

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST

(Mark Strauss)

The Gospels do not give us precise dates for Jesus's birth or ministry, but approximations can be made. We know Jesus was born in the closing years of Herod the Great's reign (Matt. 2:1; Luke 1:5), and so sometime around 6–4 BC. (Our present calendar—developed in the sixth century by Dionysius Exiguus—was miscalculated by several years.) John the Baptist began preaching in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1), which, depending on how it is calculated, could be either AD 26 or 29. The length of Jesus's public ministry, which began shortly after John's, is also uncertain. The three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) present a linear view that could fit all of the events into a single year. Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee and gradually moves southward to Jerusalem, where he is crucified at Passover. John's Gospel, however, has Jesus visiting Jerusalem regularly during various Jewish festivals. At least three Passovers are noted (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55) together with other festivals (5:1; 7:2; 10:22). Since it was normal for a Galilean Jew to take such trips, scholars tend to view John's chronology as more precise, and calculate the length of Jesus's ministry as between two and a half and three and a half years, either AD 27–30 or AD 30–33.

### The Birth and Childhood of Jesus

Two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, provide accounts of Jesus's birth (Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2). There are many parallels between the two: in both an angel announces before Jesus's birth that he will be the promised Messiah from the line of David; Mary is still a virgin when she becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit; Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the hometown of King David (Mic. 5:2), but raised in Nazareth in Galilee. There are also important differences. Matthew's story focuses on Joseph, while Luke's on Mary. Matthew recounts the star that prompts the coming of the Magi, the attempt by Herod to kill Jesus, and the family's escape to Egypt. Luke parallels the birth of Jesus with that of John the Baptist, and describes the census of Caesar Augustus that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, Jesus's birth in a lowly stable, and the visit by the shepherds.

Both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies that confirm Jesus's credentials as the Messiah (Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38). Matthew, however, traces Jesus's ancestry from Abraham to Jesus via the line of David's son Solomon. Luke's genealogy moves in the other direction, descending from Jesus through the line of Nathan, another son of David, all the way back to Adam. Various explanations have been proposed to explain how Jesus could have two genealogies. The traditional and simplest is that Matthew's contains Joseph's ancestors, while Luke's are those of Mary. Others suggest that Luke records the physical ancestry of Joseph while Matthew gives a legal or royal genealogy, or that Jesus had two lines because of an earlier levirate marriage (see Deut. 25:5–10). All such suggestions remain speculative.

Little is known about Jesus's childhood except for one story from Luke of a Passover visit to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve. Jesus here demonstrates a growing awareness that God is his Father (Luke 2:40–52). Jesus likely had a rather ordinary childhood as a Jewish boy growing up in a conservative Israelite household. His father was a craftsman (tekton), a worker in wood, stone, or metal, and Joseph's sons followed him in this trade (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Jesus had four brothers—James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon—and at least two sisters (Mark 6:3).

### Preparation for Ministry

All four Gospels precede Jesus's public ministry with that of John the Baptist. John is the beginning of the gospel, the prophetic bridge between the old covenant and the new. John came on the scene dressed in clothing reminiscent of the prophet Elijah and calling for repentance in light of the imminent judgment of God. He denied he was the Messiah, pointing instead to Jesus, the "Lamb of God" who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29, 36). John announced he was merely a messenger and herald, preparing the way for the Lord (Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1). He baptized with water, but the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Two key events prepared Jesus for his messianic role. First, he submitted to John's baptism, identifying with the repentant people of God. When he came out of the water, a voice from heaven declared him to be the Son of God (Matt. 3:13–17 and parallels). Second, the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness, where Satan tempted him for forty days. By resisting Satan's temptation to act in his own power and for his own good, Jesus proved he was ready to accomplish God's plan (Matt. 4:1–11 and parallels).

### The Galilean Ministry

When John the Baptist was arrested (and eventually executed) by Herod Antipas, Jesus launched his public ministry. His message was, "The time has come. . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). In Jesus's preaching, the "kingdom of God" was the dynamic reign of God, his rule and authority over all things. God was in the process of restoring his



fallen creation and calling a rebellious people back to himself.

