

BIBLE SURVEY, PART III

by Robert C. Walton

**Grades 7-8
Year 1
Quarter 3**

THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

THE MEDO-PERSIAN EMPIRE

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the developments in Judaism during the time of the Medo-Persian Empire that helped form the backdrop for the New Testament.

Memory Verse

John 1:1-2 - "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."

Lesson Background

When Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2, he saw four great world empires that would dominate the Middle East for a period of a thousand years. The first of those empires was the neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire represented by Nebuchadnezzar himself. The second was the Medo-Persian Empire, formed by Cyrus the Great, which lasted for about two hundred years. It finally fell to Alexander the Great. Alexander's empire ended when the young general died, but its remnants survived for almost three hundred years until gobbled up by the insatiable maw of Rome. In our survey of the Intertestamental Period, we will look at the last three of these empires, concentrating on their impact on Judaism and how the events of the period set the stage for the ministry of Christ.

Properly speaking, only the last half of the Medo-Persian Empire period is intertestamental. As we have already seen, the events described in portions of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi all occurred under Persian rule. A study of the Medo-Persian Empire will thus serve as both

a review of lessons from the end of last quarter and an introduction to a period of history about which your students probably know little, but which is crucial for a proper understanding of the New Testament.

Today's lesson will be divided into two parts. The first will survey the two hundred year Medo-Persian Empire, relating the events of that period to our Old Testament survey of last quarter. The second portion of the lesson will deal with the most important change in Judaism under Persian rule, which was the development of the synagogue. Though practical application is difficult for historical lessons such as this one, the events of the period do underscore the fact that God was working to prepare both the world and the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah. The synagogue not only was the scene for a significant amount of Jesus' earthly ministry, but also provided the model upon which the worship of the early church was based. Your students must realize that the preparations for the coming of Christ did not begin with the Annunciation, but were part of the plan of God from the very beginning.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by drawing on the board the statue seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his vision in Daniel 2, with the head of gold, the chest and arms of silver, the stomach and thighs of bronze, the legs of iron, and the feet of iron mixed with clay. Tell them that the head represented the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar, while the chest and arms were the Medo-Persian Empire founded by Cyrus, the stomach and thighs the Hellenistic influence that followed the short-lived empire of Alexander the Great, and the legs the powerful empire of the Romans. As Nebuchadnezzar's dream continued, a stone not made by human hands hit the statue on the feet and it crumbled into dust. The stone represented the Kingdom of God, which is more powerful than the greatest empires built by man. In the first three weeks of this quarter, we will look at the statue as the empires it represents succeeded one another in world dominance and see how the events during their successive periods of rule paved the way for the coming of the Rock, Jesus Christ. We already looked at the Babylonian Empire when we studied the book of Daniel. As we examine the Medo-Persian Empire today, it will both help us to review the events of the closing years of the Old Testament period and get us into the early years of the Intertestamental Period.

1. The History of the Medo-Persian Empire

The founder of the Medo-Persian Empire was Cyrus the Great (599-530 B.C.). He was born in the kingdom of Anshan in what is now Iran and became king of Anshan when he was forty years old. He began to build and extend his kingdom at the same time that the Babylonian Empire was beginning to collapse. While fighting was going on for control of Babylon after the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus was conquering the Medes. Before invading Babylon, Cyrus turned his attention westward, to the kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor. The Lydians were ruled by a king named Croesus, who was so rich that "as rich as Croesus" became a proverbial saying, sometimes still heard today. When Cyrus set his sights on this rich prize, Croesus consulted the oracles, who told him that if he attacked Cyrus, he would destroy a great empire; as it turned out, the empire he destroyed was his own. In the decisive battle, Croesus put his world-famous cavalry on the front lines. Cyrus responded with his war camels. The horses had never faced camels in battle before; they stampeded, and Croesus and the Lydians went down to defeat. All of Asia Minor soon lay in Cyrus' power. He then turned his attention to Babylon, now ruled by the dissipated regent Belshazzar while his weakling father Nabonidus meditated in a desert monastery. With the help of the general Gobryas (called Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel), he conquered Babylon and took over its empire. The fall of the city of Babylon was relatively bloodless. Gobryas' army, hiding behind nearby hills, prepared to dam up the canal that provided Babylon's water supply. In the middle of the night, while Belshazzar and his chief officers were having a drunken orgy (the night of the handwriting on the wall), the Persians dammed up the canal and followed the canal bed right under the walls of the city, surprising the drunken regent and his men

and taking the city with very little loss of life. The people of Babylon were sick of the incompetent Nabonidus and the prodigal Belshazzar and welcomed Cyrus as a conquering hero.

Every empire seems to have had a different way to keep its conquered peoples from revolting. The Assyrians used brutality to frighten the captives, then mixed populations so people would be forced to live with those who had different cultures and spoke different languages. In such an environment, it would be difficult to develop trust, let alone foment a rebellion. The Babylonians took large numbers of people captive, removing anyone with leadership potential and retraining him for a position in the Babylonian civil service. Cyrus' technique was an unusual one in those brutal days - he sought to hold his empire together through earning the gratitude and love of those he ruled. Upon conquering Babylon, he immediately allowed all captives to return to their homes and rebuild their cities and temples as long as they swore political allegiance to him. Most were quite willing to do so, and Cyrus died an extremely popular ruler. It was during his reign that a small (about 50,000) group of Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.

Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses, who ruled from 530-522 B.C. Cambyses tried to expand the empire his father had created and succeeded in conquering Egypt. When he continued across North Africa to attack Carthage, however, his army was lost in a sandstorm and was never heard from again. When Cambyses died there was a struggle to determine his successor, and the victor was a nobleman who ruled from 522-486 as Darius the Great. It was early in his reign that the Temple in Jerusalem was completed under the prodding of Haggai and Zechariah. He strengthened the empire internally by setting up a postal system that was the best the world had seen to that point; it was the Greek historian Herodotus' description of that postal system that provides the motto for the U.S. Postal Service - "These neither snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness of night prevent from accomplishing each one his appointed task, with the very utmost speed." Externally, he added northern India and Macedonia to the empire, making it the largest empire in the history of the Middle East up to that time. He tried to conquer Greece, but was defeated at the Battle of Marathon. The Greek messenger who ran from the battlefield to bring the news of victory to Athens died as soon as he delivered the message; his run was the inspiration for the Olympic marathon race.

Darius was succeeded by his son Xerxes, the willful monarch of the book of Esther. He, too, tried to conquer Greece, but failed when his navy was destroyed at Salamis. He was followed by his son Artaxerxes, under whom Nehemiah served as a cupbearer. During his reign, Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Artaxerxes was the last powerful monarch of Persia. Following his death, the empire declined rapidly, led by a succession of weak rulers and plagued by revolts on all of its far-flung frontiers. When Alexander the Great emerged to challenge Persian might, the old empire was on its last legs, ready to collapse under sufficiently heavy pressure, which it did in 331 B.C.

2. The Development and Importance of the Synagogue

The most significant development in Judaism during the Persian Empire period was the institution of the synagogue. When the Temple was destroyed, the Jews had no place to worship. God had forbidden them to worship anywhere but the Temple. Something had to be done. While in captivity in Babylon, Jews began to meet informally for prayer and the study of the law. By the Persian period, this procedure had been formalized into what was known as the synagogue. The synagogue was never intended to replace the Temple, but was a way of preserving Jewish culture and religion in captivity. A synagogue could be formed anywhere there were ten adult Jewish men (called a *minyan*). Each synagogue was ruled by a sanhedrin. Ezra later set up a Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem to serve as a court of appeal in case of disputes. The sanhedrin served as both a civil and religious court, mediating disputes among Jews and supervising the religious life of the people. Even after the Temple was rebuilt, the Jews scattered throughout the world continued to worship in synagogues, while the Jews in Palestine brought the popular institution back with

them. A great deal of Jesus' ministry took place in the synagogues of Palestine. He often took advantage of the opportunity to teach from the Scriptures when He went into one of the towns of Galilee. Paul also preached often in synagogues as he traveled all over the Roman Empire.

The worship in the synagogues consisted of the recitation of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), prayers both memorized and spontaneous, singing of the Psalms, readings from the Scriptures, and an opportunity for any adult males present to comment on the readings. Jesus often participated by teaching from the Scriptures. We are told that, unlike the scribes, He taught with authority. The scribes, founded by Ezra to preserve the law by copying and teaching it, taught by quoting the comments of other rabbis. They thus derived their authority from the teachings of others. Jesus quoted no one but the Old Testament, speaking as if He Himself had the authority to say what the Word of God meant. This amazed the people of His day. After Jesus' death, when His followers began to meet for worship, it should not surprise us that the worship pattern they followed was that of the synagogue. Thus the worship of the early church contained the same practices and the same basic structure as that of the synagogue, with the addition of the Lord's Supper and other distinctively Christian elements.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reminding your students that God prepares for His work on a large scale. Even when Nebuchadnezzar's statue was first being built, it contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The only lasting kingdom is the Kingdom of God, and while others think they rule the world, it is really the Lord who controls all things for His purposes. Hundreds of years before the Incarnation, God was already preparing the world for the coming work of His Son.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT MEDO-PERSIAN EMPIRE

1. Make a sketch of the statue seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream in Daniel 2. Include the materials used for different parts of the statue and indicate the empires they represented.

2. Who was the founder of the Medo-Persian Empire? How did he try to keep his subjects loyal to him?

3. Who was the Persian king who reigned when the Temple was rebuilt? Who chose Esther as his queen? Who sent Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem?

4. What is a synagogue? Why were they started?

5. Define the terms *minyan*, *shema*, and *sanhedrin*.

6. What things were included in the worship of the synagogue?

7. Why is the synagogue important in the New Testament?

THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

THE MACEDONIAN EMPIRE

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the developments in Judaism during the period of Greek rule following the conquests of Alexander the Great, particularly the Maccabean Revolt and its aftermath.

Memory Verse

John 1:3 - “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

Lesson Background

The people are being deprived of their inalienable rights. A small, heroic band of rebels takes up arms against the oppressors, and despite overwhelming odds, strikes again and again at the enemy forces, finally wearing them down to the point where they sue for peace and grant the rebels their freedom. The American Revolution? It might well be. But the description given above also fits the Maccabean Revolt, one of the most stirring events in Jewish history.

Our study today covers the Hellenistic era of the Intertestamental Period, from the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century B.C. until the takeover of Palestine by the Romans in 63 B.C. Not only is this a period of great heroism, but it is also a time when many important developments occur in Judaism that will have a major impact on the history of the New Testament. Again this week, we will be looking at the history of the period and the key developments in Judaism. Your students should find the history somewhat more interesting than that covered last week, especially since most of them probably know nothing of the events of this period.

No less than the book of Esther, the story of the Maccabean Revolt is the story of God's providence. We see God miraculously preserving His people in the face of an attempt to destroy the Jewish religion. He was keeping the way clear for the coming of His Son less than two centuries later.

Lesson Procedure

Start the class by asking your students to name the greatest military leaders in the history of the world. They may suggest Napoleon, Julius Caesar, Eisenhower, Grant, or any number of other famous generals. One name that definitely should come up, though, is the name of Alexander the Great. Few men have left a more lasting mark on the world through a brief period of conquest. Though the empire he founded perished with him, its impact has remained with us to the present day. Not only has Alexander left his mark on history at large, but he also had a profound impact on the history of the Jews between the Old and New Testaments.

1. The History of the Period

A. Alexander and His Successors

While the Greeks had on several occasions been able to fight off invasions by the Persians, they had been unable to do any empire-building because of the constant fighting among the city-states that made up the Greece of that day. They simply lacked the unity to be a threat to anyone but themselves. Unity finally came from the outside, when Philip of Macedon (Macedonia, now an independent country, was until recently part of Yugoslavia) united the fractious Greek city-states under his leadership. He was murdered soon after, however, leaving leadership of his newly-formed empire to his twenty-year-old son, Alexander (356-323 B.C.). Alexander had studied under the great Greek philosopher Aristotle and was convinced that his destiny was to spread the glories of Greek culture throughout the world. He almost succeeded. Within a period of thirteen years, until his death at the age of 33, Alexander and his armies conquered Asia Minor (Turkey), all of Palestine, the vast Persian Empire, and most of Northern India. He ended his conquests, not because of defeat, but because his plunder-rich soldiers no longer had the desire to fight.

When Alexander died, he left behind an enormous empire that he had not had the time to organize. As a result, the empire broke up as soon as the conqueror died. Alexander assigned four of his generals to rule his empire. Naturally, they immediately began fighting among themselves for control of the whole thing. After a generation of warfare, three families gained control of the once-vast empire - the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in Syria, and the family of Antigonos in Macedonia. For the next century, Palestine was a political football, being fought over by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. Finally, in 198 B.C., the Seleucid king Antiochus the Great brought Palestine and the Jews firmly under the control of the Seleucids.

B. Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabean Revolt

While the Ptolemies had allowed the Jews to practice their religion unmolested, the Seleucids were as zealous for the spread of Greek culture as Alexander had been. When Antiochus the Great died, he was succeeded by his son, Antiochus IV. No shrinking violet, he called himself Antiochus Epiphanes, which means "Antiochus the Manifestation" (of deity). The Jews, offended by such blasphemy, referred to him behind his back as Antiochus Epimanes - "the Madman." He was determined to bring the Jews the glories of Greek culture whether they wanted them or not. His policies quickly polarized the Jews into two factions; the Hellenizers, who favored modernization and Greek ways, and the Hasidim, or "pious ones," who detested everything Greek and clung to the Jewish traditions.

The trouble began when Antiochus started playing politics with the office of high priest, first removing the Hasidic leader Onias III and replacing him with his Hellenizing brother Jason, then removing Jason in favor of a Benjamite named Menelaus who had paid a larger bribe. These maneuvers alienated all of the Hasidim and most of the Hellenizers. In the face of the resulting unrest, Antiochus resorted to force. He insisted that all Jews worship the Greek gods; he put a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (the statue's face bore a striking resemblance to Antiochus!); he sacrificed a pig on the altar of the Temple; he outlawed Jewish holidays, Sabbath-keeping, and circumcision. It was nothing less than an attempt to wipe Judaism from the face of the earth.

In the small town of Modin in the hill country of Judea, an official of Antiochus arrived to set up an idol in the town square. He called all the people together and ordered them to sacrifice to the idol. Since no one responded, he singled out an elderly priest named Mattathias, insisting that he set the example for his people. The old priest refused. Another Jew stepped forward and offered to sacrifice in his place, but Mattathias became so enraged, he grabbed a sword and killed both the Syrian official and the compromising Jew. Mattathias and his five sons then fled to the mountains, where they were joined by other rebels who were determined to resist Antiochus' tyranny. Thus began one of the most heroic chapters in the history of Judaism, the Maccabean Revolt.

Mattathias and his band of rebels began with a sort of guerilla warfare, swooping down from the mountains to attack small groups of Syrian soldiers or punish Jews who were cooperating with Antiochus. Soon Antiochus realized something would have to be done, and he sent troops to search out the rebels. On one occasion the Maccabeans suffered a severe setback when one group of rebels was surrounded on the Sabbath. They refused to fight and were wiped out. But for the most part, the Syrians were unable to find or defeat the rebels in their mountain hideouts. As the rebels succeeded, their numbers grew, as did their victories. When Mattathias died, he was succeeded by his son Judas, who came to be called Judas Maccabeus, "Judas the Hammer." This brilliant tactician engineered victory after victory over the forces of Antiochus, until finally in 163 B.C. he reconquered Jerusalem. Once there, he set about cleansing the Temple. The rededication ceremony is remembered by Jews today in the feast of Hanukkah. Though Judas later died in battle, his brothers Jonathan and Simon brought the war to a successful conclusion, and the Jews finally gained their freedom from the Seleucids. When Simon died, his son John Hyrcanus was recognized as the leader of the people, not only as governor, but also as high priest. He began what was called the Hasmonean Dynasty, a succession of priest-kings who bridged the gap between the Seleucids and the Romans.

