

# JESUS

THREE PORTRAITS, ONE STORY

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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*Director of Regular Baptist Press:* Alex Bauman

Jesus: Three Portraits, One Story • Synoptic Gospels  
Adult Bible Study Leader's Guide

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# Contents



Lesson 1	<b>Three Reliable Portraits</b>	9
Lesson 2	<b>Matthew: Christ Is King</b>	18
Lesson 3	<b>Mark: Jesus, the Suffering Servant</b>	27
Lesson 4	<b>Luke: Jesus, the Son of Man</b>	35
Lesson 5	<b>One Story: The Incarnation</b>	43
Lesson 6	<b>One Story: Baptism and Temptation</b>	52
Lesson 7	<b>One Story: Miracles</b>	60
Lesson 8	<b>One Story: Transfiguration</b>	68
Lesson 9	<b>One Story: Triumphal Entry</b>	76
Lesson 10	<b>One Story: Prayer</b>	85
Lesson 11	<b>One Story: Arrest and Trial</b>	93
Lesson 12	<b>One Story: Crucifixion</b>	101
Lesson 13	<b>One Story: Resurrection and Ascension</b>	109



# How to Use *Truth for Living*

## Truth for Living:

A comprehensive, trustworthy curriculum that presents the truth of God's Word without compromise. The curriculum plan includes through-the-Bible courses as well as topical courses. Perfect for adults who want a guide in using all of God's Word as God intended.

As you prepare to teach these lessons, keep these two factors in mind:

- The FOCUS of productive adult Bible learning is the learner. The intent of teaching is not teaching, but learning—the learner's learning.
- The GOAL of productive adult Bible learning is an appropriate life-response to Biblical truth. You do not teach simply to impart information; you teach so that the Holy Spirit of God can use the truths of the Word of God to change the child of God into the image of the Son of God.

## The Lesson Plan

Each *Truth for Living* lesson has three distinct parts. GETTING STARTED is the attention-getter. The questions and activities “set the table,” as it were, for the study. SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES is the heart of the lesson. A series of study questions leads the teacher and learners through the Biblical text. MAKING IT PERSONAL applies the truth to life.

As is true of any teaching experience, you can adapt the parts of the lesson to fit your particular class. You may choose to alter the beginning activities or change the focus of the application. You will find more material in the study than you can probably cover in one class session.

## The Study Book

This leader's guide is designed to accompany the Bible study book. We encourage you to distribute Bible study books to your learners. Urge them to complete the study before class. The more your learners have studied on their own, the better the class discussions will be. Most of the questions in the leader's guide are picked up from the Bible study book. You will notice the question numbers in parentheses after the questions. The answers to the questions are in italics following the questions.

## Other Resources

The resource CD has PowerPoint presentations for every lesson. They incorporate the resource visuals and provide a good way for teachers and learners to track the lesson. The resource CD also has Prezi presentations for some of the lessons. Instructions for using the Prezi presentations are on the CD. Other resources include lesson outlines, case studies, and verse cards.



# Preface

God chose to have four Gospels written instead of one. That seems like overkill. But Jesus' life was not ordinary. He is multi-faceted, so it took four different writers to capture what we need to know about His life and ministry on earth. One Gospel would not have been adequate.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptics because they cover roughly the same material. But each one is nuanced to present Jesus in a different light. This course will focus first on the portrait of Christ in each of the synoptics. Taking time to understand how each Gospel presents Christ is important. That is part of sound hermeneutics.

This course will then combine all three synoptic Gospels in a presentation of the one story of Christ in a somewhat chronological manner beginning with His birth and ending with His resurrection and ascension. Not every aspect of Christ's life could be thoroughly covered in a course this length. Such an endeavor would take many volumes if done to its fullest. But the study will challenge your learners and expand their understanding of Christ. The knowledge they gain will be the basis for their growth in Christ. Pray your learners would have their relationships with Christ strengthened as a result of studying the synoptic Gospels.







# Three Reliable Portraits



## Topic

Synoptic Gospels

## Theme

The synoptic Gospels are reliable records of Christ that help us get a complete understanding of Him and His ministry on earth.

## Desired Learner Response

The learner will gain confidence in the Gospels as God's inspired Word and will determine ways to respond to the revelation of Christ in the synoptics.