The early part of Jesus's ministry was centered in the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee. There he called his disciples, preached the kingdom of God, cast out demons, and healed the sick. The exorcisms demonstrated that the kingdom of God was assaulting and overwhelming Satan's authority in the world. Healing the sick previewed the restoration of creation predicted by Isaiah and the prophets, when the lame would walk, the blind would see, and the deaf would hear (Isa. 35:5–6). From his many followers, Jesus chose twelve, designating them as apostles ("messengers") and sending them out to preach and to heal (Mark 3:13–19). The number twelve is analogous to the twelve tribes of Israel and confirms that Jesus viewed his ministry in some sense as the restoration and renewal of the nation Israel.

While Jesus's reputation as a teacher and healer made him enormously popular among the common people of Galilee, he faced growing opposition from the religious authorities. His claims to divine authority, association with sinners and tax collectors, and apparent violations of the Sabbath law infuriated the Jewish religious leaders, who challenged his authority and accused him of blasphemy. The climax of the Galilean ministry came when, on an excursion to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples what they believed about him. Simon Peter, the frequent representative and spokesperson of the Twelve, said, "You are the Messiah!" From that point on Jesus began to teach them that his messianic mission was to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die (Matt. 16:13–23 and parallels). Jesus subsequently took his three closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—onto a mountain, where his appearance was radically changed in front of them (a transfiguration), briefly revealing his divine glory (Matt. 17:1–13 and parallels).

### **Last Days in Jerusalem**

Although John's Gospel reveals that Jesus traveled often between Galilee and Judea, the Synoptics focus on this final journey as the defining moment of his life. Jesus came to Jerusalem with a purpose. On Palm Sunday, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey from the Mount of Olives in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, his first public revelation as the Messiah. Entering the temple, he took a whip and drove out the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals. The action was a symbolic judgment against Israel for turning God's temple into a marketplace and failing to be God's light to the nations. It was also a preview of Jerusalem's coming destruction. Such provocative actions could not go unchallenged, and during this week the Jerusalem religious authorities repeatedly confronted Jesus, challenging his authority and attempting to trap him in his words. Jesus responded, defeating them in debate and frustrating them further (Matthew 22–23 and parallels). Jesus also continued to teach his disciples, predicting Jerusalem's destruction and instructing them concerning the events leading to the end of the age and his own return as the Son of Man (Matthew 24–25 and parallels).

### **The Passion of the Messiah**

On Thursday evening, the last night before his crucifixion, Jesus brought his disciples together for a final meal. There he transformed the Jewish Passover into a new celebration—the Lord's Supper—a ritual where his disciples would eat bread and drink wine in remembrance of his sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus next took his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, an olive grove near Jerusalem, for a time of prayer. Judas, who had earlier agreed to betray Jesus, showed up with the religious leaders and a group of soldiers who took Jesus into custody.

In the hours that followed, Jesus was taken before the Jewish high court—the Sanhedrin—where he was accused of seeking to destroy the temple, of blasphemy, and of falsely claiming to be the Messiah. The high priest declared him guilty and pronounced a death sentence. The next morning they took Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, since the Sanhedrin did not have authority in capital cases. Pilate questioned Jesus and had him whipped, but found no reason to execute him. Yet the religious leaders persisted in their demands. Pilate, being an unscrupulous and self-serving ruler and fearing their influence with his superiors in Rome, eventually acceded to their demands and ordered Jesus to be crucified. Like other victims of crucifixion, Jesus died a horrific death of exhaustion, blood loss, and asphyxiation. His body was taken from the cross before the Sabbath began (Friday evening) and was laid in a new tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish high council.

### **The Resurrection of the Messiah**

On Sunday morning, a group of women came to the tomb to anoint Jesus's body with spices as part of the burial process. Instead they found the tomb empty, the body gone, and an angel announcing that Jesus had risen from the dead. Jesus subsequently appeared to them, to the eleven disciples (Judas had committed suicide), and many others. The New Testament describes at least ten different resurrection appearances, compelling evidence that Jesus indeed rose from the dead (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20–21; 1 Cor. 15:3–8). The resurrection of Jesus is an essential foundation for the Christian faith, confirming (1) Jesus's claims about himself were true—claims to be the Messiah and the divine Son of God; (2) Jesus's death was an atoning sacrifice providing forgiveness for sins (Mark 10:45); and (3) we, like Jesus, will be raised in an immortal and imperishable body (1 Cor. 15:35–49).