C. The Hasmonean Dynasty

In an era of peace and prosperity, the zeal of the Maccabees was quickly lost. The Hasmonean rulers became part of the Jerusalem aristocracy and eventually aligned themselves with the Hellenizers in opposition to the Hasidim. During the reigns of John Hyrcanus and his son Alexander Jannaeus, the kingdom was expanded until it rivaled that of Solomon in size. After Jannaeus died, civil war broke out between his two sons, and two opportunistic power-seekers stepped quickly into the vacuum - an Idumaeen named Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, and the Romans.

2. Developments in Judaism During the Period

A. The Spread of Greek Language and Culture

Alexander's empire may not have lasted beyond his own death, but he succeeded in spreading Greek culture throughout most of the known world. The Jews fought it tooth and nail, but most others gladly

accepted the benefits of the Greek way. The spread of the Greek language, which became the trade language of the Mediterranean world for many years, paved the way for the spread of Christianity. It was the Greek language that was used to preach the Gospel, and it was the Greek language in which the New Testament was written. Alexander's success guaranteed that almost everyone would be able to understand the Gospel when it was written and spoken by the apostles and the early church.

The Jews who favored Greek culture also wanted their Scriptures to be accessible to the Greek-speaking world. In the third century B.C., in the city of Alexandria in Egypt, a group of Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek. This translation, known as the Septuagint, spread the knowledge of the Creator-God Jehovah throughout the Greek-speaking world, thus helping to prepare the world for the Gospel. The Septuagint was the version of the Bible most frequently quoted by the writers of the New Testament.

B. The Jewish Sects

During the Hellenistic period, the Jewish sects that were to have a great impact on the New Testament arose. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees began during the reign of John Hyrcanus, but both were outgrowths of older movements. The Pharisees were the successors of the Hasidim, the upholders of Jewish tradition, while the Sadducees were the descendants of the Hellenizers, those modernists who wanted Judaism to adapt to the popular Greek way of life. As we already noted, the Hasmoneans identified themselves with the Hellenizers - they were Sadducees. As a result, the Pharisees were often persecuted during this time. On one occasion, Alexander Jannaeus was officiating at the Feast of Tabernacles and poured out the libation on the ground, after the fashion of the Greeks, rather than pouring it on the altar according to Jewish law. The Pharisees began pelting him with overripe fruit, and he called out the guards, massacring several hundred Pharisees. Another time, Jannaeus held a banquet for some of his Sadducee friends; for the evening entertainment, eight hundred Pharisees were crucified outside the banquet hall in full view of the revelers. The Pharisees and Sadducees were thus implacable enemies. By Jesus' time, the Sadducees dominated the Temple power structure (Caiaphas and most of the chief members of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees), while the Pharisees dominated the synagogues and were known as the foremost educators of the day. The fact that these long-time enemies were able to cooperate to destroy Jesus gives some indication of the strength of their animosity toward Him.

A third sect that arose during this period was the Essenes. A strict monastic group that considered even the Pharisees to be too liberal, they refused to worship in the corrupted Temple or even the synagogues, living apart by themselves in monasteries in the wilderness. Some of the groups were so strict they forbid marriage and gained members only by adopting orphaned children. The Essenes were the ones who copied and hid the manuscripts known as the Dead Sea Scrolls that were discovered in 1948. These scrolls, which include the oldest Hebrew manuscripts known to man, give us considerable information about the Intertestamental Period, and the copies of Old Testament books found among the Scrolls verified the accuracy of the copying done by the scribes in the intervening centuries.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by explaining to your students why knowledge of the Intertestamental period is important to them. We are able to understand the New Testament much better if we know something of the historical and cultural background of the world in which Jesus and the disciples lived. When we get to the New Testament, there are many groups that just seem to pop up out of thin air that were never mentioned in the Old Testament. The more we know about people like the Samaritans, Pharisees, and Sadducees, the better we will be able to understand the New Testament.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

MACEDONIAN EMPIRE

1. Why did Alexander the Great's empire break up when he died?
2. What two families fought for control of Palestine in the century after the death of Alexander?
3. Why did Antiochus Epiphanes try to stamp out Judaism?
4. Who started the Maccabean Revolt, and why?
5. Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees, and why were they enemies?
6. Why was the spread of the Greek language through the conquests of Alexander important for the growth of Christianity?
7. Who were the Essenes? For what are they famous?

THE INTERTESTAMENTAL PERIOD

ROME AND THE HERODS

Lesson Aim

To help students understand the impact of the Roman Empire on Jewish life, especially as it relates to the events of the New Testament, and to distinguish among the various members of the influential Herod family.

Memory Verse

John 1:4 - "In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

Lesson Background

When the Son of God came to earth as a baby, He was born into a world dominated by the Roman Empire. The Palestine in which He lived and ministered was characterized as much by Roman influence as it was by the religious leadership of the scribes and Pharisees. This week, we will look at how Rome came to gain control of Palestine, talk about the Jewish reaction to Roman rule, and pay special attention to the Herod family, those puppets of Rome who exerted such a large influence on New Testament history. Since much of the lesson is in itself background for studying the New Testament, I won't spend time going over it here. Suffice it to say that this lesson will help your students understand the political context in which many of the events of the New Testament occurred.

Lesson Procedure

Start the lesson by asking your students to name the worst villain in the New Testament. The obvious answer that will probably come out first is Judas, but some enterprising students may come up with others, such as Pilate, the Pharisees, Nero, or our subject for today, Herod the Great. Few characters in biblical history are more despicable than Herod. All the Bible really says about him is what is contained in Matthew 2, but his slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem is enough alone to earn him a place of infamy. As your students will find out today, that incident is only the tip of the iceberg of this man's villainy.

Last week, we looked at the Hellenistic period in Jewish history, which ended with the Hasmoneans engaged in a civil war to see who would succeed Alexander Jannaeus. This week, we will see what was the outcome of that civil war, and examine the Roman takeover of Palestine and its effects on the Jewish people.

1. Rome Takes Over

As far as the great empires of the world are concerned, Rome was a relative latecomer. The city was founded in the eighth century B.C., when the Assyrian Empire was at its height. It wasn't until the third century, while Palestine was under the control of the Ptolemies, that Rome gained dominance over the Italian peninsula. With the defeat of Carthage in the Third Punic War in 146 B.C., Rome gained control over the Western Mediterranean. In 133 B.C., Greece and Asia Minor were added to Rome's fast-growing empire. When civil war between the sons of Alexander Jannaeus threatened to tear Palestine apart, an Idumaeen (Edomite) named Antipater pointed out to the Romans that the situation could be mutually advantageous. The Roman general Pompey moved in and conquered Palestine in 63 B.C., putting an end to the civil war, and appointed Antipater as Roman governor. Though he was assassinated a few years later, he had gained enough favor with the Romans to ensure that his son, whom we know as Herod the Great, would succeed him.

2. The Response of the Jews

The Jews hated the Romans just as much as they hated the Seleucids before them. The Romans, unlike the Seleucids, allowed the Jews to practice their religion and their way of life without interference. Judaism was recognized as a legal religion within the empire, and thus had the protection of law. This recognition even exempted the Jews from emperor-worship when that practice became popular toward the end of the first century A.D. But the Jews had a hatred of foreign rule that would not allow them to submit, though some made peace more easily than others.

A. The Publicans

The ones who submitted most easily to Roman rule were a group of men known as publicans (at least in King James English). They were tax collectors who were hired by the Romans to do their dirty work for them. The publicans were given a territory and a quota. They could meet that quota any way they chose, and they had the support of the Roman troops in doing so. Any money collected over and above the quota was their salary. The system thus encouraged cheating and abuse, and the publicans became both wealthy and hated by their fellow Jews. Jesus was one of the few Jews who would have anything to do with these men. He spent quite a bit of time in their company; one, Matthew, became His disciple, and the chief publican in Jericho, Zacchaeus, was one of His most famous converts.

B. The Religious Leaders

The religious leaders, like the publicans, accommodated themselves to Roman rule, but sought to maintain their influence with the people by paying lip-service to patriotic concerns. They realized, however, that their positions of power depended entirely on Roman favor, so they were reluctant to do anything that would offend the conquerors. Despite all the talk about blasphemy and Sabbath-breaking, this was the real reason they opposed Jesus (this was especially true of the Sadducees; the Pharisees took the religious issues a lot more seriously). The members of the Sanhedrin, in particular, knew that a religious uprising would cost them their jobs, and possibly their lives. Jesus became their sacrificial lamb in order to keep their positions.

C. The Zealots

There were some Jews, however, who were willing to do anything to rid the land of the hated Romans. These men were called Zealots, and they sought to continue the guerilla warfare tactics that had been so successful during the Maccabean Revolt. They were specialists in disruption and assassination. One of Jesus' disciples, a man named Simon, was a former Zealot; so, in all likelihood, was Barabbas, the man released by Pilate instead of Jesus (and who would have been a hero to many of the Jews).

The Zealots became increasingly active in the years following Jesus' death, and their disruptive activity finally brought a Roman army into Palestine to put down the disturbance. The result was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. Many of the Zealots escaped and hid in an old fort called Masada near the Dead Sea. The Romans besieged the fortress, and when they finally breached the walls, they found that all of the defenders were dead. As it turned out, the Zealots, seeing that their cause was hopeless and refusing to be conquered by the Romans, each killed his own family, then drew lots and killed one another, with the last man committing suicide. Two women and five children survived by hiding in a storage cellar and were able to tell the Romans what had happened.

3. The Herod Family

At this point, give each student a copy of the Herod Family Tree. As you go through the family tree, explain something about each of the key individuals included on the list.

A. Herod the Great

Surely the most dominating figure in Palestine during the Roman era was Herod the Great. The son of Antipater had incredible survival instincts and real political skill, but he was cruel and suspicious beyond all reason.

Pompey, the conqueror of Palestine, was part of the First Triumvirate, three men who ruled Rome after the fall of the Republic. The strongest member of the Triumvirate was Julius Caesar. Many urged him to make himself emperor, and there were indications that he was listening. But in 44 B.C., on the Ides of March (March 15), Caesar was assassinated by a group of conspirators led by Brutus and Cassius. In Palestine, Herod, who was at this time a Roman governor, threw his support behind the conspirators. When they were defeated, Herod quickly changed sides, bribing his way into the favor of one of the members of the newly-formed Second Triumvirate, Mark Antony. In 37 B.C., he was named King of the Jews, and seemed firmly entrenched in Roman favor. He then sought to gain favor with the Jews, who hated him, viewing him as a foreign usurper. He divorced the first of his ten wives, Doris, and married the Hasmonean princess Mariamne, hoping to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Jews.

Meanwhile, the Second Triumvirate was breaking up. Mark Antony, with the help of Cleopatra, was struggling for control against Octavian, who was later known as Caesar Augustus. Herod supported his old friend Antony, but Antony and Cleopatra were defeated and Herod was summoned to meet with Octavian. He didn't know whether he would return alive, and he was jealous of his beloved Mariamne. He ordered a trusted advisor to guard her, and if he should be killed, the advisor was told to kill Mariamne as well to keep anyone else from marrying her. Herod again talked his way out of trouble, convincing Octavian that the loyalty he had shown toward Mark Antony was a valuable asset, but Mariamne found out about the orders he had left for her possible disposal. Their relationship was never the same again.

Once his political power became secure, his family situation deteriorated. He became insanely jealous, suspecting everyone around him of trying to take his throne. This jealousy led him to execute Mariamne, along with her mother and uncle, and later his sons Antipater, Alexander, and Aristobulus. Meanwhile, he tried to gain popularity with the Jews by renovating the Temple, making it one of the most beautiful buildings in the ancient world (ironically, the work was finished in 64 A.D., just six years before it was destroyed by the Romans). At about the same time that he ordered the deaths of his sons, a group of Mesopotamian astrologers came to him talking about a new king who had been born. His jealousy aroused, he tried to kill the child. Jesus escaped, but the infants in Bethlehem did not. Finally, on his deathbed, Herod made one last effort to gain Jewish favor. He ordered his soldiers to gather the leading citizens of every town in his domain. They were brought to Jerusalem and held in the Hippodrome, with orders that they should be killed as soon as Herod died, thus guaranteeing that there would be mourning throughout the land at the time of his death. Mercifully, this final order was not carried out.

B. Archelaus

When Herod the Great died, he divided his kingdom among three of his four surviving sons. Archelaus became the ruler of Judea. He took after his father, and his attitude caused Mary and Joseph to return with Jesus to Nazareth after leaving Egypt. When Archelaus died in 6 A.D., he was replaced by a series of prefects, Roman officials sent by the emperor, one of whom was Pontius Pilate.

C. Philip

Philip was the only son of Herod the Great who had no political ambition. He used his considerable wealth to live the good life in his country villa and stayed out of the political squabbles that dominated the lives of the rest of his family. His wife, however, had other ideas. Her name was Herodias, the daughter of the dead Aristobulus. She married her uncle to gain status, but found his lack of ambition insufferably boring. They had one daughter, the notorious Salome. Herodias finally left Philip and married another uncle, Herod Antipas, thus bringing down the wrath of John the Baptist, who condemned the marriage, which was a source of gossip as far away as Rome.

D. Herod Antipas

This son of Herod the Great ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D. He was more popular with the Jews than his father had been and was interested in the Jewish religion in a superstitious sort of way. He was the one who, under the prodding of Herodias, had John the Baptist arrested, then was coerced by Salome into having him executed after making a drunken promise at his birthday party. He was also the man to whom Pilate sent Jesus for trial. Herod thought Jesus was a magician and was disappointed when Jesus refused to do any miracles for him.

E. Herod Philip

He ruled Iturea from 4 B.C. to 34 A.D. His only connection with the biblical narrative is the fact that he married Salome. He was her uncle on her father's side and great-uncle on her mother's side!

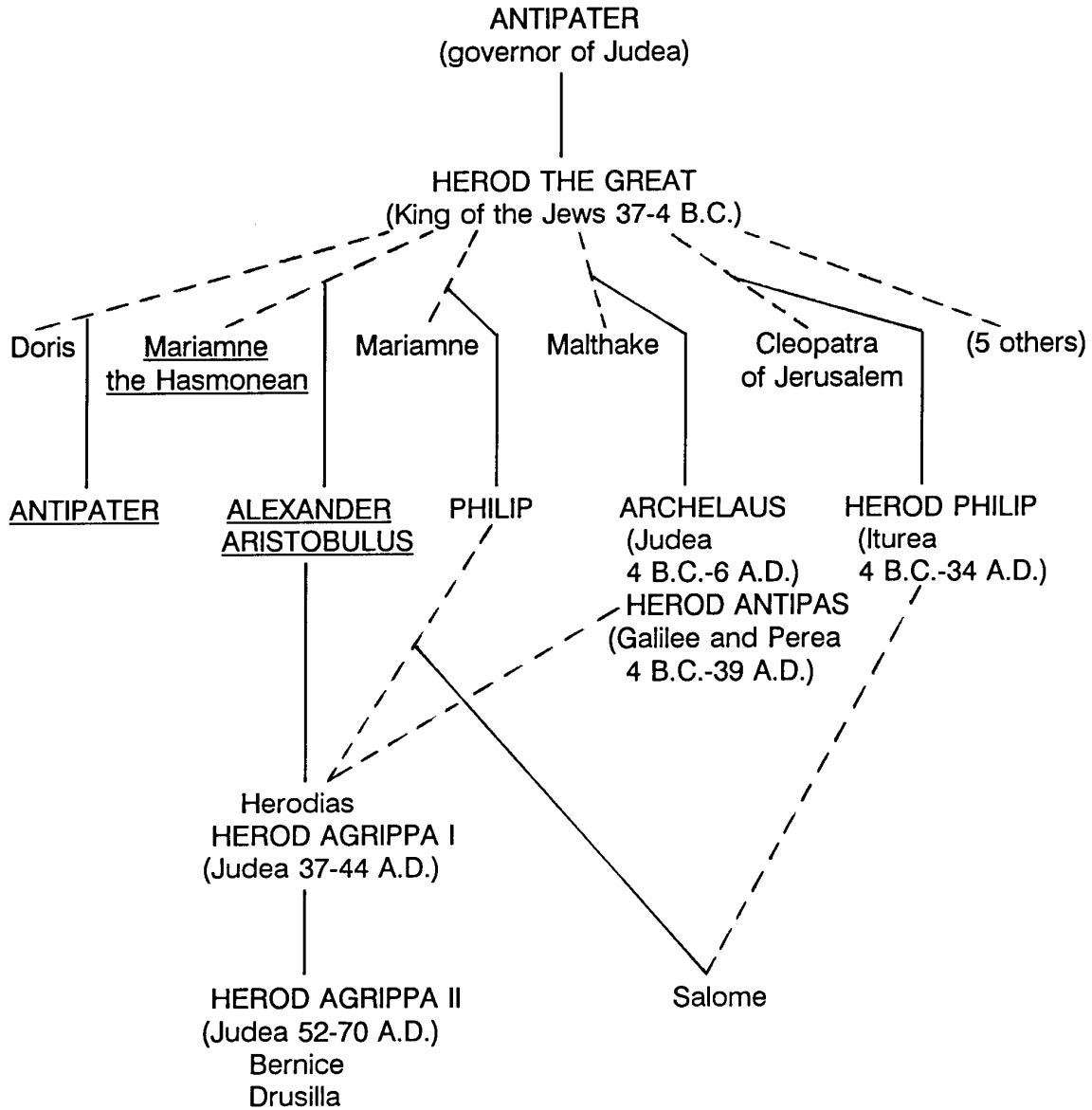
F. Herod Agrippa I

The brother of Herodias was the ruler of Judea from 37-44 A.D. He was a personal friend of the Roman emperor Claudius and had ambitions of eventually ruling all of Palestine. He was the Herod who executed James the son of Zebedee and imprisoned Peter. He was also the one who, after receiving praise as a god, was struck down by God and died of an intestinal parasite.