## Materials

- Resources 1 and 2
- Biographies

## Scripture Focus

Matthew, Mark, Luke

## Summary

Most believers readily accept the different accounts of Christ in the Gospels but don't understand why God included all of them in the Bible. They also wonder what to do with the variations in the accounts. This lesson will build their confidence in God's Word by addressing the reasons for the accounts and dealing with the account variations.

## Outline

### I. Inspiration of the Synoptic Gospels

- Sources for the authors
- Superintendence of the Holy Spirit

### II. Questions about the Synoptic Gospels

- Why the repetition?
- Why the variations?

### III. Appreciation of the Synoptic Gospels

- Mathew's message
- Mark's message
- Luke's message

## Memory Verse

*"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:20, 21).*

## GETTING STARTED

### Three Titles

All of us carry out multiple roles in our lives. We have familial roles, occupation roles, roles in our communities, and roles in our church.

Instruct your learners to pick two or three of their roles they play in their lives (e.g., father, sister, employee, deacon). For each role, have them come up with a title for a book about that role. Give them four minutes to work. Have volunteers share their titles.

**ASK:** Would you expect each of your books to be different? Why? (Q1) *(Yes, because each book would emphasize a different part of their lives.)*

**ASK:** Would you expect them to be similar? Why? (Q2) *(Yes, because the books would all be based on the same life.)*

The four gospels each focused on a different role Christ played while on earth. Consequently, they are all a little different. Yet they books are all about Christ's one life, so they are similar too.

This lesson will help the learners appreciate the emphasis of each of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

### Missing Source

Bring some historical biographies to class. Distribute them to groups of learners. Instruct the groups to browse through the list of sources in the biographies, noting the different types of sources the authors used. Give them three minutes to work.

**ASK:** What types of sources did the biographers consult?

**ASK:** How does the list of sources affect your confidence in the biographer's historical account?

**ASK:** What makes the Gospels, which are biographies of Christ's life, different than the biographies we considered? *(The Holy Spirit is the ultimate source for the writing of the Gospels.)*

The Holy Spirit superintended the writing of the Gospels. The Spirit's inspiration of the Gospels gives us confidence that they are true and that there is a purpose for each of them. This lesson will consider the inspiration of the synoptic Gospels, the questions about their authenticity, and the need to know and apply their messages.

## SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

People who have read and compared the four gospel accounts have discovered

that three of them—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—contain much similar material, while much that John recorded in his account is not found in any of the other Gospels. The first three Gospels are often studied together because they are the *synoptic Gospels*, a term derived from Greek words that mean *to see together*. Scholars believe that these three Gospels were written between AD 52 and AD 68. The *synoptic problem* is a matter of questions raised by the similarities and differences within these Gospels.

## I. Inspiration of the Synoptic Gospels

### A. Sources for the authors

People have speculated about how the synoptic Gospels were written. First, Matthew, Mark, and Luke had access to oral tradition. In societies where printing did not exist or writing was scarce, men took great pains to accurately learn and remember the records they desired to preserve.

Second, personal contact contributed to the content of the gospel accounts. The apostle Matthew associated closely with Christ throughout His earthly ministry. Mark lived in Jerusalem, engaged in missionary work with Paul and Barnabas, and was closely associated with Peter, from whom he would have received first-hand accounts of the life of Christ.

Third, the writers had access to the apostles, who had moved to Jerusalem. They would have shared the information they knew about the life of Christ, and others would have repeated it.

Fourth, the gospel writers would also have taken care to examine written records, as Luke specifically stated he did (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–4).

**ASK:** Describe your confidence level in the veracity of the Gospels if the authors wrote solely based on the four sources discussed above. (Q3)

### B. Superintendence of the Holy Spirit

Most significantly, the disciples had the Holy Spirit, as Christ had promised (John 14:26). The Spirit led the authors to record their accounts exactly as God wanted.

**READ:** John 14:26. **ASK:** What did Christ say the Holy Spirit would do for the disciples? (Q4) *Teach them all things and bring to remembrance what Christ had said to them.*

If the Spirit wanted the writers of the Gospels to record a particular account, they never had a moment in which they could not remember exactly what happened or what Christ said. And they never recorded what they thought they heard or remembered; they were sure of the accounts they recorded. The Holy Spirit enabled the writers to discover the written records, to evaluate them, to remember from personal contact with Christ or from those who had heard Him, and then to relate those things to us accurately, without error.

