shown, from archeology and archeological excavations, the way that houses were commonly constructed. It shows that the common way of construction involved the use of a big room and stalls for animals off this room. The barn and the house were, in that sense, built together, but not in the sense that the animals wandered through the living quarters of the people.

I have some pictures from a recent article in Biblical Archeological Review showing some things that they had excavated. It was a fairly compact arrangement where the center structure was the main room, the main courtyard. Approximately where the beams are, there would be several pillars, and there would be an upstairs. It was kind of an enclosed courtyard area down there where cooking fires would be and various things of this sort. Over in the courtyard where the pillars came up, a low wall—kind of a half wall—would be divided into stalls for animals. Generally, they would have cobblestones in there with cracks between them where the stalls could be washed down. The floor of the main courtyard would be clay. It was tamped down until it was solid, but it was basically a dirt floor. Then there would be stairs leading up to a second floor where there would be bedrooms over the stalls. In the winter when they would bring the animals in, the animals would be in their stalls that were divided off from the rest of the house. That served to actually provide heat for the house because it was closed in, and the animals were down there.

If you have ever been in a barn and there were cows in several of these stalls, you would realize what an amount of body heat they could give off in this small confined space. The heat would tend to rise, and that had a very heat-conserving effect for the bedrooms that were on the upper story. This is still done in the Middle East and portions of Europe where the houses and the barns are kind of built together. Most of the living quarters are upstairs, and they keep the animals downstairs. During the summer and most of the spring and fall, the areas where the animals were kept during the winter are cleaned out and are pretty well empty. They may put the animals in part of the time or bring them in to milk, but

generally they are just kept there during the winter or when they needed to be fed.

It was a time when the animals were still abiding in the fields. Even by night they were not being brought in. This was a time when Bethlehem was heavily crowded, and as a result of that, these stalls in the lower part of the house were rented out to handle this great influx of people. Since the inns had been over crowded, private individuals were renting out a room or a place in their homes. This area downstairs which is attached to the dwelling (where the animals would have been kept in the winter) was part of what was being rented out. That, undoubtedly, was where Christ was born—in one of those stalls.

Luke 2:8-18, the shepherds coming in and inquiring over the city ensured that the news was going to spread like wildfire among the common people of Bethlehem. A little while later, maybe a month or six weeks later, wise men from the East came. They came before Herod inquiring about the birth of the Messiah. Herod summoned the whole Sanhedrin (Matthew 2). He was all upset. He didn't know what was going on; he demanded of them where the Messiah would be born, and they had to give testimony. The witness from the wise men, the Magi, was an announcement to the officials of the Jewish nation. The very top officials, the whole Sanhedrin and the Roman appointed king had a witness that the Messiah was born. The Sanhedrin had to acknowledge where.

Let's notice Matthew 15:24, "But He answered and said, 'I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" If you note here, this is the story of the Canaanite woman who came and wanted Christ to heal her daughter. Christ had not come to deal with the world as a whole. He said, 'I am not come to deal with the world as a whole.' He said, 'I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' That certainly included the Jews. His ministry for those three and one-half years was primarily to the Jews.

What about the other ten tribes? They are the lost sheep of the house of Israel. How did they become aware of the birth of their Messiah? They did and there is a clear answer on that. Matthew talked about these wise men from the East. The East, as spoken of by Matthew, refers to the area east of the Euphrates River, which was ruled by the Parthian Empire in the last century. It was on the border of the Roman Empire. The lost ten tribes, the Israelites, were the rulers of the Parthian Empire, which had

risen to power about two centuries earlier. The Magi were the leading wise men and counselors of the king. They saw a star and followed it (as prophesied in Numbers 24:17) until coming to Jerusalem. Because of their prominence, they had no trouble coming before King Herod and giving a witness to him and to the Jewish religious leaders. After their return to Parthia, it served as a witness to the ten tribes.

It is interesting. The tradition of the Eastern churches is that there were twelve Magi. The tradition of three, as we know it, originated in Rome, but ancient tradition and all Eastern tradition hold that there were twelve—one from each of the tribes of Israel. These wise men came to do homage to the Messiah on behalf of the ten tribes in exile and to serve as a witness to the religious leaders of the Jewish nation, as well as the Roman government of Judea. God set the stage for the proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom by evidencing that the Messiah had truly arrived.