G. Herod Agrippa II

The son of Herod Agrippa I ruled Judea from 52-70 A.D. He was the King Agrippa before whom Paul gave his testimony. His sister Bernice, with whom he was rumored to have an incestuous relationship, was also present at Paul's trial. His other sister Drusilla married the Roman governor Felix, who also was involved with Paul's case.

THE HEROD FAMILY TREE



KEY

CAPITALS = men

small letters = women

underlined = executed by Herod the Great

dotted lines = marriage

solid lines = children

parentheses = places and dates of rule

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT ROME AND THE HERODS

Complete the following matching quiz:

- ___ 1. The Roman general who conquered Palestine.
- ___ 2. The Idumaeen who became Judea's first Roman governor.
- ___ 3. The ruler who murdered the babies in Bethlehem.
- ___ 4. He was murdered to keep him from becoming Roman emperor.
- ___ 5. Cleopatra's lover and friend of Herod the Great.
- ___ 6. Hasmonean princess married by Herod the Great.
- ___ 7. Later known as Caesar Augustus.
- ___ 8. The only member of the Herod family who had no ambition.
- ___ 9. When he ruled Judea, Mary and Joseph settled in Nazareth.
- ___ 10. John the Baptist was killed at his birthday party.
- ___ 11. Her seductive dance cost John the Baptist his head.
- ___ 12. She was married to two of her uncles at various times.
- ___ 13. He executed James the son of Zebedee.
- ___ 14. Paul was put on trial before this man.

- | | | | |
|----|------------------|----|---------------|
| A. | Antipater | H. | Julius Caesar |
| B. | Archelaus | I. | Mariamne |
| C. | Herod Agrippa I | J. | Mark Antony |
| D. | Herod Agrippa II | K. | Octavian |
| E. | Herod Antipas | L. | Philip |
| F. | Herod the Great | M. | Pompey |
| G. | Herodias | N. | Salome |

PERSPECTIVES OF THE GOSPEL WRITERS

Lesson Aim

To help students understand what a Gospel is, why there are four of them, and to familiarize them with the unique perspective of each of the Gospel writers.

Memory Verse

John 1:5 - “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

Lesson Background

The focus of the entire Bible is Jesus Christ. The fact that God became man, and that the God-man died to save His people and rose from the dead to bring them new life is at the heart of what we call the Gospel - the Good News. For the next five weeks, we will be studying the Gospels. These are not biographies in the normal sense of that word. Instead, they are accounts of the ministry of Jesus written to convey the good news of salvation. The entire Old Testament points toward the content of these four books, while the rest of the New Testament is intended to explain and amplify it.

In today’s lesson, we will cover the background of the Gospels. In order to do this, we will need to discuss what a Gospel is, why there are four of them, who the authors were, and the peculiar perspectives brought by each to their work of narrating the ministry of Christ. We will also talk about the audiences addressed by the four writers, and how these audiences influenced the ways in which the four books were written. In addition to the knowledge your students will gain from this study, a further application could involve the inspiration of Scripture, and the way God used a variety of men to give us exactly what He wanted us to know about His Son.

Lesson Procedure

The approach you as a teacher take to this lesson will largely depend on the level of knowledge of your students. If they are already familiar with some of the things to be covered in this lesson, it would be most effective for you to ascertain what they know using a question-and-answer format, allowing your students to provide the basic information while you fill in any blanks they may have left in their answers. On the other hand, if your students are unfamiliar with what this lesson contains, it will be necessary for you to give them most of the information in a lecture format. It might help in that case if you gave out the worksheets at the beginning of the lesson and allowed your students to fill in the information as you go along.

1. What is a Gospel?

Most of your students probably know that the word “Gospel” means “good news.” Ask them what the good news is that is being proclaimed in these books. Be sure they understand that it is particularly the death and resurrection of Christ that make up the good news, for it is on these events that the four Gospels focus most of their attention.

Also be sure that your students know the difference between a Gospel and an ordinary biography. While the Gospels tell the story of Jesus’ life, they pay very little attention to His early “formative” years like a normal biography would. Instead, only two of the four even mention Jesus’ birth and the events surrounding it, and only Luke tells us about anything that happened between His return from Egypt and the beginning of His public ministry. The vast majority of the Gospel material deals with Jesus’ public ministry, and about one-third of that concentrates on the time between Palm Sunday and the Ascension. The writers wanted to spread the Good News of salvation. For that purpose, the early years of Jesus’ life were irrelevant, but the last week was vitally important.

2. Why Four Gospels?

Wouldn’t it have been easier for God to have given us one story of Jesus’ life rather than four, with all their repetitions and overlaps? What your students must realize is that each Gospel is written from a different perspective. The result is the same kind of improvement that a hologram gives over a normal photograph - the added dimension adds depth and fullness to the picture. [A nice touch at this point might be to show the students a hologram, which they are becoming increasingly commonplace.]

3. The Authors

A. Matthew

Matthew, who was also known as Levi, was a disciple of Jesus. He had formerly been a publican, or tax collector (remind your students from last week’s lesson what a publican did). Matthew’s facility with numbers and his knowledge of money come out clearly in his Gospel. Some have suggested that he may have developed his own form of shorthand for record-keeping purposes, which allowed him to take down Jesus’ sermons for posterity (the two longest sermons recorded in the Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse, are both found in their fullest form in Matthew). We know little about Matthew’s activities after Jesus’ death, but according to tradition he was martyred in the city of Antioch.

B. Mark

Mark was probably a teenager during the years of Jesus' public ministry, and thus was not one of the Twelve. His family was among the early followers of Jesus, however, and his home was one of the early meeting places of the church in Jerusalem. Some have speculated that it was his home that was used for the Last Supper by Jesus and His disciples, and that Mark himself was the young man who "barely" escaped capture in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:51-52). He was probably among the 120 on the Day of Pentecost and accompanied Paul and his uncle Barnabas on the first missionary journey. He gave up and returned home, and as a result caused a split between the two old friends. He later became a useful helper to Paul, however. He also spent time traveling with Peter and got much of the information for his Gospel from hearing Peter preach. According to an early tradition, he was the founder of the church in Alexandria, Egypt, which became one of the most influential churches in the early centuries of church history. We know nothing about his death, though vague and contradictory traditions do exist.

C. Luke

Luke was a doctor from Asia Minor and was the only Gentile among the Gospel authors. He was a companion of Paul, and thus never knew Jesus personally. He wrote a two-volume history of the beginnings of Christianity that we know as the books of Luke and Acts. The Gospel of Luke was compiled through careful research, including extensive interviews with people who had known Jesus. Much of the book of Acts was written from personal experience, as Luke's use of the first person indicates. Because of his research, Luke's Gospel is the most nearly chronological of the four (Matthew deliberately groups events of the same type together; Mark is basically chronological; John only includes a few isolated events, thus chronology is not important to his Gospel). Luke's concern for the poor and weak in society shows clearly in the incidents he relates from Jesus' ministry.

D. John

John was another one of the Twelve and has come to be known as "the beloved disciple." This is because he never refers to himself by name in the Gospel he wrote, but instead calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved." His natural character was hardly as lovable as his reputation would indicate. In fact, he and his brother James were known as the Sons of Thunder - an indication that they had rather nasty tempers. John was a fisherman, in business with his brother, Peter, and Andrew. After Jesus' death, he wrote three letters that bear his name, along with the book of Revelation. He served for many years as an elder in the church in Ephesus. Toward the end of his life he was exiled to the island of Patmos off the Turkish coast by the emperor Domitian. He is said to have been the only one of Jesus' disciples to have died a natural death.

4. The Audiences

The following is largely a matter of speculation, but much of it is rooted in the content of the books themselves and the teachings of the early church.

A. Matthew

Matthew had greatly abused his people in his years as a tax collector. It should come as no surprise that he wanted to give something back to them - the riches of the Gospel. His book is written for a Jewish audience, as can be seen by the fact that he constantly quotes the Old Testament, attempting to show that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies found there. He also speaks at greater length than any of the others

about the relationship of Jesus to the Jewish law. An ancient tradition says that his book was originally written in Hebrew and only later translated into Greek.

B. Mark

Mark's Gospel is said to have been written for a Roman audience. It is short and to the point, contains lots of action and very little teaching, and uses simple grammar and short sentences. The Romans were men of action and had little patience with the philosophizing of the Greeks.

C. Luke

Luke, being Greek himself, naturally wanted to convey the Gospel to his own people. The Greeks loved complicated thought and detailed description, and Luke's is the longest of the four Gospels (Matthew has four more chapters, but Luke has considerably more verses). Luke also relates more parables than any other Gospel writer - a story form that appealed to the Greek mind.

D. John

John, by his constant use of the term "whoever," makes it clear that he is aiming for a universal audience. His writing thus focuses, not on events, but on the teaching of Jesus. His is the most theological of the Gospels, and also the one most clearly intended to evangelize the reader.

5. Views of Christ

A. Matthew

In writing to the Jews, Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah, the King of the Jews who had been prophesied in the Old Testament.

B. Mark

Our study of Herod the Great last week showed how responsive the Romans would be to a king. Mark instead pictures Jesus as the Servant of all men. The Romans had enslaved millions, but the slave Mark pictures for them is like none they had ever seen before. He shows that the only true leadership comes through service.

C. Luke

Luke's favorite title for Jesus is "Son of Man." The Greeks had no trouble believing that the gods could come down to earth - their mythology had told them that for years. But to think that God could really become man was another matter. The Greeks believed that matter was evil. Luke thus concentrates on showing his readers the humanity of Jesus, through His miracles of healing and His compassion for the downtrodden of society.

D. John

The main emphasis of John's Gospel is that Jesus is the Son of God. This is how his book begins, and it is the focus throughout.

6. The Genealogies

The genealogies found in the Gospels fit very well with the intentions and audiences of the books.

A. Matthew

Matthew presents the genealogy of Jesus through Joseph and David back to Abraham. If Jesus is the King of the Jews, it must be established that He is both truly Jewish and from the royal line. The fact that He was not Joseph's biological son is beside the point - adopted children could possess the legal right to monarchy as well as those born naturally.

B. Mark

Mark contains no genealogy. Who cares about the genealogy of a slave?

C. Luke

Luke traces Jesus' line through Mary all the way back to Adam. If Jesus' humanity is what is important to Luke, he must establish Jesus' link with the human race through His biological mother and His relationship to all men through his descent from Adam.

D. John

John's "genealogy" is found in the first verse of his Gospel. If he wants to show Jesus as the Son of God, he does not need information about His human parentage. It is His equality with God from all eternity that is important.

COMPARISON OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
NATIONALITY	Jewish	Jewish	Greek	Jewish
OCCUPATION	Tax collector	unknown	Doctor	Fisherman
KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS	Disciple	from Peter	Research	Disciple
AUDIENCE	Jews	Romans	Greeks	Everyone
VIEW OF JESUS	King of the Jews	Servant	Son of Man	Son of God
GENEALOGY	Through Joseph and David to Abraham	none	Through Mary to Adam	“. . . the Word was God.”
LATER LIFE	Martyred in Antioch	Founded church in Alexandria	unknown	Elder in Ephesus
OTHER WRITINGS	none	none	Acts	I John II John III John Revelation
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOSPEL	Fulfilled prophecy	Action	Parables	Theology

COMPARISON OF THE FOUR GOSPELS

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
NATIONALITY				
OCCUPATION				
KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS				
AUDIENCE				
VIEW OF JESUS				
GENEALOGY				
LATER LIFE				
OTHER WRITINGS				
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOSPEL				

BEGINNING OF JESUS’ EARTHLY MINISTRY

**Matthew 1:1-4:12; Mark 1:1-15;
Luke 1:1-4:15; John 1-4**

Lesson Aim

To show students how God prepared His Son for His earthly ministry in the first thirty years of His life and how Jesus began that ministry.

Memory Verse

John 1:6 - “There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.”

Lesson Background

Having gone over the background material for the Gospels last week, we are now ready to begin a four-week survey of the Gospels themselves. Rather than taking one book each week, we will divide the content of the four books into four sections and cover one of those sections each week. This week, we will look at the little that the Gospels tell us about Jesus’ early years along with the first year and a half of His public ministry.

In attempting to fix dates for the life of Christ, there are several serious difficulties we face. The Gospel writers themselves give no indication of the dates on which events occurred, though they often relate them to Jewish feasts or Sabbath days. Furthermore, Jesus is rarely mentioned in the secular literature of the period, so we get no help there. At one end, we know that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. Jesus must therefore have been born before that date, probably in 6 B.C., since Herod ordered all male children under the age of two in Bethlehem killed on the basis of what the magi told him about the appearance of the star (our present dating system was originated by a medieval monk named Dionysius Exiguus; he miscalculated a bit, so we wind up with Jesus being born six years “before Christ”). As far as His death is concerned, it

had to have been within the period when Pilate was prefect of Judea (A.D. 26-36). The date most commonly given for the crucifixion is A.D. 33 (note that this would make Jesus 37 or 38 when He died; the only reason most people assume He was 33 is because Luke says He was “about thirty” when He began His public ministry, but “about thirty” could be anywhere between 25 and 35). Using this chronology, today’s lesson will take us from the birth of John the Baptist, where Luke’s Gospel begins, to the end of A.D. 30.

The key word in today’s lesson is preparation. God prepared the world for His Son, He prepared His Son for His work, and Jesus set the stage for important aspects of His ministry in the first year or so after His baptism. Your students are in the middle of a period of preparation. It is easy to get impatient at such times. They must remember that if God took over thirty years to prepare His Son, who was perfect, we shouldn’t be surprised if God works long and hard to get us into the proper condition to serve Him. That does not mean, of course, that those who are in preparation shouldn’t be serving. Part of the way Jesus prepared His disciples was to send them out to preach. Service is a part of preparation, and each step in a person’s service for God is preparation for the next one.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the class how God went about the task of preparing the world for the coming of His Son. They will probably talk about things like Gabriel appearing to Mary, the angels telling the shepherds, the star appearing to the wise men, etc. These are all true, of course, but remind them that everything we have studied so far this year could be included in the answer to the question. From the call of Abraham to the law given to Moses to the monarchy established under David to the messages of the prophets to the deliverance under the Maccabees, God was at work preparing the way for His Son. Today, however, we will look more specifically at the preparations immediately preceding the coming of Christ, as well as what went on in His early years on earth.

1. God Prepares the World for Jesus

The Bible is full of miracles. In chapter after chapter, we find stories of God’s intervention in His world. But nowhere in Scripture do we find a greater concentration of such events than in the chapters describing the birth of Christ. Divide your class into four groups and assign each one a chapter, either Matthew 1, Matthew 2, Luke 1, or Luke 2 (assign a small group to Matthew 1 and a large group to Luke 1). Have the members of the group read through the chapter and write down any instances they find of direct supernatural intervention in human affairs. When the groups are done, have them come back together and read their lists. Ask them why they think these few chapters have so many angelic appearances and other supernatural phenomena. Several points should be brought out in response. First of all, Jesus was someone special. He was not like any other baby who had ever been born, and it was proper that His birth should be surrounded by miraculous events. Secondly, and really of greater importance, Jesus came into the world to do the work of salvation. That work was one man could not do for himself. God had to do it if man was to be saved. What we see in the early chapters of the Gospels is that salvation, from beginning to end, is the work of God, a matter of divine initiative.