**READ:** 2 Peter 1:20, 21. **ASK:** How do we know the writers weren't just putting

**their personal spins on their records of Christ's life and ministry? (Q5)** *Peter made it clear that no Scripture was written based on any person's will or desire. Rather the Holy Spirit guided them and gave them the exact words to record.*

Each Gospel is flavored with its writer's personality. But this is not a problem since the Holy Spirit was guiding the writers. And God gave the writers the personalities He wanted reflected in His Word. The Gospels record exactly what God wanted them to record.

**READ: 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. ASK: What is the result of the inspiration of the Gospels? (Q6)** *They are all profitable for helping the believer become spiritually mature.*

The superintendence of the Holy Spirit in the writing of the Gospels gives us confidence in their veracity as we read them. Without the inspiration of the Gospels, we might be tempted to view them with skepticism for being repetitive and even seemingly contradictory.

## II. Questions about the Synoptic Gospels

Though the Spirit's inspiration of the Gospels gives us confidence in them, the reasons for the repetitions and variations in the Gospels are worth considering.

### A. Why the repetition?

**READ: Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–23. ASK: What reasons might you give for all three Gospel writers including the account of Christ's baptism in their Gospels? (Q7)** *The account of Christ's baptism was crucial to the purposes in writing each of their Gospels.*

If there had been no repetition within the gospel accounts, critics would say that an editor had corrected the manuscripts to make sure that each one contained new material. However, where repetition does occur, critics say that two of the writers must have simply copied from the third. This speculation reduces the inspired Scripture to a human level and attributes to an unknown editor what the Bible attributes to the superintendence of the Holy Spirit.

The repetition is valuable in that it emphasizes certain themes and provides more than one witness to the event. Scripture tells us that the testimony of two or three witnesses will establish a matter (Deut. 19:15; cf. Matt. 18:16). God has given us three witnesses plus one extra (John) in some cases! Each writer did not *need* to consult the others but independently wrote what the Holy Spirit led him to write.

Furthermore, each Gospel is written for its own purpose. Since each Gospel is based on Christ's life and ministry, it stands to reason that specific events in Christ's life would serve the purpose of more than one Gospel. Read any two news stories about the same event and you will realize a similar phenomenon. Some of the facts reported by both stories will be essentially the same. Yet the writers' purposes for their news stories are most likely different. Consequently they will neither include the same facts nor arrange them in the same order.

When we find parallel accounts in the Gospels, we should ask why each

See John 1:32–34 for John's record of Jesus' baptism as told by John the Baptist.

writer included the account in his gospel. How does the account fit into the overall context of the particular gospel we are studying? And what specific details of the account might help us better understand the writer's purpose?

We should not conclude that the less informative accounts are necessarily less important. All accounts in the Gospels play the same role in that they all help to shape the message of each Gospel.

## B. Why the variations?

Some of the parallel passages in the Gospels seem to present conflicting reports. Critics use these as proof that the Bible contradicts itself and therefore cannot be trusted.

**ASK: How do you respond when you find apparent contradictions between the Gospel accounts? Do they ever make you feel uncomfortable? (Q8)**

A closer look at some of the most commonly criticized passages in the Gospels shows that the apparent contradictions can all be satisfactorily explained. The explanations actually serve to build our confidence in the Gospels and the Bible in general.

**READ: Matthew 28:2–7; John 20:11, 12. ASK: What is the apparent contradiction in these two accounts? (Q9)** *Matthew records that there was one angel at Christ's empty tomb while John records that there were two angels present.*

The apparent contradiction about the number of angels at Christ's tomb is not hard to explain. According to John, there were at least two angels there, but Matthew recorded the presence of only one. Yet just because Matthew's account is narrower in scope does not mean it is wrong. The same goes for all Bible accounts. An account is not automatically wrong because it is missing facts recorded in a parallel account.

**READ: Matthew 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43. ASK: What differences in these accounts might a critic claim are contradictory? (Q10)** *Matthew and Mark say Jesus is going out of Jericho while Luke says He is approaching Jericho. Matthew says there are two blind men healed while Mark and Luke say there is one.*

Like the previous variation involving the number of angels, the number of blind men is not a contradiction. Matthew mentions two blind men while Mark and Luke mention only one of them. We don't know why Mark and Luke didn't mention both blind men, but we do know that not including both men is not a contradiction to the Matthew account.