This was added to by the testimony of elderly Simeon and elderly Anna in the temple. Remember the story when Jesus was brought to the temple to be presented to God? This was forty days after His birth according to the laws of purification as brought out in Leviticus 12.

In Luke 2:25-31, we are told at this point, "And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the Law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: 'Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.'"

You can imagine a crowd gathered around here. Simeon is a very well-known elderly man and highly respected. This testimony spreads.

Verses 36-37, "Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess...She was of great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eight-four years, who did not depart from the temple...." She was a very elderly woman who lived there in the temple complex. You can imagine that Anna

had been well known for decades. Everyone who came to the temple was very familiar with Anna. God had given miraculous revelations to her. Interestingly, it had probably been a hundred years since the Urim and the Thummin had worked for a high priest because they had so departed. At this point in time, God wasn't answering the high priest. The only one that we have record of that God was revealing anything supernaturally through was this elderly widow who lived in the temple by the name of Anna. The way God chose to work certainly was a witness and a condemnation to the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leadership. You can believe she was well known; she was recognized. Everyone who had come into the temple for decades, Anna was there. She lived there in the temple complex for many, many years.

She came over and began to speak to Mary and Joseph. A crowd gathered around, as people do. Everybody wants to know what's going on, 'Hey, what's happening?' They see a bunch of people gathered over there and go "stick their ear in" to see what's happening. So this testimony was given.

God testified in many, many ways. God never leaves His people without a witness of the truth when the time comes for Him to intervene in human affairs. God makes it plain where He is working if we simply have the wit to look and to see.

We are going to go through the Gospels, and you can follow me in your Bible. I **am going to primarily utilize a harmony of the Gospels**. I will give you reference as to where I am going. The starting place, if we harmonize the Gospel accounts, is the Gospel of John because it starts in the beginning.

John 1:1-3, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." The universe and all things were created and came into being through His power and authority. Without Him, not even one thing came into existence which has been created.

Verses 4-5, "In Him was life and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend or overcome it." Who was actually the One who did the creating recorded in the Old Testament? It is very apparent it was none other than Jesus Christ. The One who was in the beginning was

the Word, the Spokesman. He was with God and He was God. We are given clear record of that.

Verse 14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." It is very apparent that the Word was none other than Jesus Christ.

Verse 15, it was testified of by John the Baptist and others that the very One who did the creating recorded in the Old Testament was the One that we know as Jesus Christ. That is made plain in John 1:1-3.

Now as we follow the account down, Luke gives the details.

Luke 1:5-6, "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division [KJV, "course"] of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." This is some information that we would often tend to read over. What important information are we able to derive from learning that "Zacharias was of the course of Abijah"? We are actually able to arrive at the approximate time of the birth of Christ as a result of that information.

Luke 1:5 (MEV), "...of the course of Abijah...." When we go back to I Chronicles 24, we learn that David divided the priesthood into twenty-four courses or divisions (NKJV). Since there became so many priests, they couldn't all get into the temple and carry out the functions. As the priesthood grew, there were too many of them. Generation after generation the family of Aaron increased. At first there were a few of them. It started out just being Aaron and his sons; after a while, there were dozens of them, scores of them and finally, hundreds of them. It got to where there needed to be some organization. There were too many of them to function all at once, so they were divided up in the time of David into twenty-four courses.

The course of Abijah, we are told in I Chronicles 24:10 was the eighth course. Each course served in the temple for two weeks a year. Twenty-four courses at two weeks each would be forty-eight. Forty-eight weeks were accounted for. Then we have the Festival weeks—the weeks surrounding the week of Passover/ Unleavened Bread season, the week around Pentecost, and the two weeks of the Feast of Tabernacles which fill in the whole year. Each course served in the temple for two

weeks a year in addition to the three festival seasons.

They started with the first course, which began serving the first of the sacred year, two weeks prior to Passover. The second course worked the second week; then all of the courses would serve for a week for Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. Then the third course would serve for a week, and so it would go.