As far as how God prepared the world for His Son in the time immediately preceding the Incarnation, we should note the following:

- God prepared a herald. Whenever a king traveled to visit a city, he would send a representative to announce his visit. This representative was called a herald. Sometimes he would have to supervise road-building procedures to make the king’s travel easier (when John quotes Isaiah 40:3, he is talking about that job of road-building). To emphasize the fact that the coming king was special,

God also designated His herald as someone special. He was to be a Nazirite, one dedicated to God and visibly different from normal people, from his mother's womb.

- God prepared a virgin. Though it had been prophesied by Isaiah that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, it is doubtful that the Jews of Jesus' day would have understood the prophecy to mean that. Mary thus was offered a great honor, but also faced a hard choice. Her decision nearly ruined her marriage before it began and opened her up to public ridicule and scorn.
- God prepared witnesses. The wise men were told two years beforehand by the appearance of a star, though they at first went to the wrong place. The shepherds were told on the night of Jesus' birth and were given explicit direction as to where to find Jesus. The rich and the poor, Gentiles and Jews, the influential and the outcasts, those from afar and those nearby - God chose witnesses to show that His Son had come into the world as the Savior for all sorts of people. The contrast between the two groups could not have been greater.
- God prepared the political situation. The decree to register for taxation in one's birthplace was essential in order for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem despite the fact that His earthly parents both lived in Galilee. A way of escape was readily available to avoid Herod's attempt to kill Jesus, and Herod at the time was terminally ill and died a few months later, allowing Mary and Joseph to return from Egypt with Jesus.

2. God Prepares Jesus for His Work

Have you ever wondered what happened to Jesus between the time of His birth and His baptism? People have wondered that for a long time. In the second and third centuries, some tried to fill in the gap by writing stories about what Jesus did as a child. In one story, he was playing in the mud with His friends, making clay birds and setting them in the sun to dry. Suddenly He walked over and touched the birds, and they flew away. In another story, He was playing with friends, and one of them climbed up onto the flat roof of a nearby house. While playing, he fell off and was killed. Jesus, however, came over and raised him from the dead. We know that these stories are not true because John 2 tells us that the miracle at the wedding in Cana was the first done by Jesus. How, then, did God prepare His Son for the work He was to do?

- God prepared Jesus by training Him in submission. While we are given no specifics about Jesus' early life except the one story of His visit to the Temple at age twelve, we are told that He grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man, and that He was obedient to His parents. It must have been very hard for the perfect Son of God to submit to sinful parents. In fact, the incident in the Temple underscores this because it tells us that Jesus realized He was the Son of God, even at a very young age. Yet His obedience to His parents makes Him the perfect model and example for His people.
- God prepared Jesus through an official ordination ceremony. When Jesus was baptized by John, He was being initiated into His ministry as Prophet, Priest, and King - the three types of people who were anointed to office in the Old Testament. He not only was publicly inaugurated for ministry, but also heard the confirming voice of His heavenly Father and was anointed by the Holy Spirit.
- God prepared Jesus through a sustained period of temptation. Before Jesus was ready to preach to the world, He had to face Satan. The Accuser hit Him with his best shot but was unable to deflect Jesus from His designated course. Satan left Him for a time, but Jesus now had been hardened in the fires of temptation and was ready to take on the world.

3. Jesus Sets the Stage for His Ministry

The Gospels record relatively few events in the first year of Jesus' public ministry, but those we do have are very important in that they establish certain key themes that dominate the ministry of Jesus from beginning to end. Jesus laid the groundwork for what was to come from His baptism and temptation in the fall of 29 to the end of the following year in the following ways:

- He issued the call for repentance and faith. One cannot turn to God without turning away from sin. When John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, he told men to repent and baptized them as a symbol of that repentance. Jesus began by preaching repentance as well, and supplied the positive side by describing Himself as the source of new life (to Nicodemus) and living water (to the Samaritan woman).
- He called disciples. While Jesus did not officially designate the Twelve until the midpoint of His ministry, His initial contacts with many of these men occurred shortly after His baptism. They left all and followed Him from the beginning, though they were set apart later for a special role.
- He did miracles. In these early months Jesus healed, exerted control over nature, and cast out demons. These miracles showed that He was who He said He was and authenticated the words He spoke. They also had the negative effect of drawing a large number of followers for the wrong reasons - they came simply out of curiosity, or to be healed or fed.
- He confronted the religious establishment. The only real conflict in this first year of ministry was when Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the Temple. The religious leaders were startled, since they didn't have the foggiest idea who Jesus was or where He had come from. The encounter with Nicodemus shows more curiosity than hostility, but the miracles Jesus did soon made these men jealous, and they began to look more closely at what He was doing.

Conclusion

Close the lesson by reminding your students that God sets His plan in motion after careful, long-range planning. This was true for the ministry of Jesus, and it is also true for their lives. If they are God's children, God has a plan for them, and what they are doing now is part of that plan. Since God makes no mistakes, they should recognize that God is doing His work in their lives now if they belong to Him, and they should not rebel against it.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

BEGINNING OF JESUS' EARTHLY MINISTRY

1. In what sense is the entire Old Testament a record of God's preparation for the coming of His Son?
2. Why were there so many angelic appearances around the time of Jesus' birth?
3. How did God prepare the political situation for the coming of His Son?
4. Why is the Bible virtually silent about the years in which Jesus grew up?
5. Why was it hard for Jesus to submit to and obey His parents?
6. In what sense did John the Baptist act as a herald for Jesus?
7. What important themes of Jesus' ministry were introduced during His first year of preaching?
8. If you are a child of God, how do you think God may be preparing you now for what He wants you to do?

FIRST YEAR OF JESUS’ GALILEAN MINISTRY

**Matthew 4:13-9:34; 11:1-13:53; Mark 1:16-5:43
Luke 4:16-8:56; John 5**

Lesson Aim

To survey with students the major events of the first year of the Galilean ministry and show them that not all who claim to follow Christ do so from the right motives.

Memory Verse

John 1:7 - “He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.”

Lesson Background

Jesus spent the better part of His ministry in Galilee, the region where He was raised. Except for occasional visits to Jerusalem to attend various feasts and two trips to the north of Palestine, He stayed within a few miles of the Sea of Galilee. The headquarters for His ministry was the town of Capernaum, where at least four of His disciples had a fishing business, and to which He and His family moved early in A.D. 31 (using the chronology outlined in last week’s Lesson Background). The two years spent mostly in and around Galilee are known as the Galilean Ministry. The first year, which we will survey today, is often called the Year of Popularity because during that time Jesus gathered a large number of followers. Some of them became His disciples, but a large number turned out to be mere curiosity-seekers who had no interest in full commitment.

There are many incidents in this year of ministry on which we could focus, but three in particular stand out as characteristic of the call to discipleship that Jesus sounded so vigorously in His preaching. These are the Calling of the Twelve, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Parables of the Kingdom. While

Jesus did many miracles in this year also, and these were the main source of His popularity, it was the teachings that really give us the key to His ministry. Those who sought Him for the wrong reasons did not understand what He taught.

Your students may all profess to be Christians. If so, they are like the enormous crowds that followed Jesus around in A.D. 31. Like people in those crowds, some of them are true disciples, while others may be merely along for the ride. They must be challenged to examine themselves to find out where they stand.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by giving a general description of the Year of Popularity - the first year of the Galilean Ministry. Jesus started the year by visiting His home town of Nazareth, but when He proclaimed Himself to be the Messiah, they nearly threw Him off a cliff. He then moved with His family to Capernaum, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which was to become His headquarters for the next two years. Here He singled out certain people to become His followers, starting with four fishermen and a tax collector. Many others followed Him voluntarily, without being called, after seeing His miracles, and soon He could hardly walk into a town without being mobbed. He then began to travel around Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and healing as He went. The crowds grew larger and larger, and as His popularity grew, He began to attract the attention of the religious leaders. They soon were attacking Him about what was to become a major point of opposition - His refusal to observe the rabbinical traditions associated with the Sabbath. As the crowds got larger, Jesus designated twelve men among them to be His disciples. He not only singled them out for companionship and instruction, but also gave them special power to work miracles. Having begun the year by proclaiming Himself the Messiah at Nazareth, He then proceeded to describe the Kingdom He had come to set up. He explained this Kingdom by means of the Sermon on the Mount that summer and the Parables of the Kingdom later in the fall. As the miracles continued, the crowds got bigger and more obnoxious. Even when He told those He healed to keep quiet, the word would be spread, and the crowds would grow larger still. The opposition, too, was growing, and would get even worse the following year.

Having given a brief overview of the year, turn now and look more closely at the three key events - the Calling of the Twelve, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Parables of the Kingdom.

1. How Does a Person Become a Disciple?

In Luke 5, we find Jesus calling Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew to be His disciples. In the next chapter, He designates twelve out of the multitudes that had been following Him to be His students and companions. The key thing to notice about these incidents is what Jesus Himself told these same men at the Last Supper: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you. . . ." This lesson was underscored by the incident in Luke 5, where Jesus told His new disciples to fish. Their own efforts had brought them nothing, but when they did what Jesus told them to do, the catch was enormous. Those who come to Christ come because Jesus has called them. Those who do the work of evangelism succeed, not because of their own fishing know-how, but because of the power of God.

2. How Does a Citizen of the Kingdom Live?

It is impossible, of course, for us to look at the entire Sermon on the Mount in a single lesson, let alone part of a lesson. We can, however, focus on the main theme of the sermon. Jesus makes it clear in

numerous ways in this message that true righteousness is not the righteousness of outward behavior, but that of a pure heart. It's what's inside that counts. Notice several ways in which Jesus makes this point in the Sermon on the Mount.

- The Beatitudes emphasize inner character qualities displayed by Jesus Himself. He is the model for righteous living. Note also that the qualities He considers important are not those valued by the world. Have your students go quickly through the list, and comment on ways in which the values of society at large are different from those expressed in the Beatitudes.
- The remainder of Matthew 5 expounds on the relationship of Jesus to the Jewish law. He contradicts the common rabbinical interpretations of the Ten Commandments, showing that outward observance is not enough. Inner obedience is required as well if one is to be part of the Kingdom. One should not murder, but neither should one hate (or insult or cut up); one should not commit adultery, but neither should one lust (or look at or listen to things that tend to stimulate it). Be sure your students understand that Jesus is not requiring these things before a person is accepted into the Kingdom. If that were the case, no one would ever get in. Instead, Jesus is describing how one who has been changed by the power of God lives. The perfection demanded in 5:48 comes from God, never from us.
- The first part of Matthew 6 talks about worship - giving, praying, and fasting. These, too, are to be done from the heart rather than as a merely formal observance. True worship comes from within, out of a heart that has been changed by God. No matter how ostentatious a person's worship may be, it earns no points with God if it does not come from within.
- The end of Matthew 6 talks about a person's attitude toward material possessions. One who has been changed by God will have his priorities straight, putting spiritual things first and trusting God to supply his material needs. One who is truly part of the Kingdom will seek its good above all else.
- In Matthew 7, Jesus warns His followers that not all who claim to be Christians really are. Some are wolves in sheep's clothing. But if the difference between true and false believers is not found in externally observable behavior, how can a person tell? By their fruit. The fruit spoken of here is not external observance - keeping the commandments, praying, fasting, etc. It is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). No one who is without the Spirit of God can possess this fruit, and all who belong to God have it to one degree or another. The reality within is bound to be displayed sooner or later. At the end of the chapter, Jesus tells us how. The little story of the two houses shows that trials and persecution will reveal a person's foundation. Like the seed in rocky ground in the Parable of the Sower, the person who puts on a good act will be unable to continue it under pressure. Unfortunately, some do such a good job of acting that they fool themselves. Jesus also speaks in Matthew 7 of those who die and go before the throne of God convinced that they are believers, only to find themselves cast out. While this is a frightening passage, it need not discourage a true Christian. The test for false prophets can also reveal true believers. The presence of the fruit of the Spirit can give a child of God confidence in his salvation.

3. How Does the Kingdom Grow?

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a series of seven parables. He is speaking to a large crowd, but He only explains the parables to His disciples. He also tells them why He speaks in parables, and the answer may be somewhat startling to some of your students. Jesus said that He spoke in parables to conceal the truth from unbelievers! He knew that, apart from the work of God in their hearts, the Gospel of the Kingdom would only harden them further - the response of the Pharisees was ample proof of that. As a result, He

spoke in language that would confuse unbelievers while at the same time enlightening those who came to Him in faith. This particular series of parables speaks of the growth of the Kingdom Jesus came to earth to establish. Again, only a brief survey is possible.

- In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus prepares His disciples for the responses they will get as they preach the Gospel. The four types of responses He outlines are those who reject the message outright (the path), those who receive the message gladly but turn away as soon as pressure is applied (rocky soil), those who respond but never really turn away from their old way of life, giving priority to the things of this world (thorny soil), and those who respond and are truly saved (good soil). As a result, not all of the apparent growth of the Kingdom will be real. When the Roman Emperor Constantine declared himself to be a Christian, thousands immediately went to churches asking to be baptized - they wanted to be on the side of the emperor. The church grew visibly, but much of the growth was not real. Anyone who serves God as a citizen in His Kingdom must realize that not all who claim to be Christians really are.
- The Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Net both communicate the same idea, namely that in this world the good and the bad will exist together, but that final separation will occur at the Last Judgment. It is foolish for God's people to expect that the Kingdom will conquer the world, or that all will one day be converted. There will be no heaven on earth before the return of Christ. God will separate the wheat from the weeds, the good fish from the bad, but it is not our responsibility to do so in the context of the world. Those like the Puritans in New England who have tried to build Christian societies have missed the lesson of these parables.
- The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Yeast both show that the Kingdom will grow, slowly but surely, and will become a powerful force in the world. To Jesus' disciples, twelve ordinary men in an isolated backwater of the great Roman Empire, this must have seemed an impossible promise. Yet that small mustard seed, that small piece of yeast, has spread throughout the world, and will one day include men and women from every people, tongue, and nation. The citizens of the Kingdom are on the winning side.
- The Parable of the Treasure and the Parable of the Pearl both teach that the Kingdom, whether found by "accident" or after a long search, is worth more than anything else a person may possess. The Sermon on the Mount may have made being a citizen of the Kingdom sound hard, but the Parables of the Kingdom tell us it is worth it.

Conclusion

Conclude your lesson by challenging your students to examine their own relationship to the Kingdom of God. Are they true disciples or false? Good soil or bad? Wheat or weeds?

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

FIRST YEAR OF JESUS' GALILEAN MINISTRY

1. Why is the first year of Jesus' Galilean Ministry called the Year of Popularity?
2. Is it possible for someone to become a disciple of Jesus without being called by Jesus? Why or why not?
3. What is the major theme of the Sermon on the Mount? What are some of the ways that people wrongly think they can be righteous?
4. How can a person tell whether he or she is a citizen of the Kingdom of God?
5. Why did Jesus tell parables?
6. Would it be possible to create a Christian country, based on the Bible and populated only by believers? Why or why not?

SECOND YEAR OF JESUS' GALILEAN MINISTRY

**Matthew 9:35-11:1; 13:54-18:35; Mark 6-9;
Luke 9:1-13:21; John 6:1-10:39**

Lesson Aim

To survey with students the main events of the second year of the Galilean Ministry, showing them how and why opposition to Jesus' work increased among the religious leaders of the Jews.