The location of Jesus in relation to Jericho is also rather easy to explain. Archeologists have uncovered two cities named Jericho from about the time of Christ. The cities are near each other making it plausible that Jesus visited the one and then made His way to the other. Meeting the blind men in transition between the two cities would fit the descriptions of Jesus both leaving Jericho and approaching Jericho.

The timing of the Passover meal at the time of Christ's arrest and crucifixion is

Comparing Gospel accounts of the same event is wise. It helps us get the fuller picture and helps to prevent us from drawing wrong conclusions. But we should primarily consider how the account we are studying fits into its immediate context.

another apparent contradiction. It appears from Matthew's account that the meal was the night before Christ's crucifixion (Matt. 26:18–20) while John records that some Jews observed Passover after Jesus was arrested (John 18:28). This is perhaps best explained by the use of two different calendars. So Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples before His arrest according to one calendar while the Jewish authorities followed another calendar and celebrated it the next day. Both accounts are accurate and neither is a contradiction.

The time of Christ's death is another source of apparent contradiction. Yet it is simply related to the different first century understandings of when a day began. Mark 15:24–26 records that Christ was crucified at the third hour of the day. Mark employs the *Jewish* method for noting hours of the day. The Jewish day began at 6 AM, so the crucifixion was at 9 AM. John 19:14–16 says Jesus was on trial at about the sixth hour. That would be impossible according to the Jewish day. But John recorded time according to the Roman day, which started at midnight. So the sixth hour of the Roman day was 6 AM, or about three hours before Christ's crucifixion at 9 AM. John wrote from Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia. He used the Roman day so his Hellenistic readers would understand the time sequence.

Another apparent controversy has to do with Jesus' occupation. Jesus is called the son of a carpenter in Matthew 13:54 and 55 and a carpenter in Mark 6:3, suggesting that perhaps one of the statements is wrong. This explanation is simple: both are true.

**ASK:** How does providing explanations for apparent contradictions affect your confidence in God's Word? (Q11)

There are other variations in accounts between the Gospels. Most of them simply indicate the separate witnesses to the events and provide additional information. All of the variations have plausible explanations.

### III. Appreciation of the Synoptic Gospels

Compiling all the information recorded in all four Gospels to form one cohesive account of the life of Christ is a profitable exercise. It helps us get a full picture of Christ. But we should not seek a harmonization of the Gospels without also considering each of the Gospels on their own. We should learn the message of each Gospel. The rest of this lesson will introduce each of the synoptic Gospels. The next three lessons will provide a more detailed look at the authors and content of each one. Lessons four through thirteen will cover the life of Christ with a special emphasis on how the theme of each synoptic is apparent throughout the life of Christ.

#### A. Mathew's message

Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to persuade them that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah/King.

**READ:** Matthew 1:1. **ASK:** Why would this verse be particularly important to a Jewish audience? (Q12) *It links Jesus with David, the beginning of the royal line from which God promised the Messiah would come (2 Sam. 7:16), and to Abraham, the one through whom God promised all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3).*



Lineage was of utmost importance to the Jews when considering whether someone was the Messiah. It made sense for Matthew to start with Jesus' lineage in his Gospel. Jesus will one day sit on the throne of David as God promised the king. And the salvation Jesus provided on the cross is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him.

Matthew went on to present the proof that Jesus had the credentials of the Messiah. The writer linked Old Testament prophecy to events happening in the ministry of Christ. He quoted from the Old Testament more times than any other Gospel. Sixteen times Matthew stated that a certain Old Testament statement or prophecy was *fulfilled*. Matthew also made many more references to the kingdom (meaning the kingdom of Heaven or of God) than the other gospel writers did.

**READ:** Matthew 3:1–3.

Matthew recorded the message of John the Baptist as “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2), while both Mark and Luke reported it as “repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Both messages are right, but the difference emphases show how intent the Holy Spirit was on presenting Jesus as the Messiah/King through Matthew's Gospel. That will become more apparent in the following lesson.

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 2. Show the summary of Matthew's presentation of Christ: Jesus is the Messiah/King.