From I Chronicles 24, we can put it together. We can go through and calculate how many weeks into the year we were. We are looking at the spring of 5 B.C. The first course began serving at noon on the Sabbath on the first day of Abib, the first day of the sacred month, which was coincidentally a Sabbath. They began serving at noon on that Sabbath that coincided with the first day of the sacred year, which was April 8<sup>th</sup> in 5 B.C. The second course began serving a week later at noon; then two weeks after that, all the courses served for Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. Coming on through, we would track it on down as to when all of the courses would begin serving at Passover. The courses would serve all the way to the third week. Then the third course would begin its service at noon on the Sabbath, which would be the 22<sup>nd</sup> of Abib or April 29<sup>th</sup>. Then that's when the third course would end; the fourth course would begin at noon on the 29<sup>th</sup> of Abib. It would just continue down to where the eighth course would begin serving at noon on the Sabbath, June 3<sup>rd</sup>. They would serve all through that first week of June, and then the following week was the week of Pentecost when all of the courses would be serving. Zacharias would have been free to leave after noon on the Sabbath of June 12<sup>th</sup>. That brings us to the last half of June 5 B.C., which would be the probable two weeks during which Elizabeth conceived.

Remember the account where Zacharias the priest entered into the temple, saw a vision and the angel told him, "Your wife is going to conceive a child" (Luke 1:11-13). Well, if we would track it through, we could lay out these courses. We would find that when his term in the temple service was over and he would have returned home, we have an approximate two-week period that we would allot and say that Elizabeth conceived fairly soon.

Then we track it through as to the months of her pregnancy. When Mary is told that she is with child of the Holy Spirit, that she has conceived Jesus, she is also told about Elizabeth.

Luke 1:36, "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren." So this brings us, if we track it through, to December. The angel Gabriel was sent to the Virgin Mary. The power of the Holy Spirit enveloped Mary, and she was impregnated with Jesus Christ (v. 35). Mary visited Elizabeth at the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Her sixth month would end right around the end of December. We have an overlap of Mary's first month of pregnancy with Elizabeth's seventh month of pregnancy as being the same. What it comes down to, John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus Christ.

We can calculate from the time of the course of Abijah, the time that Zacharias was in the temple and the subsequent conception of his wife. We would come all the way down to March when John the Baptist was born; Jesus was born about six months later in the fall. We can track back to the time when the course of Abijah would have been serving in the temple, come forward nine months from that, and we're at John the Baptist's birth. We come forward six more months, and we're at the birth of Jesus Christ. It is kind of a technical, drawn-out thing, but it is a point. If we put the whole story together and go back to I Chronicles 24 to get the layout of it, we are able to clearly see the way that it would work out.

We are also shown from Luke 1:15 that John the Baptist was going to be under a Nazarite vow from his mother's womb.

Luke 1:15, "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb." John the Baptist was under a Nazarite vow. You can go back to Numbers 6 and read a little more about that.

At this point, I would like to call your attention to something interesting. Did you ever notice the extent to which Zacharias and Mary both reacted similarly when informed by Gabriel of the approaching birth of their sons? Yet they were dealt with in a different way. Let's notice.

Luke 1:5-10, "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division [MEV, "course"] of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was, that while he was

serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.”

I think I have mentioned before that the burning of incense in the temple was symbolic of the prayers of the saints. Revelation 5:8 makes that plain. The Jews had adopted a custom of considering an hour of prayer at the time of the morning and evening sacrifice. They took one of the coals from the altar of sacrifice, took it inside the temple and put it in the golden censor. Then they put incense on these live coals taken from the altar of burnt sacrifice. This symbolized the prayers of the saints. The Jews had adopted this custom. When you read of “the hour of prayer” (Luke 1:10), that’s what you’re talking about—the hour of the morning and evening sacrifice. Well, people were outside praying and Zacharias was performing the ritual.

Luke 1:11-12, “Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.” You better believe it! Here he was walking in there with his incense going through his ritual. All of a sudden, he looked up and out of nowhere was this great, powerful, brilliant, shining being totally clothed in white. You can imagine Zacharias was absolutely stunned. He had never seen anything like this before, and terror seized him.

Verses 13-19, “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He [John] will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ And Zacharias said to the angel, ‘How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my wife is well advanced in years.’ And the angel answered and said to him, ‘I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.’”

The angel asked, ‘What do you mean, how are you going to know if that’s true? I am Gabriel,

who do you think I am? Do you just normally run into somebody standing in there by the incense altar in white shining brilliance?’