Memory Verse

John 1:8 - "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

Lesson Background

If the first year of Jesus' Galilean Ministry may be called the Year of Popularity, the year prior to His death should be called the Year of Opposition. In A.D. 32 (again, according to the chronology set forth in Lesson 5), Jesus initiated a radical change in the thrust of His ministry. The crowds had been growing larger and larger, but the majority of the people who were following Jesus around had no interest in the Gospel. Instead, they wanted to see miracles, or to be healed or fed themselves. Their constant demands for attention hindered the work that Jesus had come to do. The turning point came with the Feeding of the Five Thousand in the early summer of 32. Jesus compassionately fed a hungry crowd, and they were so impressed that they wanted to take Him by force, march on Jerusalem, and set Him up as king in opposition to the Romans. Such a total misunderstanding of the purpose of Jesus' ministry was the last straw. After having the enthusiastic crowd chase Him halfway around the Sea of Galilee, Jesus spoke to them in the Bread of Life sermon in John 6 - one of the most devastating messages uttered by Jesus, second only to His condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23. His harsh words sent most of the people in the crowd away angrily shaking their heads. From this point on, Jesus devoted almost all of His attention to preparing His disciples for His departure. He rarely was surrounded by crowds in His final year on earth.

Since one of the major objections of the religious leaders against Jesus was the enormous crowds He was attracting, one would think that His alienation of the crowds would please them and get them off His back. But this was not the case. The threat of a political disruption that would cost the religious leaders their comfortable positions under Roman authority became greater, not less. Instead of enthusiastic crowds gathering around a wonder-worker, they now faced two factions in Jewish society, some who supported Jesus as the Messiah and others who insisted He was a fraud. His name was on the lips of everyone more than ever, and the danger was thereby increased. It was becoming more and more obvious that the only solution to the problem lay in the removal of the object of all this controversy. As a result, the opposition of the religious leaders to the ministry of Jesus became increasingly open as the year progressed.

In surveying this last full year of Jesus' earthly life, we will look at three major themes that run through the events of the year - the alienation of the crowds, the preparation of the disciples, and the opposition of the religious leaders. These three groups encompass three categories of people that have existed throughout Christian history - those who unequivocally commit themselves to Christ, those who overtly oppose Him, and those who claim to be followers but really are not among His sheep. As you study this material today, challenge your students to identify the group to which they belong.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reviewing the material covered last week. Stress the growing popularity of Jesus, but remind your students that most of those who were following Him could not be called disciples in any meaningful sense of the word. Today we will be looking at the last full year of Jesus' life on earth, and we will see that the situation begins to get ugly. Jesus said that He came not to send peace, but a sword, and that His ministry would be highly divisive in character. That divisiveness becomes more and more apparent as this last full year progresses. The events of A.D. 32 may be summarized under three basic headings.

1. The Alienation of the Crowds

It had gotten to the point where Jesus and His disciples had no privacy. Everywhere they went, they found crowds wanting healing, wanting demons cast out, or just wanting to see the famous Galilean miracle worker; to hear His voice, to bask in His notoriety, or possibly even to touch His robe! The disciples were tired, and their patience had long ago run out. Jesus sent them on a preaching tour to give them some experience and get them out of the pressure cooker, but when they returned, the crowds were still there. They needed a vacation, and Jesus knew it. When they got back from their preaching tour, He took them and got into a boat, intending to sail across the Sea of Galilee to a remote wilderness area on the far shore. Can you imagine their surprise when they landed only to find that the crowd had followed them, running around the shore to catch up! The disciples were ready to tell them to go home, but Jesus felt sorry for them despite their misguided enthusiasm. He spent all day teaching them, then miraculously fed them all from a box lunch brought by a little boy. This miracle encouraged the crowd even further. This man was not just a healer, he was another Moses! He was the one who would lead Israel out of Roman bondage. The idea quickly spread through the crowd. They knew that Jesus was too modest to propose the idea Himself, but how could He refuse if they put Him at the head of a column of ten thousand people and just marched right into Jerusalem? Jesus knew what they were thinking, of course, so He quickly sent the disciples away in a boat and went up into the mountains alone to pray. Later that night, He walked across the Sea of Galilee to join the disciples and they crossed over to the eastern shore, where He was met by another crowd and more demands for healing. Later they returned to Capernaum and found that the crowd that had been ready to make Jesus king by force was again waiting there to meet Him. At this point Jesus had no choice. He confronted the crowd with their false values and shallow belief, telling them that as long as they concentrated on material things like bread and miracles that they would never understand spiritual truth. Spiritual truth, He said, could be

grasped only by those to whom God revealed it. Then, to underscore His point, He began to speak to them in symbolic language, telling them that those who would truly be His disciples must eat His body and drink His blood. They were revolted at this talk of cannibalism and went away shaking their heads, most of them convinced that their erstwhile Messiah had gone off the deep end. Jesus was left alone with the Twelve.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels, and there is a good reason for that. It was a major turning point in Jesus' ministry. While His first two and a half years had been given largely to the multitudes, His last year would be devoted almost exclusively to His disciples. They had to be prepared for the work He had for them to do after His own departure.

2. The Preparation of the Disciples

Jesus knew that His ministry on earth was not only to die for sinners and rise again, but also to lay the groundwork for the church that would carry on His work in the power of the Holy Spirit after He was gone. The disciples, that ignorant, foolish, overzealous, bickering group of followers, had to be turned into a potent missionary force in less than a year.

The first thing Jesus did was to give them some on-the-job training. In the spring of 32, He sent them out in groups of two to preach, heal and cast out demons. His instructions to them are recorded in Matthew 10. At this point He restricts them to preaching to Jews, but the experience they gained would eventually help them in their ministry to Gentiles as well. The tour was immensely successful, and they came back full of enthusiasm, but very tired, only to find the crowd that led to the incident we just finished examining.

Once Jesus had gotten rid of the crowd, He and the disciples were finally able to get away for some rest. They went up to the northern coast of the Mediterranean, in what is now Syria (this was the only time Jesus left the confines of Israel). There Jesus healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter. They returned to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (still avoiding the Capernaum area), and were met by a crowd from Decapolis, who were fed by Jesus. He and the disciples then headed north again, this time going up to the area around Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mount Hermon. It was here that Peter made his famous confession of faith, and Jesus unambiguously told His disciples that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. He then spoke to them for the first time about His death. Peter quickly took Him aside and tried to cheer Him up, thinking that the strain of the crowds had finally gotten to Jesus and He was getting depressed, but Jesus rebuked Him. Jesus spoke about His death on several other occasions as well, but the disciples seemed unable to accept it. Their concept of the Messiah left no room for crucifixion.

Jesus then took Peter, James, and John up to the top of a mountain (probably nearby Mount Hermon, the highest peak in Palestine) and was transfigured before them. While they had been unwilling to accept what He had told them about His death, they gladly received the glory they had seen. They thought the Kingdom had now arrived for sure! Jesus again reminded them that He had to die first, but they stubbornly refused to accept it.

Jesus spent much of the rest of the year teaching His disciples about the nature of Christian leadership. He used object lessons and parables to teach them about humility, servanthood, mercy toward those who are different, and forgiveness of those who offend. He also gave them instructions for dealing with disputes - the famous passage on church discipline in Matthew 18.

3. The Opposition of the Religious Leaders

Though Jesus had gotten rid of the crowds and spent little time in public, the opposition of the religious leaders was getting worse and worse. Whenever He visited a synagogue in Galilee, the Pharisees

were waiting for Him, trying to find something to criticize, or some word or action that could be used against Him. He warned His disciples to watch out for their hypocrisy on several occasions, noting that such concentration on externals to the exclusion of the condition of one's heart tends to be contagious.

The worst conflicts occurred in Jerusalem, however. The Great Sanhedrin was becoming increasingly concerned about the divisions Jesus was causing among the people. The debates over Him were going on in every street in the city, and the Sanhedrin could smell trouble. The man had to be stopped.

Jesus visited Jerusalem at least twice in A.D. 32 (He may have been there for the Passover as well, but the Gospels don't mention it). When it came time for the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall, the Sanhedrin put out a warrant for Jesus' arrest, filling the streets with informants to try to locate Him before the crowds that filled Jerusalem became aware of His presence. Jesus, however, delayed His arrival until the middle of the Feast, then entered the city secretly. When He appeared in the Temple on the final day of the Feast, the Sanhedrin could do nothing - they were afraid that if they arrested Him in public, it would start a riot. Jesus soon changed their strategy, however. He preached in the Temple, inviting the people to come to Him for living water. Debates among the people broke out more excitedly than ever. The Sanhedrin simply had to do something, no matter what the risk. They sent some Temple guards to arrest Jesus, but He calmly walked through the crowd and disappeared! Later in His stay, He defeated the trap they set with the woman taken in adultery, preached the sermon in which He claimed to be the Light of the World, in the process calling those who did not believe in Him "sons of the devil," and healed the man who had been born blind, stirring an uproar in the Jerusalem synagogue.

He then left Jerusalem, but returned for the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) in December. Here He bluntly told the people that He was the Messiah, but they tried to stone Him for claiming to be God (their concept of Messiahship did not include deity).

Conclusion

Summarize the lesson by looking again at the three groups of people studied this week - preferably in reverse order. It is doubtful that you have many in your class who are openly opposed to Jesus. The Sanhedrin makes a convenient target, and allows most people to feel that they are good Christians because they aren't throwing rocks at churches. Challenge your students to think again about what Jesus told His disciples, however. Discipleship means humility, self-sacrifice, suffering, service, forgiveness of the offenses of others, etc. Is this a description of your students' lives? Are they really committed to following Jesus? Or are they like the crowds who are along for the ride as long as things are interesting or exciting, but get bored or disillusioned as soon as the conversation starts getting too spiritual? Remind your students that the same ones who followed Jesus to see the miracles called for His crucifixion when He refused to be the kind of Messiah they wanted Him to be.

THE FINAL MONTHS

**Matthew 19-28; Mark 10-16;
Luke 13:22-24:53; John 10:40-21:25**

Lesson Aim

To show students how Jesus both illustrated and accomplished the work of salvation in His final months on earth, while preparing His disciples for His departure.

Memory Verse

John 1:9 - "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world."

Lesson Background

As the earthly ministry of Jesus reached its climax, it should come as no surprise to anyone that almost all of His public teaching was done in the form of parables. After all, His ministry was one of separation, and the parables separated the unbelievers, who saw nothing of value in the simple stories, from the faithful, who discerned spiritual truth in the Master's words. When He was alone with His disciples, on the other hand, He taught them in plain language, especially in the crucial week prior to His death. He talked often of the time after His death, when they would carry on His work with the help of the Holy Spirit. He also spoke of His Second Coming, encouraging them with the fact that He was not deserting them, but would return and take them to be with Him forever.

It is not Jesus' teaching that will be the focus of today's lesson, however. Though He came to earth to teach, His basic purpose was to die on the cross to save sinful men. It is that work of salvation upon which we will concentrate as we study the closing months of His earthly ministry. We will look not only at what Jesus did on the cross, but also at several key encounters with individuals during the final months of His life that illustrate very clearly what His death on the cross accomplished. Again, the challenge to your students

will be for them to consider where they stand in relationship to what Jesus did. Have they received the life He came to bring, or are they still dead in their sins?

Lesson Procedure

Review the lesson from last week, making sure your students remember the three groups we talked about - those who were committed to Christ, those who just came along for the ride, and those who actively opposed His work. As we look today at the closing months of Jesus' earthly life, we will see more and more of the first and last groups and very little of those in the middle. The reason for that, of course, is that Jesus' ministry increasingly polarized those around Him. It was never possible to be neutral, but when Jesus died and rose again, it became increasingly impossible even to pretend neutrality. Thus we find the crowds screaming for His blood instead of hanging around looking for miracles, while the believing members of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, are forced to "come out of the closet" and declare their allegiance.

The most important aspect of the final months of Jesus' life, of course, was His death and resurrection. This was why He had come to earth in the first place. While He was preparing His disciples for what was to come, He also was illustrating what His death and resurrection would mean to His followers through several key encounters with individuals prior to His death. Today we will examine several of those encounters and also talk about Jesus' death and resurrection.

1. The Illustrations

A. Life for the Dead - John 11

Jesus had raised people from the dead before. The son of the elderly widow of Nain, the young daughter of the Jewish official Jairus - these had been acts of mercy done for grieving parents otherwise unknown to Jesus and his disciples. But this was different. Lazarus was one of Jesus' closest friends, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany. Yet when Jesus received word that Lazarus was sick, He calmly went about His business and didn't even begin traveling toward Bethany until several days later. The disciples could understand why Jesus was reluctant to go near Jerusalem - after all, the Sanhedrin had tried to kill Him the last time He was there - but if He was determined to go, why wait so long? Their confusion was compounded by the fact that, when they arrived at Bethany, they found that Lazarus had already died. Jesus' unexplained delay had cost their dear friend his life.

Jesus obviously waited until Lazarus was dead so that He could raise him again. Why would He do such a thing? Jesus was not the kind of person who would do something just to make Himself look good, or manipulate a situation for His own benefit no matter how much it hurt others - and there could be no doubt that the death of Lazarus hurt Mary and Martha a great deal, as did Jesus' decision to delay His visit. There can only be one answer to such a question. Jesus deliberately allowed Lazarus to die so that He could raise him again, not to make Himself look good, but to teach His followers an important lesson about His coming death. Jesus was demonstrating that He had the power over death, and that when He conquered death by rising from the grave, He was conquering it not only for Himself, but also for all those who believed in Him. As He said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life."

B. Grace for the Self-Sufficient - Mark 10:17-31

Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler illustrates another aspect of His death and resurrection, though it too must have been very puzzling to His disciples. The man who came to Jesus and eagerly asked how he might obtain eternal life was by all accounts a model citizen. He was moral and upright, a pillar of the community, and he obviously put no stock in the criticisms that the religious leaders had been circulating about Jesus. Besides all that, he was rich - a sure sign of God's pleasure, at least according to popular Jewish belief. But Jesus, instead of welcoming him with open arms, tells him that he cannot be a disciple unless he sells all he owns and gives it to the poor! The man was stunned, and walked away in great confusion.

The young man was not the only one who was confused. The disciples, too, wondered about how Jesus had treated this promising supplicant. They started asking questions, and Jesus told them that it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven - an obvious piece of hyperbole, but it got the point across. The disciples were astounded. Who, then, could be saved? This, of course, was exactly the point Jesus was trying to make. The Kingdom of Heaven was not for those who earned it; there were no such people. It was the righteousness of Christ, the benefits of His death and resurrection, that got people into heaven, not their success or failure in keeping the Ten Commandments or their possession or lack of external signs of God's blessing.

C. Sight for the Blind - Mark 10:46-52

On His way to Jerusalem for the final time, Jesus passed through the town of Jericho. There He was accosted by two blind beggars, one of whom was named Bartimaeus. Such pests constantly harassed those who traveled the streets of Palestine's cities and towns, and Jesus' companions tried to shut them up so they would not bother Him as He taught. When Jesus heard them, He stopped and called them over. Upon asking them what they wanted, the bold Bartimaeus did not ask for alms, as everyone expected, but instead asked for his sight to be restored. Jesus complied with the request immediately, at the same time commending the man's faith.

Ask your students what this incident was intended to teach the disciples about Jesus' coming death and resurrection. They should realize that what Jesus accomplished gives sight to those who are blind, not in the physical sense, but spiritually. Those who are blinded by sin can have their eyes opened through faith in the crucified and risen Savior. But like Bartimaeus, they must realize their need and cry out for mercy.

D. Change for the Wicked - Luke 19:1-10

As Jesus and His followers continued through Jericho, Jesus suddenly stopped and looked up into a tall tree. There, sitting on one of the branches and looking totally ridiculous, was a little round man who was notorious throughout the region as a cheat and an extortioner; he was Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in the Jericho district. Jesus' disciples had heard Him ream out the Pharisees many times before. Now it was this little worm's turn! By the time Jesus was done with Zacchaeus, he would never want to come down from that tree. Much to the surprise of everyone around, however, Jesus calmly told Zacchaeus to come down from his perch and invited Himself to lunch at Zacchaeus' house! Not one word of criticism! And He even stooped to the level of sharing food with the rascal! When they arrived at Zacchaeus' house, however, it became clear what Jesus had in mind. His followers knew the man's reputation, but Jesus knew his heart. It was obvious that Zacchaeus was a changed man. He vowed to repay everyone he had cheated and to give a large portion of his wealth to the poor.

What did this incident teach the disciples about Jesus' coming death? It showed them that the salvation He came to give had the power to change the worst of men, to reform them from within and make them new creatures. Even an outcast like Zacchaeus could be accepted through the blood of Christ.