## B. Mark's message

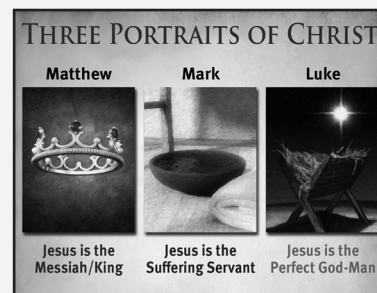
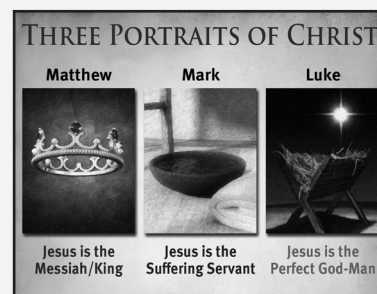
The book of Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, begins with Christ's public ministry without a word about Jesus' birth and early life. Mark seemed to be in a hurry as he moved from scene to scene. His favorite word appears to be *immediately* or one of its other forms, *straightway* or *forthwith* (used a total of forty times). Mark recorded only four of Christ's parables, preferring to present Christ through His works rather than through His teaching ministry. This presentation seems to support the view of many Bible teachers that Mark addressed his book specifically to the Romans because of their respect for action and efficiency.

The Romans were more impressed by deeds than words, and Mark presented a Man of power to them. Mark also presented Christ as the Servant.

**READ:** Mark 10:45. **ASK:** Why might a Roman audience be particularly intrigued by a suffering servant? (Q13) *It was foreign to their understanding of what made a person great. A Roman with so much power would subject himself to neither suffering nor servanthood. Romans used their power and authority to subject and even destroy others.*

Thus the Gospel of Mark presents Jesus as a Man of action, constantly on the move in His devotion to serve the needs of the people.

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 2. Show the summary of Mark's presentation of Christ: Jesus is the Suffering Servant.



### C. Luke's message

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus goes back to Abraham to emphasize that Jesus was identified with the Jewish people. It also traces the line of Joseph and is thereby Jesus' legal record. But Luke carried the genealogy back to Adam to emphasize that Jesus identified with the entire human race (Luke 3:23–38). Luke's genealogy seems to present Mary's line, which would be Jesus' natural record that connects Him directly with humanity.

Luke emphasized Jesus' perfection as the God-Man: *the Son of the Highest; in favour with God and man* (Luke 1:32; 2:52). Pilate, after questioning Him regarding all the charges made against Him, announced, *I find no fault in this man* (Luke 23:4, 14) and further answered Christ's critics, *I have found no cause of death in him* (23:15, 22). The centurion, watching His composure in death, *glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man* (23:47).

Luke conveyed Christ's claim to royal heritage and His manifestations of miraculous power, but he also conveyed the feeling of Christ's love enveloping the world.

**READ:** Luke 9:56; 19:10. **ASK:** How do you respond when you read these statements about Christ? (Q14)

**ASK:** How might it affect your outlook on lost humanity? (Q15)

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 2. Show the summary of Luke's presentation of Christ: Jesus is the perfect God-Man.

While among the Gospels distinctions exist in the choice of content and the manner of presenting it, the three books stand united in their record concerning one Man, His ministry, and His mission. There are three distinct portraits but only one story of redemption.



## MAKING IT PERSONAL

Looking at the Lord Jesus Christ through the threefold synoptic Gospels provides a picture of Him that is truly three-dimensional. We see the height of His human perfection, the breadth of His miraculous ministry, and the depth of His divine love.

### Responding to the Portraits of Christ

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 2 to review the emphases in the Gospels. **ASK:** How might we respond to Christ as the Messiah/King in Matthew's Gospel? (Q16) *By recognizing His authority in our lives and submitting to Him.*

**ASK:** How might we respond to Christ as the Suffering Servant in Mark's Gospel? (Q17) *By praising Him for serving us and by emulating His servant's heart.*

**ASK:** How might we respond to Christ as the Perfect God-Man in Luke's



**Gospel? (Q18)** *By being grateful for His love and continuing His mission to share it with the lost.*

These responses will be developed further over the next three lessons.

### Summary and Memory Verses

**RESOURCE:** Display resource 1. Add a summary statement for lesson 1 or use the following: Know and respond to the portraits of Christ.

Encourage learners to memorize 2 Peter 1:20 and 21. Give them an opportunity to say the verses in class next week.