Verse 19, “...‘I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God and was sent to you and bring you these glad tidings.’” Gabriel said, ‘You want a sign? I am going to give you a sign. You are going to be struck dumb.’

Verse 20, “‘But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.’” Gabriel said, ‘I’ll give you a sign, all right. You won’t be able to say anything until all of this is over with. That will be sign enough for you.’

Verse 21, “And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.” All the people outside were expecting Zacharias; after a while, this was dragging on, and people began wondering what happened.

Verses 22-24, “But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months....”

Then we are told, v. 26, “Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,” So Gabriel returns.

Verses 27-29, “to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, ‘Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!’ But when she saw him, she was troubled [awestruck] at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.” Again, the same reaction—just absolutely shocked and dumbfounded. What is this!

Verses 30-34, “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.’ Then Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I do not know a man?’”

Mary said, ‘I am a virgin.’ Now again, she asked the question just as Zacharias did, ‘How do I know this is going to happen? How can this be? I

am an old man, and my wife is an old woman.’ The angel dealt with Zacharias a little more abruptly. ‘I will give you a sign.’ Mary asked, ‘How can this be? There must be some mistake here; I am a virgin.’ The angel then explained.

Verses 35-38, “And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.’ Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her.”

I think it’s interesting in reading the account to just understand there was a difference in the way God dealt with an elderly priest whom God expected to know a little better, to exercise a little more faith and not to question in that way. God dealt with him a little more abruptly because he should have known better than to ask a question like that. Here was Mary, a young girl of age nineteen or twenty; the angel dealt with her very patiently and explained everything to her in more detail. I think that one of the points we get from this is that God does not always deal with everyone exactly the same way. God expects a little more of some than others. He expected a greater level of understanding from an elderly priest than He did from a young girl who was maybe nineteen or twenty years old. So, to one He gave a little more detailed explanation; the other one, He dealt with a little more abruptly. Gabriel said, ‘Zacharias you shouldn’t have asked a question like—“how shall I know this?” You shouldn’t have expressed that kind of doubt. You’ve been around long enough Zacharias that you should have known that if I say something, that is the way it is. Where are all these questions coming from?’

**Genealogy of Jesus Christ:** Luke 3:23-38 and Matthew 1:1-17.

Now let’s take note of the genealogies given in Luke 3 and Matthew 1. The genealogies are different. Luke gives the natural genealogy. He gives the genealogy of Mary and traces it all the way back to Adam. Matthew gives the legal genealogy, which would be the genealogy of Joseph. Joseph was the legal father (though not the literal father), and he traces it back to Abraham, the one to whom the promises were made.

It is made plain if you go through Matthew’s account.

Matthew 1:1-3, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham who was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Pharez and Zerah by Tamar....” It goes right on down.

Luke 3:23, “Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the *son* of Heli.” If you will notice, the word “son” is in italics. Matthew 1 is worded differently, “so and so” begat “so and so.” It is a literal description of somebody born to somebody, and somebody else born to them, and somebody else born to them. It is a literal step-by-step genealogy, one after another.

Here in Luke 3, we run up against different names. In reality, Joseph was simply the son-in-law of Heli. There is no evidence that Heli had any sons. We know that he had several daughters. Salome, the wife of Zebedee, the mother of James and John, was a sister to Mary and a daughter of Heli. The wife of Alphaeus was another sister. James, the son of Alphaeus was one of the apostles. One thing that a lot of people don’t realize is several of the apostles were first cousins to Jesus. These were people who had connections in that way.

So, if Mary only had sisters, when she married, of course, it would be someone in her tribe. She was of the tribe of Judah. She married in the tribe of Judah, and her husband would have been accounted as though he were a son and would have inherited property from her father.

You can go back to the book of Numbers (Numbers 27:1-7; 36:6-7) and notice the legal requirements in terms of property inheritance. Where there were no sons, the daughters inherited as though they were sons. If they married within the tribe, in effect, their husband equated with a son, legally. So Luke uses the term “Joseph of Heli” as “son,” as it is supplied in italics, but it could just as clearly have been “son-in-law,” which is really the sense of it.