2. The Reality

Finally it was time for the job for which Jesus had come to earth. All the pieces were in place. The Sanhedrin hatched their plot; Judas engineered his act of betrayal. Jesus spent most of the last week in intense instruction of His disciples. They had to know what was coming, and know what to expect afterward. What He told them meant little to them at the time. They said they understood, but the picture did not fall into place in their minds until after the fact. Actually, it was the Holy Spirit who put the puzzle together, allowing them to understand all that Jesus had said to them.

Then it happened. After eating the Passover meal together, Jesus and His disciples took a stroll out to the Mount of Olives. It was obvious that Jesus was upset, but nobody understood why. He left them to spend time in prayer, but when He came back, they were asleep. Suddenly they heard noises in the garden - loud noises, the sound of dozens of men walking quickly. They saw the torches, the swords. Judas stepped out of the middle of the crowd and gave Jesus a kiss of greeting, and the soldiers advanced to arrest Him. After that, all was confusion. The disciples ran for their lives. Peter and John tried to keep track of what was happening to Jesus, but they were too afraid to get very close. The next morning, word came that the worst had happened. Jesus had been condemned to death and was being taken out to the place of execution at that very moment. Only John had the courage to go. He witnessed the crucifixion, and took Mary home with him to comfort her after her Son's death. The disciples went far underground at that point, afraid to poke their noses outside the door, afraid they might be next. When word came that the tomb was empty, it took quite a bit of convincing for them to believe that Jesus had really risen. Then, one by one and in small groups, they saw Him, spoke to Him, and they knew. The one who had defeated death for His friend Lazarus had also defeated His own death, and in so doing had conquered death for all His followers. He spent about six weeks with them, encouraging them and telling them what they had to do. They saw Him ascend into heaven, and then about a week later the Holy Spirit came and took that pathetic band of frightened followers and turned them into a Kingdom-building force that the wrath of the Sanhedrin and the persecuting power of Rome were unable to stop.

What was the significance of what Jesus did? Take time to explain the basics of the Gospel to your students - the Good News that the Gospels were meant to proclaim. Jesus died for the sins of others, paying their debt to God, and when He rose from the dead, it was a sign that God had accepted that payment. Because Jesus died, His people do not have to suffer eternal death. Because Jesus rose from the dead, those who repent and put their trust in Him can enjoy eternal life with Him in heaven.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by again relating the death and resurrection of Jesus to the incidents you discussed at the beginning of the lesson. When Jesus died and rose again, He gave His followers life from the dead; He gave them a gift of grace, something they could never earn or deserve, no matter how much they tried; He brought sight to the blind, a sight that can come only to those who reach out in faith to grasp it; He brought the forgiveness of sins, and the life-changing power that can take a wicked man like Zacchaeus and turn him into a generous friend of the poor with a conscience that will not allow him to harm anyone. Challenge your students about their relationship with Jesus Christ. Do they enjoy the benefits of what He did on the cross, or are they like the Rich Young Ruler, still thinking to please God by the way they live?

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE FINAL MONTHS

1. What was the main purpose for which Jesus came to earth?
2. How did the incidents involving Lazarus, the Rich Young Ruler, Bartimaeus, and Zacchaeus illustrate what Jesus accomplished when He died on the cross?
3. What changes in Jesus' disciples were brought about by His death? His resurrection? the coming of the Holy Spirit?
4. Why do you think Jesus told His disciples that it would be better for them if He went away?

THE EARLY CHURCH

Acts 1-12, 15

Lesson Aim

To survey the history of the early church from the Day of Pentecost to the Jerusalem Council, focusing on the factors that God used to spread His Kingdom.

Memory Verse

John 1:10 - "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."

Lesson Background

On the night before He died, Jesus assured His disciples that it was better for them if He went away, because then the Holy Spirit could come and indwell them, enabling them to continue the work of spreading the Gospel of the Kingdom. Before He ascended into heaven, Jesus told those who were with Him that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit that would make them witnesses throughout the known world. How these words came to pass is the subject of the book of Acts. The book is the second part of the two-volume church history written by Paul's companion and personal physician, Luke. It covers the history of the early church from the Ascension of Jesus to Paul's (first?) imprisonment in Rome, centering largely on the ministries of two men - Peter and Paul, the apostles to the Jews and Gentiles, respectively.

We will be spending two weeks on our survey of the book of Acts. In our first lesson, we will look at the growth of the early church (Acts 1-5), the ministries of Stephen and Philip (Acts 6-8), and the later ministry of Peter (Acts 9-12), including the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Next week we will look at what the book has to say about the labors of Paul.

The major application you should try to bring to your students today is that the spread of the Gospel occurs in many ways, but God has promised that it will happen. The early part of Acts shows us the church beginning to grow from that small mustard seed into a plant, though not yet a large one. The growth is accomplished by many methods, and through a wide variety of people ministering to a wide variety of people. God is still in the business of expanding His church, and your students, if they are Christians, can be a part of that work, just like the ordinary Christians in the Jerusalem church.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students what they think is needed in order for a church to grow. They will probably answer “witnessing,” or some such thing, but probe a little deeper. What motivates Christians to witness? What makes others willing to hear and respond? Remind them of Jesus’ parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast, in which He said that the Kingdom of God would expand from small beginnings until it filled the world. In the book of Acts, we see the beginning of that process, and by examining the accounts found in the early part of the book, we can get some ideas about how God works to make His church grow.

1. The Early Expansion of the Church (Acts 1-5)

The early chapters of the book of Acts show us a picture of a church that is growing rapidly despite intense opposition. What caused that enormous growth?

A. The Coming of the Spirit

The most fundamental reason for the growth of the church was the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. His presence turned a bunch of timid followers of Jesus who were hiding behind closed doors in fear for their lives into a bold group of preachers of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit did more than just change the disciples, of course. As we know, it is the Holy Spirit who works in people’s hearts to draw them to Christ. The enormous number of people who were saved in the weeks and months after Pentecost came to Christ because the Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts. The growth of the early church was not solely the result of human effort and commitment.

B. The Preaching of the Gospel

The principal method God has chosen to spread His Kingdom is the preaching of the Gospel. Communications experts today tell us that preaching is an inefficient means of communication; that multi-media appeals to the eye and ear and participatory approaches are much more effective. Yet God has told the ministers of the Gospel to preach. It was through the clear proclamation of the Gospel that three thousand people were saved on the Day of Pentecost, and another two thousand shortly thereafter in Acts 3. Preaching may be out of style, but it is God’s chosen method for doing His work.

C. The Signs of the Apostles

There were some factors involved in the growth of the early church that we should not expect to see today. Christ empowered His apostles with the ability to perform miracles. These miracles, like the healing of the lame man at the Temple gate, served the purpose of authenticating the message that was being preached. The spoken word was accompanied by a display of power that showed that the words that were being spoken were the words of God, not of men. Though preachers today are not empowered to perform

such miracles, we still have a record of them in the Word of God to show us the power that lies behind the preaching of the Gospel. [NOTE: Your students may quite logically ask at this point why God does not give the power of miracles to His people today. Talk to them about the unique position of the apostles in history and the foundational nature of their work. Also note that the cessation of the gift of miracles does not mean that God Himself no longer performs miracles.]

D. The Unity of the Church

The members of the church contributed greatly to its growth by the way they conducted themselves in relationship to one another. The world around them was amazed at the love they displayed for one another. They lived together in Jerusalem, shared everything they had with one another, and gave generously to the needs of fellow Christians. Their mutual love attracted many to their number.

But the church was not just a mutual admiration and self-help society. The early Christians were committed to Christ, and they did not tolerate hypocrites. The discipline that was meted out to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 shows that these people took their religion seriously. Interestingly enough, the chapter also mentions that the incident spread such fear throughout the city of Jerusalem that many were motivated to join the church. There can be no real growth without purity and dealing with sin.

Another way the church contributed to its own growth by dealing effectively with problems was through establishing an organizational structure to cope with the growing pains that quickly appeared in their midst. The Jews in the early church were divided into two groups: those who came from Palestine, and those who lived in other parts of the Roman Empire. The Palestinian Jews tended to be more traditional and more conservative, while the others had adopted more of Greek culture and paid less attention to the traditions of Judaism. In Acts 6, we find that the Hellenistic Jews thought they were being discriminated against in the food distribution. The apostles appointed seven deacons to distribute the food, all of them Hellenistic Jews. This was not only an effective piece of diplomacy that enhanced the unity of the church, but it also freed up the apostles to concentrate more fully on the work of preaching. Thus something that could have blown the church apart before it had a chance to get started became through intelligent organization a source of strength, enhancing the unity of the church and allowing the apostles to spend more time spreading the Gospel.

E. The Persecution by the Sanhedrin

In the early chapters of Acts, we find the members of the Sanhedrin doing all they can to hinder the growth of the church. Ask your students if they think this persecution wound up helping or hindering the church's growth. They will probably see it as negative, but point out several reasons why it really helped the church to grow.

First of all, persecution directed the attention of everyone to the church. Show business personalities say that they don't care what kind of publicity they get as long as people know their names. There is some truth in such an assertion. The constant harassment of the early Christians kept the entire city's attention focused on the church.

Secondly, persecution drew the church together. In the face of a common external threat, people tend to pull together more than they might in times of peace. Persecution helped to unify the church. It also helped to purify the church. When Christians are being persecuted, only those who are really committed to Christ will identify themselves with the church. The church in America contains many people who are involved only because they consider it socially acceptable. In countries where the church is persecuted, such problems don't exist.

Thirdly, persecution produced a terrific witness for the truth of the Gospel. Not only in the book of Acts, but also in the following centuries of Roman persecution and in other persecutions that have occurred in succeeding years, those who have suffered publicly for their faith have stimulated many by their example to trust Jesus Christ.

2. The First Martyr and the First Missionary (Acts 6-8)

The next section of the book of Acts talks about the expansion of the church beyond Jerusalem, and begins by looking at the work of two of the deacons, Stephen and Philip. The seven who were chosen to assist the apostles were not only godly men and efficient administrators, they also were effective preachers of the Gospel. Stephen preached often in the synagogues of the Hellenistic Jews and stirred up enough controversy that he soon attracted the attention of the Sanhedrin. They hauled him in for a trial, and he boldly challenged them for their rejection of the Messiah. They were so angered by his boldness that they took him outside the city and stoned him to death (they had no right to do this; the power of capital punishment had been taken away from the Sanhedrin in 6 A.D., but they got away with it in this case because Pilate had been recalled to Rome and his successor had not yet arrived). This incident had a lasting effect on one of its instigators, a young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus.

The incident also sparked a vicious persecution of the church in Jerusalem that scattered many of the Christians throughout Palestine and the rest of the empire. As they went, they took the Gospel with them, starting churches everywhere. One who did this is the first recorded missionary in Acts. He was Philip, another one of the deacons. He traveled up to Samaria, to the traditional enemies of the Jews, and began preaching the Gospel. He was so successful that Peter and John were sent up from Jerusalem to help him. He then was called away to the desert of Gaza in the south, where he met an Ethiopian official returning to Africa from Jerusalem. The man was saved and baptized, and according to tradition went back home and started the first African church.

3. The Broadening of the Church (Acts 9-12, 15)

As more and more churches were founded, the apostles were forced to travel away from their headquarters in Jerusalem to supervise the work. These chapters in Acts tell of some of the travels of Peter and how he helped the church to grow. The most notable aspect of Peter's early work was the way God used him to bring the first Gentiles into the church. God prepared him carefully with the vision of the sheet containing unclean animals (God showed him the vision three times to be sure he got the point!), then sent him to preach in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius. Cornelius and those with him were converted, the Holy Spirit coming upon them in the middle of Peter's sermon.

This raised a problem, which was only made worse by the success of Paul's first missionary journey (which we will cover next week). Up to this point the church had been Jewish. Were Gentiles to be accepted also, or was it necessary for them first to become Jews in order to be Christians? A council was convened in Jerusalem to decide the issue. James the brother of Jesus appears to have chaired the meeting, and Peter, Paul, and Barnabas gave evidence of their experience in preaching to the Gentiles. After much discussion, James rendered the final decision of the council based on a passage from the last chapter of Amos. Gentiles were to be permitted in the church without being circumcised or keeping the Jewish ceremonial law, but they should take care not to offend Jewish Christians or engage in immoral or idolatrous behavior. The apostles thus paved the way for the expansion of the church far beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the factors God used to bring growth to the early church. Emphasize particularly those affecting your students - the need to show love to one another, to maintain the purity of the church, to speak boldly to their friends, and to remain faithful in the face of persecution. Also remind them that God intends His church to bring together all different kinds of people, and that the Christians in your class should be willing to reach out to those who are different from themselves, not only their own narrow group.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE EARLY CHURCH

1. Who was the Person most responsible for the growth of the early church? Why?
2. How did the following factors contribute to the growth of the early church: preaching, miracles, fellowship, discipline, organization, and persecution?
3. Who were the deacons? What was their main responsibility?
4. What was the main issue discussed at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15? What was decided there?

THE MINISTRY OF PAUL

Acts 9, 13-28

Lesson Aim

To survey the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul, providing an historical context into which our study of his epistles may be placed.

Memory Verse

John 1:11 - "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

Lesson Background

Apart from Jesus Himself, no man made a greater contribution to the early church than did the Apostle Paul. This former self-righteous Pharisee who had made his reputation among the Jews as a persecutor of the church was miraculously saved by the power of God, and thereafter became the greatest missionary and church planter the church has ever known. Though his contributions as a missionary were great, his most lasting contribution to the church was the letters he wrote to the congregations he founded and to the men he had sent to oversee some of those congregations. These letters make up almost half of the books of our New Testament. Before taking time to survey those letters, however, we are going to spend a week examining what the book of Acts teaches us about the life and ministry of Paul.

The story of Paul in Acts is like the story of Jesus in the Gospels in the sense that it says virtually nothing about the apostle's early life, but instead concentrates on his ministry. Unlike the Gospels, however, the book of Acts says nothing about Paul's death, which occurred sometime between 64 and 68 in the city of Rome. In fact, some commentators believe that the book of Acts was part of the documentation prepared for Paul's defense in his trial before Nero, trying to demonstrate that he was not a threat to the peace of the

empire. Luke's account begins with the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus and ends with him under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial before Nero. Most scholars believe that Paul was acquitted in this trial and freed, after which he did more traveling and planted more churches, going possibly as far west as Spain. He was then rearrested, and this time condemned to death and beheaded during the Neronian persecution in Rome.

In surveying what the book of Acts has to say about the life and ministry of Paul, we will look at the broad contours of his work without taking the time to discuss specifics. In getting the broad overview, we will not only supply the historical context within which we may fit our study of Paul's letters, but we will also see the story of a man used greatly by God in the midst of personal weakness and great suffering. The main lesson you should try to bring home to your students today is that weakness, far from being an excuse to quit, or not even try in the first place, should be a motivation to rely on the Holy Spirit.

Lesson Procedure

Begin by asking the class who the most dangerous enemy of the church was in the first few years of its existence. They should be able to realize, at least after a few minutes of thought, that it was a Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. This zealous young student of the rabbi Gamaliel hated Christians, and went much further than the members of the Sanhedrin in persecuting them. While the Sanhedrin tried to stop the preaching of the Christians in Jerusalem, Saul wanted to extend the arm of the Sanhedrin, not only outside of Jerusalem, but also outside of Israel, to Damascus, the capital city of Syria. He had special privileges not enjoyed by most Jews since his family came from Tarsus, a city that had been rewarded for its loyalty to Rome by having all of its inhabitants declared Roman citizens. He used his privileges to travel outside the area where the Sanhedrin usually held sway in order to stamp out this Nazarene movement once and for all. On the way to Damascus, however, the traveling party suddenly was surrounded with a bright light that temporarily blinded them. They fell to the ground, and Saul heard a voice, which identified the speaker as Jesus, and told Saul that he was to become His representative in spreading the Gospel. Saul, still blind, was led into Damascus, where he was met by a Christian named Ananias, who restored his sight and baptized him. He then began preaching in the Damascus synagogues, demonstrating from the Old Testament that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. At first the Christians were skeptical, but they eventually recognized the reality of his conversion and welcomed him into their company. The Jews, meanwhile, plotted to kill him, but the Christians let him down over the wall in a basket. He then went to Jerusalem, where the Christians were even more skeptical, fearing that Saul had merely come up with a more devastating plot to exterminate Christians by insinuating himself into their company and finding out their secrets. Finally, through the intercession of Barnabas, Saul was accepted by the apostles and the church in Jerusalem. He then disappeared from the scene for a number of years. Some of these were spent in his home town of Tarsus, and he also spent three years alone in the Arabian desert, during which time God taught him the truths that were to become his unique contribution to the development of Christianity - the truths that more than any other help us to understand the nature of the work of Christ. Meanwhile, the church in Antioch was growing rapidly. The Jerusalem church had sent Barnabas up to help supervise the church, and he called his old friend Saul to come down from Tarsus to help in the work. It was in Antioch that the missionary work that was to become Saul's life got its start.