Luke traces the genealogy differently than Matthew. Luke traces it back through the natural genealogy through Mary’s family; Matthew traces the legal genealogy through Joseph’s family.

Christ had claim to the throne of David in both directions. He was a descendant of David from both of these. What did the angel tell Mary

concerning the destiny of the Son that she was to bear? In Luke 1, we noticed here a few moments ago that the angel told Mary that she would bear the Messiah who would inherit the throne of David and rule over an everlasting Kingdom. This child is going to be called the Son of God.

Luke 1:32-33, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” This very clearly shows that Jesus was born to be a King and to sit on a literal throne.

Now what was the mission of John the Baptist? That’s made plain here.

Luke shows in Luke 1:17, “He [John] will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

We go on a little further; John was born.

Luke 1:63-64, “And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, ‘His name is John.’ And they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, praising God.”

Verses 68-75, “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets, who have been since the world began, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham: to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.”

Zacharias was speaking to John.

Verses 76-80, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.’ So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.”

We have the description of what God was going to do through John the Baptist. John was a cousin of Jesus. He was a little more distant cousin of

Jesus. He would have been a second cousin. His mother Elizabeth and Mary were first cousins. Undoubtedly, since Elizabeth was described as a daughter of Aaron, she was of the priestly line. Mary’s mother was, undoubtedly, a sister to either Elizabeth’s mother or father. In other words, Mary’s mother was of the priestly family of Levi and Aaron and married Heli who was of the royal line of David. Mary, on her mother’s side, traced her genealogy back through Aaron and Levi; on her father’s side, back to David. That’s why she and Elizabeth were cousins even though Elizabeth was of the priestly line. John the Baptist and Jesus would have been related; their mothers would have been first cousins. John was raised up to give a message.

Again, notice how God prepared a witness. You can imagine how word of this big event that occurred in the temple—the priest having seen a vision—you can imagine how that spread. Because this occurred right around the time of Pentecost, you had people there from all over. Word like this must have spread like wildfire. This would have been big news. It set the stage.

We can clearly see that the wise men did not come at the time of Christ’s birth.

Matthew 2 shows the account of the coming of the wise men.

Matthew 2:11 makes it plain that Mary and Joseph were already abiding in a house by the time they arrived, “...when they came into the house....”

In v. 16, Herod was not taking any chances. When he realized that the wise men had not come back and told him where the child was, he sent word out to put to death all the boys in Bethlehem and surrounding areas who were two years old and younger. This was according to the time in which he had diligently inquired of the wise men, based on the time that the Magi had seen the star. The star hadn’t appeared when Jesus was born. It had appeared *prior* to that time and brought them in that direction. The star, undoubtedly, was an angel.

People talk about “star” or “comet.” Have you ever seen a comet stand over somebody’s house? You see this thing up there? It takes weeks and months to go across the sky and it finally stops over the top of somebody’s house—one that appears and disappears. You’ve never seen a comet like that, have you? A star, as we think of a star, how can you tell if that star is on top of somebody’s house? You go out and look up, and say, ‘Boy, that star is right above this building.’ If you were somewhere else, you’d look up and

think, ‘That star is right above that building.’ How could you tell? Obviously, it was an angel. They only had to be just a slight distance away. They could see a bright shining light and would follow.

Stars are used as symbols of angels. You can read that in Revelation 12:4. This angel manifested himself that way. All they could see was the bright light, but it was close and vivid enough that they could tell where it was and where it was standing over. That was the way in which they were led.

Herod realized that he had been “had.” He didn’t want to go worship the Messiah, ‘Oh, go find Him and come back and tell me where He is so I, too, can go and worship Him.’ Herod didn’t want to go and worship anything. He didn’t worship anything but himself.

Josephus tells us about Herod’s death. Herod had a very gruesome death. I won’t even go into all the details, but it was a very gory disease in which God really visited retribution on him. A type of maggot consumed him; just a very gory, gruesome death consumed him. Josephus records how Herod died.

**Joseph and family returns to Nazareth:** Matthew 2:23 and Luke 2:39.

Where did Jesus grow up? Matthew 2:23 makes it plain that He grew up in Nazareth and was called a Nazarene—not a Nazarite, as of the Nazarite vow. Christ wasn’t a Nazarite. He was a Nazarene and grew up in Nazareth, a little village in Galilee.

There is proof that the Being who dealt with men in the Old Testament in a visible manner (in other words, talked with Adam, walked with Enoch, ate with Abraham, wrestled with Jacob) was not the Father. That’s made plain in John 1.

John 1:18, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” This shows very clearly that no one has ever seen the Father at any time. Any time you read of God manifesting Himself in the Old Testament, it had to have been the One that became Jesus Christ because no one has seen the Father at any time. The Father has not manifested Himself. Jesus came to reveal the Father. Jesus Christ was the Word, the Spokesman and the One who dealt with man.

**Ministry of John the Baptist:** John 1:6-18, Luke 3:1-6, Matthew 3:1-4 and Mark 1:1-3.

As we read these parallel accounts, all of them start out with the story of John the Baptist, and

how John the Baptist came for a witness and a testimony.

John tells us in John 1:6-8, “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.”

Luke adds in the detail, Luke 3:1, “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.”

Scholars have calculated the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar in several different ways. The method of reckoning that Luke used to record is not clearly indicated from the context. But throughout all of his account, Luke uses the Jewish method of reckoning time and events. It would be consistent for him to use the Jewish method of reckoning in this case—using a spring-to-spring calculation.

It was Biblical for the priests to begin their priesthood at the beginning of age thirty. This is found in Numbers 4:3, 30. It is a historical fact that the priesthood under Moses began to function in the first month of the second year out of Egypt, when the tabernacle was set up. This was the only method of reckoning used by priests. Since John the Baptist was the son of a priest, he would have begun his ministry when he became thirty years of age. This means he would have had to begin his ministry no later than the time of Passover, 27 A.D. This would have given him at least a six-month ministry preparing the way for the Lord. He would have continued until just before the Feast of Pentecost in 28 A.D., at which time he was cast into prison.

This is the time when, Luke 3:2, “...the word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.”

In v. 3, we are told, “And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”

There is one thing I would like to point out, to illustrate. The Jews understood and had a concept of what we term “baptism.” They had what they termed “*mikvah*,” which had reference to immersion in water, to the ritual purifications and washings. That was what a woman went through, the rites of purification; that’s what the priests went through prior to entering into the temple. It was gone through at certain times, any time someone was ceremonially unclean.

Now when a Jewish baby boy was born, the baby was circumcised and was then considered an heir of the promises, but if a Gentile converted to Judaism, there was something else that was added. He not only had to undergo circumcision, but he had to undergo the “*mikvah*”—the ritual washing, the ritual immersion, to purify him, in a sense, from the uncleanness. The Jews viewed themselves inherently clean because they were the sons of Abraham. But everybody else was unclean. They were familiar with immersion, but they looked upon it as something that was only necessary for Gentiles if they became ceremonially defiled. They felt it was not an inherent need for Jews because they were, in a sense, born clean.

John’s message really “shook them to their socks.” John’s message was the fact that they were unclean, too. ‘You have to be baptized. You have to have your sins washed away.’ That had never dawned on them before. They thought they were inherently “one up” on everybody else. All they needed was circumcision (the sign of the Covenant), and they were inherently clean. John came preaching the baptism of repentance, performing, in a sense, this priestly ritual, but saying, ‘You Jews, you Pharisees, you Sadducees—you’re just as dirty. You’re just as polluted; you’re just as much sinners as any Gentile that you have ever converted or immersed. You better repent and be baptized or you’re not going to be forgiven.’

This is the context in which John preached baptism. People wonder where he came up with baptism. It was an adaptation of something. The Jews had never understood it as having applied to them. They viewed everybody else as having a problem, but they were okay. John broke the news to them that, no, they weren’t. That was news to them. They had thought they were clean, but John made it plain that they weren’t.

**John’s baptism to repentance:** Matthew 3:5-12, Mark 1:4-8 and Luke 3:7-18.

When the religious leaders came to John for baptism, it’s recorded in Matthew 3:6-7 that John was baptizing those who came to him acknowledging and confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said:

Matthew 3:7, “...‘Brood of vipers!’ [You bunch of snakes. Now the snake was a symbol of the devil, so it was not a very complimentary term.] Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” He really kind of “took the hide off” of them. ‘Look, which rock did you slither out from

under? Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? You “snake in the grass”!’