1. The First Missionary Journey (Acts 13-14)

While in prayer, the elders in the church in Antioch were directed by God to send Saul and Barnabas on a trip to plant churches in the Eastern Mediterranean. They traveled first to Cyprus, where Barnabas had grown up, and ministered in the two chief cities on the island. They led the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, to the Lord despite the opposition of a sorcerer named Elymas.

They then crossed over to Asia Minor, where they preached and founded churches in the cities of Antioch (not the same city from which they had been sent out), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. The superstitious pagans in these cities did not quite know what to make of Paul and Barnabas; those in Lystra at first thought they were gods! But the Jews in the region followed them from place to place, stirring up the people against them. As a result, Paul was stoned and left for dead outside Lystra. God spared him, however, and he and Barnabas returned to all the cities where they had founded churches, encouraging the young Christians there, after which they returned to Antioch in Syria. While in Antioch, Paul wrote a letter to the new churches that is called Galatians, after the region in which the churches were located. He then went down to Jerusalem to participate in the Jerusalem Council and give evidence of God's work among the Gentiles.

2. The Second Missionary Journey (Acts 16:1-18:22)

Paul and Barnabas were ready to set out again after the Jerusalem Council, but Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them, and Paul refused because Mark had quit during the first journey. They argued, and Barnabas left with Mark to visit the churches on Cyprus. Paul took Silas with him and headed for Asia Minor to revisit the Galatian churches. While there, they added to their party a young man named Timothy who had been converted during Paul's last visit. After visiting the churches of Galatia, Paul and his group headed west to Troas, where they were joined by Luke, the author of the narrative. While in Troas, Paul saw a vision instructing him to cross over into Macedonia.

In obedience to the vision, they crossed the Aegean Sea and traveled to Philippi, where they found a largely Gentile population with the exception of a small group of Jewish women. Lydia became the first convert on the European continent, and Paul and Silas wound up being thrown into jail after casting the demon out of a young girl who was making money for her masters as a fortune teller. They were liberated by an earthquake, after which the jailer was converted. They then traveled down into Greece, visiting Thessalonica, Berea, Athens (where Paul had the opportunity to preach in front of the philosophers on the Areopagus), and Corinth. Here he remained for a year and a half, founding a church in Sin City on the Isthmus. While he was in Corinth, he also wrote two letters to the newly founded church in Thessalonica. The party then was practically run out of town by the Jews in the city and left for Asia Minor, visiting briefly in the city of Ephesus before returning to Jerusalem.

3. The Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23-21:14)

Having laid the groundwork with a brief visit at the end of the second journey, Paul began his third journey by returning to Ephesus, where this time he stayed for two and a half years. Though the Jewish community was largely unreceptive, he was able to rent the lecture hall of a man named Tyrannus, from which he taught and where many were converted. While in Ephesus, he also wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth. His preaching was so successful that many of the Christians organized a bonfire to burn their idols and occult paraphernalia. Not everyone was thrilled at the decrease in idolatry, however, especially those who made their living by making and selling idols. Demetrius, the head of the silversmiths' guild, instigated a riot. The local Roman official succeeded in calming things down, but Paul was forced to sneak out of town before further violence ensued.

He then left for Macedonia by way of Troas, visited the churches there, and in the meantime wrote II Corinthians. He visited Corinth, where he wrote his letter to the church in Rome, then visited Philippi before heading back to Jerusalem. On the way he met with the elders of the church in Ephesus, encouraging them to continue the work despite the fact that he would probably not be able to visit them again. On the way back to Jerusalem, he was warned by a prophet named Agabus that if he went to Jerusalem, he would be arrested.

4. From Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 21:15-28:31)

Paul, undaunted by the gloomy prophecy, arrived in Jerusalem and gave a report on his work to the elders there. Meanwhile, the Jews were spreading all kinds of false rumors to stir up the people against him. He took a Nazirite vow to show that he respected the Jewish law, but the word had been put out that he had actually brought a Gentile into the sacred precincts of the Temple. When he entered the Temple to worship, he was arrested - taken into custody to protect him against the angry mob that met him there. He spoke to the mob, trying to allay their concerns, but accomplished nothing. He was then taken before the Sanhedrin, but shrewdly manipulated that fractious group by getting the Pharisees and the Sadducees at one another's throats (not a particularly hard thing to do) by bringing up the subject of the resurrection, which the Pharisees believed and the Sadducees did not. Paul was taken to the Antonia fortress (the same place where Jesus had been scourged before His crucifixion) under protective custody. While he was there, a group of Jews vowed to eat nothing until Paul was dead and set up an ambush outside the city. Paul's nephew got word of the plot and reported it to Paul, who arranged for a heavy escort to take him to the provincial capital of Caesarea, where he was held for trial before the Roman prefect.

He spent two years in prison in Caesarea. He defended himself ably before the prefect Felix, refuting all the charges brought against him, but Felix left him in prison anyway, hoping for a bribe to set him free. After Felix was relieved of his post, the new prefect Festus heard Paul's case all over again. Festus wanted to stage a full-blown trial in Jerusalem, but Paul knew he could not get a fair trial there, even if he did manage to survive the trip. He appealed to the emperor, which was the right of any Roman citizen. While waiting in Caesarea for the trip to Rome, he gave his testimony before Herod Agrippa II, who said he would have released Paul had he not earlier appealed to Nero.

Paul was then taken to Rome by ship. They were shipwrecked on the way, but God miraculously spared the lives of everyone aboard, and they landed on the island of Malta, where Paul healed the father of the chief of the island's inhabitants. Upon arrival in Rome, Paul was greeted by the Roman Christians and allowed to live under house arrest, seeing visitors and writing letters. During this imprisonment, he wrote the Prison Epistles - Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians. Many believe he was then released and traveled further around the Mediterranean world, even reaching Spain. While traveling, he wrote to Timothy and Titus, young men whom he had appointed to supervise the churches in Ephesus and Crete respectively. He was then arrested again during the last years of Nero's reign. While in prison in Rome, he wrote his second letter to Timothy, shortly after which he was beheaded.

Conclusion

Conclude the survey of the life of Paul by emphasizing the fact that the great missionary was a man who relied on the Holy Spirit for both guidance and strength. When Paul faced opposition, he didn't give up, but turned to a source of strength greater than his own. When the Christians in your class face opposition from their friends and acquaintances at school and in the neighborhood, they can turn to the same source of strength and guidance, and in addition benefit from the letters written by this great man of God almost two millennia ago.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT THE MINISTRY OF PAUL

1. What do we know about the life of Paul before his conversion?
2. Why did the Christians in Damascus and later in Jerusalem at first refuse to trust Paul?
3. What was the name of the region in which most of the First Missionary Journey was spent?
4. Paul stayed for lengthy periods of time in two cities during his missionary journeys. The first was a city in Greece, during the second journey; the second was a city in Asia Minor during the third journey. He later wrote letters to the churches in both of these cities. What were the names of these cities?
5. Why did the Jews oppose Paul's ministry so violently?
6. What are the names of the Prison Epistles?
7. Who was the emperor who was responsible for executing Paul?

ROMANS

Lesson Aim

To show students the gracious nature of salvation as explained by Paul in the book of Romans.

Memory Verse

John 1:12 - “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God . . .”

Lesson Background

The book of Romans, as we saw last week, was written from the city of Corinth during Paul’s Third Missionary Journey. At that time, he had never visited the city of Rome, although he knew quite a few people there, as can be seen from the long list of greetings found in Romans 16. The letter is thus far less personal than most of those Paul wrote. It presents not so much solutions to specific problems as a cohesive presentation of the Christian doctrine of salvation, followed by an application of that doctrine to a few problems that were currently causing trouble for the church in Rome.

The importance of this study for your students today will depend on where they stand with Christ. The Christians in your class will profit from gaining a better understanding of what the Bible teaches about salvation, and certainly need to be challenged with some of its practical applications. The unbelievers in your class, however, need to focus on the message of salvation as presented by Paul. You should tailor your presentation to the specific needs of your students.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by placing the letter to the Romans within the ministry of Paul, reminding them that it was written from Corinth during the Third Missionary Journey. Tell them that Paul had never been to Rome, but knew many people in the church from his travels around the empire. The book contains probably the strongest and most straightforward exposition of the Gospel found anywhere in Scripture.

1. The Doctrine of Salvation (Romans 1-8)

Most of the members of the church at Rome were new Christians. Normally, when Paul would visit a city, his earliest sermons would include a summary of the message of the Gospel and the doctrine of salvation. When he would write to these churches later, there would be no need to repeat these things, only to remind them of what he had already taught. Since Paul had never been to Rome, however, it was necessary for him to put in writing what he usually explained orally to churches he had founded.

A. Sin (Romans 1-3)

The first three chapters of the book of Romans are a courtroom trial, with Paul as the prosecutor and the whole of mankind standing accused of offending God so as to be worthy of death. He includes the rank pagan who has never heard the Gospel, the moral unbeliever who follows his conscience in a “civilized” way, and the Jew who has had the benefit of God’s law. All alike are convicted of sin against God (Romans 3:23). Make sure your students understand this critical passage. They must see why those who have not heard are guilty for rejecting the revelation of God in nature, but that is not the most important thing. All of your students have heard the truth. They need to worry about themselves, not the pagans in a jungle somewhere. The Christians in your class, on the other hand, should realize that those who have not heard the Gospel are desperately in need of it; God is not going to “let them slide” because they never heard the truth.

B. Justification (Romans 4-5)

Rome had a large Jewish population, and there were many Jewish believers in the church. Paul was concerned lest they think that obeying the law could earn salvation. In these two chapters, Paul makes it clear that salvation is by faith, not works, and that no one could possibly work his way to heaven because all are born in sin, in a state of rebellion against God. Christ must do what we cannot possibly do for ourselves.

Explain to your students the concept of justification. It is a legal term that means to be declared righteous. It is as if a judge tried a case, found the defendant guilty, then punished someone else, transferring that other person’s clean record to the blemished account of the defendant. Those who belong to Jesus Christ have been declared righteous by God; their sins have been transferred to Jesus, who paid for them on the cross, and the righteousness of Christ has been transferred to them, so that as far as God is concerned, they are perfect. No one can earn such a verdict. It comes only by faith.

C. Sanctification (Romans 6-8)

Paul now turns from those who think that they can work their way to heaven to those who think that because they are saved by faith, it doesn’t matter what they do. Paul points out that obedience is a grateful response of the saved sinner, who hates his former life of sin and is glad to be free from its bondage. Christians do not live righteously in order to be saved, they live righteously because they are saved. This does not mean that they are perfect, of course. They still struggle against sin, but they have the Holy Spirit

within to provide help in the battle (this is what sanctification is all about). The victory has already been won by Christ, and those who are saved are as secure as if they were already glorified in heaven.

Be sure your students understand the teaching of Paul here on the subject of security. They must know that for the person who has the Spirit within, there is peace, because that person knows that the way he is living is not by his own strength, but through the Spirit of God. There is no room for presumption, however. No one who does not display the fruit of the Spirit in his life may assume that the Spirit is present. Confidence belongs only to those who live lives of obedience motivated by love for Christ.

2. Israel and the Church (Romans 9-11)

As was mentioned earlier, there were many Jews in the church in Rome. They had difficulty understanding that the law of God was not the way to salvation. They also could not understand how God could have rejected His Chosen People, the Jews. In these chapters, Paul explains first of all that God is free to do anything He wants to do. If God chooses to make some people for the purpose of destroying them, and thus demonstrating His justice, He is perfectly within His rights to do so. Having said that, Paul then goes on to explain that God had indeed set aside the nation of Israel, but not permanently. God had all along wanted to bring Jews and Gentiles together into one People of God, and chose to do so by using the newly-converted Gentiles to move the Jews to jealousy and eventual repentance. Paul thus assured the Romans that Jews and Gentiles alike had a role to play in the plan of God, and people from both groups would ultimately make up God's family.

The most important thing your students should understand from this section of the book is its teaching about the sovereignty of God. If God is to be God, He has the right to do with His creatures whatever He chooses. This cannot be seen as discouraging the spreading of the Gospel, however. It is within the context of Paul's discussion of God's sovereignty that he points out that the preaching of the Word is absolutely essential in order for God's chosen people to be saved.

3. Practical Applications (Romans 12-16)

What does it mean to live as a Christian? Paul obviously did not have time to answer that question in any exhaustive way, but he did spend a few chapters at the end of the book dealing with a few important principles for Christian living.

A. Total Commitment (Romans 12)

The most important principle that a Christian must observe is that he belongs completely to Christ. This means that all his abilities and gifts are to be used in Christ's service, and he is to show love to others, even if they are not very lovable.

B. Submission to Authority (Romans 13)

The church at Rome was located in the capital of the empire. As such, they faced daily the question of the Christian's responsibility toward governmental authority. Paul told the Romans they were responsible to obey laws and pay taxes, since the government was an institution ordained by God for their good even if it did happen to be run by unbelievers. [At this time Nero was the emperor, although his instability had not yet surfaced when Paul wrote this letter.]

C. Flexibility in Questionable Matters (Romans 14)

With a cosmopolitan population like the one found in the city of Rome, the church was made up of people from all kinds of different backgrounds and religious traditions. In such an environment, it is very easy for Christians to get all caught up in arguing about non-essentials. This would have been particularly the case between the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church. Paul tells them to show love for one another in questionable matters, allowing one another to follow their consciences in matters not specifically addressed in the Word of God.

Such a philosophy is every bit as important today as it was then, since most of our churches contain people from a host of different backgrounds. We must allow one another to be different, especially in matters not specifically addressed in Scripture. There can be no compromise on fundamental doctrinal issues, but there must be flexibility and mutual love on matters of lesser importance.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the material, supplying an emphasis appropriate to your particular group of students. Focus on whatever part of the book of Romans is most suited to their needs at the moment, whether they are predominantly Christians or most of them are unbelievers.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

ROMANS

1. When did Paul write the book of Romans?
2. How did the fact that Paul had never been to Rome affect the content of his letter?
3. Why did Paul conclude that all men are guilty before God and worthy of death?
4. What do the terms “justification” and “sanctification” mean?
5. What gives God the right to choose some people for salvation and send others to hell?
6. Why did Paul say that a Christian is to obey a secular government?
7. Why is it important that Christians not argue about insignificant differences among themselves?

I CORINTHIANS

Lesson Aim

To show students the importance of Christian unity by surveying the problems experienced by the Corinthian church.

Memory Verse

John 1:13 - “. . . children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

Lesson Background

The letter of I Corinthians was written by Paul to the church in Corinth while he was in Ephesus during his Third Missionary Journey. Actually, this letter was not the first one he wrote to the church in Corinth (see 5:9), but it is the earliest one that has survived for our use. The city of Corinth was located on the isthmus connecting the Peloponnesus to Achaia, and thus was a thriving center of commerce for anyone wishing to ship goods by taking a short cut from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic Sea, or vice-versa. Like any port city, Corinth was cosmopolitan in character, and had more than its share of vices. The church in the city had been founded by Paul on his Second Missionary Journey and incorporated as much variety as the city itself, from traditional Jews to recently-converted pagans who knew little of the Christian faith to which they had just committed themselves.