Verse 8 states that if you want to be baptized, go and produce evidence worthy of repentance. Prove a change in your attitude and your life; go and bring forth fruits worthy for repentance. ‘Let me see some changes; let me see you shape up. Change as evidence that you are really repentant if you want to be baptized.’

The only reason they wanted to “get on the bandwagon” was because everybody acknowledged John as a prophet. You can imagine—the event that had occurred at the time of John’s birth was known. Everybody in Jerusalem, everybody who was there, had been aware of these things when John had been born. They had been in expectation of this, and when he made this appearance, it really created a stir.

Notice briefly a couple of other things. Notice John’s advice to soldiers and to tax collectors. People came to John when they wanted to be baptized, and they asked him what to do.

In Luke 3:12, the tax collectors said, “...‘Teacher, what shall we do?’” What is the evidence of repentance?

John told them in v. 14, “...‘Collect nothing above what’s been appointed to you.’” ‘Be honest. You can collect taxes, but you need to be honest, be scrupulously honest. Don’t cheat people.’

Soldiers asked him in v. 14, “...‘And what shall we do?’....” The Roman army didn’t have conscientious objector status; you were a soldier. John told the soldiers, all right, “...‘Do violence to no man’” (KJV). Now that’s a difficult order for a soldier because you may find yourself in a situation that requires faith. If you’re not going to do violence to any man, you may find yourself in a situation where you are going to get killed because you’re brought out there and told to fight. John told them, ‘If you are going to repent, then you have to do violence to no man. You don’t falsely accuse anyone; you don’t misuse your status. You be satisfied with your wages. You make the best of it; treat people fairly, and do violence to no one.’

Verse 16, “John answered, saying to them all, ‘I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’” John said he baptized with water, but One mightier than he was coming who was going to baptize in a different way, which was to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

**Christ's baptism:** Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-23 and John 1:28-33.

As we continue the account, we find in Luke 3:21 that Jesus came to be baptized at the beginning of His ministry.

Verse 23, He was baptized at thirty years of age, which would have been in the fall of 27 A.D. John had begun his ministry in the spring of 27 A.D. Jesus appeared there in the fall of 27 A.D., and there was a miraculous display.

Luke 3:22 mentions it, "And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, 'You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.'" This was a very miraculous event to point out the uniqueness of this.

The first miracle that Christ worked is clearly shown and referred to in John 2:1-11, the turning of water into wine.

**Christ tempted by the devil:** Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13 and Luke 4:1-13.

What Jesus did right after His baptism, prior to the formal beginning of His ministry, is recorded in greatest detail in Matthew 4.

Matthew 4:1-2, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterwards He was hungry." This was necessary before He could begin His proclamation of the Gospel message because before He could begin announcing the good news of the Kingdom of God, He had to qualify to be King over that Kingdom by overcoming Satan. Adam, who had the first opportunity to rule the world, yielded to Satan and accepted his government. Jesus Christ showed that He would not yield to Satan, but would be totally yielded to God. He would resist and overcome Satan by the power of God.

These events occurred between the fall of 27 A.D. when Jesus made His first public appearance and the spring of 28 A.D. when He came into the temple for the first cleansing of the temple.

I might comment on a couple of things. One of the things made plain in John 1 is that many of the disciples that Jesus later dealt with were previously disciples of John the Baptist. Peter and Andrew were John the Baptist's disciples.

John 1:35-42, "Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples and looking at Jesus walking and he said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God.' The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do

you seek?' They said to Him, 'Rabbi' (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), 'where are You staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus....'"

You get this account of those that Jesus began to deal with.

We will go through the calling of the apostles in greater detail at a later time. Some of this material we will come back and summarize from a little different standpoint, but I think this gets us started.

There is a lot that is packed into the Gospel accounts. I think, hopefully, over the course of the next few Bible studies, we will come to more clearly see the real impact of some of these things—many of which we have read before. But I think as we really study into them, we will find that God has packed a lot into the Gospel accounts.

We will pick up from there next time and perhaps be able to summarize a few more comments on a little bit of what we covered this evening. I have some questions for the next Bible study, which will primarily concentrate on the Sermon on the Mount and related material. With that, we will conclude this evening.