Paul had heard that the church was having problems. The family of Chloe, who lived in Corinth, had given him a report, and another delegation sent by the church itself had met him with a series of questions. This letter is an attempt to deal with the problems and questions faced by the young church. Though the

incidents with which Paul deals occurred almost two thousand years ago, the principles he sets forth for dealing with those problems are still beneficial for the church today. As we survey the issues facing the church in Corinth, your students should be able to see some areas where they also need to make use of the principles set forth by Paul in this wide-ranging epistle.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students the following question: If you were a pastor and had the chance to choose to go to any one of the churches founded by Paul, which one would you choose? What is the one you would least like to have to lead? If your students have any feel for the churches of the New Testament, they will realize that whoever went to Corinth would face an incredible pile of problems. Paul had to deal with those problems, and wrote I Corinthians to correct some of the church's false ideas and sinful practices. By considering these today, perhaps we can avoid some of the same abuses in our own lives.

1. The Problem of Disunity (I Corinthians 1-4)

The fundamental problem in the Corinthian church was their inability to get along with one another. They had divided themselves into cliques, each purporting to follow some well-known leader - Paul, Peter, Apollos, or Jesus Himself. These factions emphasized one aspect of the truth to the exclusion of all else. For instance, one can readily imagine a Jewish Christian faction claiming to follow Peter and emphasizing the importance of obeying the law, or the intelligentsia who liked the stirring preaching and philosophical sophistication of Apollos, or the Gentiles who thought Paul's message of freedom from the law was an excuse for doing whatever they wanted, or the rebellious group who claimed to follow Christ alone and refused to submit to any human leadership, including their elders.

In response to this conflict, Paul argues that such divisions are alien to the nature of the church and repulsive to the leaders who are being claimed by the various factions. He accuses the members of the church of acting like unbelievers in this matter (he calls them "carnal" - this means they are behaving in a fleshly, worldly, or non-Christian way; there is no such thing as a carnal Christian, a person who is a Christian but acts like an unbeliever; there are, however, Christians who behave like unbelievers in certain areas of their lives).

Middle school students are extremely prone to forming cliques. Be sure to challenge your students about the unscriptural nature of this behavior, whether it be at church or at school. Ask them how they ought to act in the face of cliques formed by others.

2. The Problem of Discipline (I Corinthians 5-6)

One of the factions in Corinth obviously had rejected any responsibility to the moral law of God. They believed that Christians were saved by grace, and consequently could do whatever they wanted. Others, though disapproving of this attitude, felt that they should not judge other Christians, and therefore said nothing about the immorality being practiced openly in the church (in this case, a man was living with his stepmother). The church leaders, meanwhile, were doing nothing. The inactivity of the church leadership also generated another problem. Whenever disputes arose between individuals in the church, they took one another to court rather than submitting the dispute to the leadership of the church or following the pattern set forth by Jesus in Matthew 18. Clearly, both the people and their elders needed to be educated about the proper function of Christian leaders.

With regard to the man who was living in open immorality, Paul instructed the church to excommunicate him. He told the Corinthians that, while they had no right to judge the conduct of unbelievers, they had a responsibility to judge that of other Christians and to discipline those who were bringing shame to the name of Christ. As far as the lawsuit-happy members of the church were concerned, Paul told them that they would be better off submitting their disputes to the youngest and most foolish members of the congregation rather than taking them into a secular court. Non-Christians simply are not capable of dealing with the spiritual dimension of human problems, and no problems can really be solved without taking the spiritual into account.

There are two applications for your students from this section. One is that the idea that anyone has a right to behave however he wishes as long as he doesn't hurt anyone else, and that no one has the right to judge the behavior of another, is unbiblical garbage. The Bible gives us standards of behavior, and whatever violates those standards is wrong, whether it appears to be hurting anyone else or not. The second is that the people who are best equipped to settle disputes among Christians are other Christians. God has given His Spirit to His people, which gives them an insight not available to unbelievers. Both of these applications relate to the proper role of leaders in the church, who ought to be exercising oversight of the morality of the congregation, as well as mediating disputes.

3. The Problem of Marriage (I Corinthians 7)

In contrast with the immorality condemned in chapter five, some in the Corinthian church were advocating asceticism, teaching that celibacy was good, sex was bad, and those who were married should either divorce or live without sex. Paul tells them that though abstaining from marriage can have certain advantages in times of persecution, it is totally wrong for Christians to divorce their spouses for "spiritual" reasons, or for married people to abstain from sex on a long-term basis. The only divorces Paul permits are in situations where a person has become a believer while his or her spouse remains unconverted and the unbeliever wants to end the marriage (this is not an excuse for a Christian to marry an unbeliever). Your students need to be reminded that, contrary to the view of the world in which we live, marriage is a sacred and binding vow, intended by God to be permanent, and that sex is only beautiful within the confines of that marriage relationship.

4. The Problem of Meat Offered to Idols (I Corinthians 8-10)

Here Paul deals with much the same issues that he tackled in Romans 14, but again it is colored by the factionalism of the Corinthian church. Some in the church, being the practical type, saw nothing wrong with purchasing the meat in the marketplace that had come from one of the many idol temples in Corinth. This meat had been part of a sacrifice offered to an idol, and what was left had been given to the priest for his use. When the priests had more meat than they could reasonably eat, they would sell the extra and put the money in the temple treasury. Other Christians, whether the Jews who blanched at the mere thought of idolatry or the pagans who had all too recently been worshiping in those same temples, were terribly offended by the thought of eating such meat and let their displeasure be known rather loudly.

Paul insisted that there was nothing wrong with the meat, but taught that the love of Christians for one another was far more important than who was right or wrong on this issue. Those who saw nothing wrong with the meat should be careful not to cause the others to go against their consciences, while those who felt wrong about eating the meat should not impose their strictness on the other members of the congregation or condemn them as sinful. This principle is important for your students to practice. In areas where Christians differ, strict Christians should not condemn those who are more lenient, and looser Christians should not force those who are strict to violate their consciences. It is also important to remember that these principles can only be applied to disputed behavior that is right in and of itself.

5. The Problem of Worship (I Corinthians 11-14)

The Corinthians were also taking their “do your own thing” philosophy into their worship services. During the agape feast that preceded the Lord’s Supper, the rich members of the congregation were stuffing themselves and getting drunk while the poor were sitting by with nothing to eat. During their worship, everyone would want to participate at once, exhorting their brothers, speaking in tongues, interrupting one another in disgraceful confusion. On top of that, those who possessed such showy gifts as the gift of tongues were lording it over those who had less conspicuous gifts, maintaining that only those who spoke in tongues were really spiritual.

Paul told them that orderliness was an important part of the worship of God, just like love is an essential key to their relationships with one another. In celebrating the Lord’s Supper, Paul told them that they should be considerate of one another and take seriously what it was they were remembering. In their worship, he reminded them that all Christians had gifts from the Holy Spirit, and that all gifts were equally valuable, though not equally visible. All were to minister to all; all were important, not just those with visible gifts; and the gifts themselves were useless if not exercised in love. He finishes out this section of the letter by laying down strict guidelines for the practice of speaking in tongues to make sure that the abuse of the gift in Corinth did not continue.

The application to emphasize for your students from this section is the universality and equality of spiritual gifts. All Christians have them, they are intended to minister to others, and all are necessary for the church to function as a body. Your students will probably want to talk about speaking in tongues, but we simply do not have the time for any reasonable treatment of that subject in today’s lesson.

6. The Problem of the Resurrection (I Corinthians 15)

The philosophical Apollos faction appears to have picked up one of the ideas that was most popular among the Greek philosophers in the first century - the idea that matter was evil. To such people, the whole concept of a bodily resurrection was ludicrous. The body was the prison of the soul. Once the soul was free from the body, why would it ever want to return?

Paul uses this occasion to speak about the centrality of the resurrection in Christian doctrine. If Christ was not raised from the dead, there simply is no salvation. Furthermore, salvation is the renewal of the whole man, not just the spiritual part of him. If the body is not delivered from death, then salvation is not complete. When God accomplishes salvation, He does it right. The whole man is delivered from corruption, his body as well as his spirit. Paul closes the chapter with an exhortation to perseverance. All doctrine has practical consequences. If the bodies of believers are to be raised from the dead, then death has already been conquered, and the Christian can live confidently, not being shaken by whatever circumstances come his way.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the various applications made during the survey of I Corinthians, emphasizing those you consider to be particularly appropriate for your students. Encourage the Christians in your class to be the kind of secure, steadfast people described by Paul in I Corinthians 15:58.

1. Where was the city of Corinth located? What was the population of the city like?

2. What was the basic problem of the Corinthian church, the one that was at the heart of all their other disputes?

3. Evaluate the following statements, which display some of the attitudes that were prominent among the Corinthians:
 - a) “I only like it when Pastor Tom preaches. The other pastors are too boring.”

 - b) “I know what she’s doing is wrong, but that’s her business, not mine. After all, Jesus said not to judge one another.”

 - c) “Mr. Brown may be a member of my church, but if he doesn’t pay for the damage he did to my car, I’ll sue the pants off him!”

 - d) “It really doesn’t matter if I marry a non-Christian. I’ll witness to him, and if he doesn’t get saved, I can always divorce him.”

 - e) “Dancing is of the devil. Anyone who dances is going to hell!”

 - f) “Anyone who is really spiritually mature will be able to speak in tongues.”

II CORINTHIANS

Lesson Aim

To show students the importance of sacrificial giving for the cause of Christ as exemplified by the apostolic ministry of Paul.

Memory Verse

John 1:14 - “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Lesson Background

Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians during his Third Missionary Journey. He wrote it from Macedonia as he was on his way to Corinth. He had heard that the church had not received his first letter very well, and he was being attacked by some factions in the church. He wrote to them, then, both to defend his own authority and to prepare them for his visit. The main purpose for his visit, besides checking up on the church he had started, was to collect an offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, who were experiencing a famine at the time. Thus this letter not only contains a defense of Paul’s apostolic ministry, but also gives an exhortation about Christian stewardship. He also warns them against becoming entangled with the world and its way of thinking.

For your students, this letter has significance in three areas. For them, the authority of Paul translates into the authority of the Scriptures. If Paul, as an apostle, had the right to tell the Corinthian church what to do because God was speaking through him, what he wrote is equally authoritative for the church today. Secondly, when Paul speaks about not being unequally yoked with unbelievers, your students must

understand that dating relationships fall into the category of his teaching. In our culture, dating is courtship, and if it is wrong to marry unbelievers, it is also wrong to date them. Thirdly, the portion of the book that deals with stewardship is critical to people in our materialistic age, where the goal of life seems to be to acquire as much as possible. Your students need to understand that all we have belongs to God, and that He gives us things so we can use them for Him and share them with others.

Lesson Procedure

An issue of Christianity Today a number of years ago contained a cartoon drawn by John Lawing that showed a group of women carrying picket signs saying such things as “Women of Corinth Unite” and “The Apostle Paul is a Male Chauvinist Pig.” Paul was standing somewhat sheepishly off to one side and saying, “I see you got my letter.” The church at Corinth did not respond well to Paul’s first letter. Though they did excommunicate the man who was living with his stepmother, and he repented and was restored, they generally responded with anger, and the more forward among them began publicly questioning whether Paul really had apostolic authority. After all, he had never seen Jesus like the other apostles had. How could he claim to be their equal? What right did he have to tell the Corinthians what to do? Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth is basically a defense of his apostolic authority. Though this may seem on the surface to have little relevance for us today, he includes in his letter teaching that has considerable application for modern Christians.

1. Paul’s Apostolic Ministry (II Corinthians 1-7)

Paul begins his letter in a very conciliatory tone, apologizing for not visiting them sooner and commending them for restoring the repentant sinner mentioned in I Corinthians 5. He refuses to become defensive and justify himself despite the attacks that have been leveled against him, but he does remind them that his love for them was displayed in the way he brought them the Gospel in the first place - not in arrogance, but in humility and love. He denies that he has ever used trickery or manipulation, affirming instead that he in himself is weak and unimpressive, and that any good that came from his ministry came from God, not his own eloquence. He also speaks of his intense physical suffering, both from illness and persecution, and of his longing to be with Christ in what he believes to be the near future (in fact, Paul would live about ten more years after writing this letter). In response to charges that he had made a profit from his ministry (there were rich evangelists in the first century, as there are today), Paul reminds the Corinthians that he had deliberately refused support from them, instead working to support himself by making tents while he preached the Gospel in Corinth.

There are two passages in this section of the book on which you as a teacher should focus the attention of your students. The first is the end of chapter five, where Paul speaks of the ministry of reconciliation. The Corinthians were divisive in their attitudes toward one another and in their treatment of Paul. He reminds them that Christ died to bring men together, not to tear them apart, and to close the gap between God and men that had been created by the Fall. Christianity is a ministry of healing, both between God and man and between individuals and groups of people. Those of your students who are Christians should be showing the kind of love and unity that comes only from the presence of the Holy Spirit, and thus being a testimony to this sadly fragmented world. They should also be Christ’s ambassadors, bringing the message of reconciliation to those who are separated from God.

The second critical passage in this section is found at the end of chapter six. If the Corinthians’ criticism of Paul showed a lack of unity and of the reconciling power of the Holy Spirit, it also showed that they had adopted the attitudes of the world around them. Paul tells the Corinthians that they must separate themselves from the such attitudes. For your students, the attitudes they particularly must watch out for are

attitudes about sexual morality and about material possessions. Very specifically, they should not adopt the world's attitudes toward sex as they are communicated through dress, music, other media, and dating practices, and should reject the world's identification of material possessions and fulfillment. It is particularly important to warn your Christian students against dating unbelievers, since in our culture such a relationship can easily escalate into an unequal yoke of the sort against which Paul speaks.

2. The Famine Relief Offering (II Corinthians 8-9)

The Christians in Jerusalem were suffering terribly. The country was in the throes of a famine, and many of the Christians had little or nothing to eat. The church in Jerusalem had asked Paul, among others, to collect money for the relief of the poor as he traveled from church to church around the empire. In these chapters, Paul encourages the Corinthians to give generously, telling them of the example of the Macedonians (particularly the church in Philippi), who had given abundantly despite the fact that they were poor themselves. In what is probably the most famous passage on giving in the entire Bible, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to give as a matter of thanksgiving to God for what He has given them. They are not to give simply as a matter of duty, because God loves those who give cheerfully and willingly. Paul's words must have produced as much skepticism among the Christians in Corinth as they often do when preachers use them today to raise funds for some cause or other. There are many charlatans who encourage people to give until it hurts while they themselves are living in luxury. Paul was no such mercenary. His own life was an example of selfless giving, and he knew what it meant to sacrifice for others and to be blessed by God as a result.

Spend some time talking to your students about giving. Most of them probably have little income outside of an allowance from their parents, but it is good for them to learn the practice of giving at an early age. When Paul speaks of the blessings of giving to others, he is not simply putting together a good sales pitch. All we have belongs to God. When we acknowledge that by using what we have for His glory, He will keep His promises to supply our needs and will trust us with more of what we have shown we are able to use wisely, not for our own comfort, but for the benefit of others.

3. Paul's Apostolic Experience (II Corinthians 10-13)

Paul then returns to the defense of his ministry for the remainder of the book. He particularly takes pains to contrast himself with those charlatans who have been going around denigrating Paul's legitimacy as an apostle, while themselves milking the congregation for all they can get. In the process of drawing out this contrast, he somewhat reluctantly speaks of the persecutions he has experienced, and also tells them of a vision he saw in which he entered the very presence of God (some speculate that this may have occurred when he was stoned and left for dead at Lystra, or when he spent three years alone in the Arabian desert). He also mentions his physical disability, whatever it may have been, and indicates that God had told him that he would have to depend on God's grace to endure it rather than seeing it miraculously removed.

Conclusion

Paul concludes the book in the same way that you should conclude the lesson - by encouraging the Corinthians to examine themselves to see whether or not they are really Christians (II Corinthians 13:5). The Corinthians were in many ways not acting like Christians; they had little evidence to support their profession of faith. Where do your students stand? Make sure they know what they should do if they examine themselves and come up short as a result.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

II CORINTHIANS

1. How did the Corinthians respond to Paul's first letter?
2. What is the major theme of II Corinthians?
3. Why did Paul find it necessary to defend his apostleship?
4. Why did Paul warn the Corinthians not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers?
5. What are some ways Christians have to watch out for being unequally yoked with unbelievers today?
6. Why was Paul intending to take an offering in Corinth?
7. What reasons did Paul give the Corinthians for giving generously?
8. Why did Paul tell the Corinthians to examine themselves?