

## CHAPTER 23: The Gospels Part 1

“Are we there yet?” If you have ever traveled in a car with young children on a long road trip you were probably asked that question more than once. They want to get there! They are tired and bored from the long journey. Their minds have been filled with just how wonderful the place they are traveling to is. They want to see it – and right now! So, what was your response to “are we there yet”? You probably said something like, “No, we’re not quite there yet. Just be patient a while longer. We’ll get there soon enough.”

This illustrates our biblical journey up to this point. We have had a long, trip through the Old Testament and, like the kids in the car we are a little bit tired. This gives us some sense of how the people of Israel feel. They have been promised all these wonderful things, but have not experienced any of them. They are not there yet! The prophets have told them to wait patiently with an eager expectation – it WILL happen. Messiah WILL come. God’s eternal kingdom WILL come.

But the years pass and whatever hope they once had is fading. Many have adopted feelings of apathy, cynicism, skepticism, or doubt. They think to themselves, “It’s not going to happen, at least not in my lifetime!” So, as we come to the Gospels, this is the mindset of the faithful remnant of God’s people who have heard all the prophecies and want to believe them. But the reality is that none of the promises have happened.

And not only that, but for the last 600 years the Promised Land has been under foreign domination – first the Babylonians and Assyrians, then the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. Also, there has been no new word from God for over 4 centuries. The Israelite people continue to cling to the hope of past promises. They are weary from waiting. What can they reasonably expect after all of these years? Some have already given up. Others have lost interest. Many have forgotten. It is out of this backdrop of darkness and despair that we are reminded of God’s promise from His last prophet we looked at, Malachi...

**“I am about to send My messenger, who will [prepare] the way before Me. Indeed the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to His temple, and the messenger of the covenant, whom you long for, is certainly coming,” says the Lord who rules over all.** (Malachi 3:1) This person will prepare the way for the

Messiah by announcing, “He’s here!” This Elijah-like figure as he is described in Malachi 4 will get God’s people ready to receive their Messiah King.

This is exactly what happens next in the Gospels. God sends Elijah. Well, not literally, but figuratively. **In those days John the Baptist came into the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” For He is the one about whom Isaiah the prophet had spoken: “The voice of one shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make His paths straight.’”** (Matthew 3:1-3)

But how is John the Baptist like Elijah? **Now John wore clothing made from camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his diet consisted of locusts and wild honey.** (Matthew 3:4) This is a very similar description to Elijah that was given in 2 Kings 1. And like Malachi’s Elijah figure in Malachi 4, John the Baptist preaches repentance in an effort to turn the hearts of the people back to God.

In the process John draws quite a crowd. Many of the Israelite people, religious leaders included, flock to a remote area near the Jordan River to hear a message from God. This shows just how spiritually famished they are. Out in the wilderness John preaches and “baptizes.” This is why he is called John the Baptist. Baptism has its roots in the Jewish purification laws where a person is cleansed in a ritual bath. It symbolizes an act of repentance. Through John’s ministry at the Jordan River many confess their sins and turn to God.

John’s message is basically this: “Get ready, He’s almost here!” We know that whoever “He” is, that this person must be really important because John the Baptist says: **“I baptize you with water, for repentance, but the one coming after me is more powerful than I am – I am not worthy to carry His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”** (Matthew 3:11) Could this individual that John is referring to here be the Messiah that God’s people have been waiting for all these years? Is it possible?

**Then Jesus came from Galilee to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.** (Matthew 3:13)

**John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who is greater than I am, because He existed before me.’”** (John 1:29-30)

Alright, let’s pause this story for a moment. Who exactly is this “Jesus” guy? This is the first time that we’ve heard His name mentioned in the story. He must be the person that John the Baptist has been preaching about because John points to Jesus and says,

“Look (behold) the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Who IS Jesus? Is He really the Messiah King talked about throughout the Old Testament? Could He really be that one that John had announced was coming?

For answers to this we will need to go to the beginning of each of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gospels, of course, get their names from the four men who wrote them.

The first gospel, Matthew, begins with these words: **This is the record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.** (Matthew 1:1) Matthew then proceeds to list the genealogy of Jesus starting with Abraham and running through King David. He ends his genealogy like this... **and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.** (Matthew 1:16)

That term “Christ” that Matthew uses here comes from the Greek word, *Christos*, meaning “anointed one.” It was originally a term applied to the priests. Later “Christ” became adopted as the formal title for Jesus. The Hebrew equivalent is *Mashiach* or “Messiah.” This recognizes Yeshua (Jesus) as the anointed one of God, the Messiah King that all of those Old Testament prophets talked about. Matthew addresses a largely Jewish audience. He makes his case, using many of the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus IS, in fact, the promised Messiah of Israel.

The second gospel, Mark, opens by saying... **The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.** (Mark 1:1) Then Mark references Malachi 3 and Isaiah 40 that talk about a coming Messiah. Mark writes his gospel to a mostly Gentile audience. He focuses on what Jesus does more than what He teaches. Mark highlights the human side of “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” in an action-packed, fast-moving account of Jesus’s life.

The third gospel, Luke, begins with a prologue addressed to a man named Theophilus: **Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know for certain the things you were taught.** (Luke 1:1-4) Luke’s purpose is to clarify some things that Theophilus has been taught about Jesus. Luke compiles information about the life of Jesus from his own careful research into the accounts of various people who had witnessed Jesus’s ministry first hand.

Both Matthew and Luke include genealogies of Jesus. Matthew begins with Abraham while Luke traces Jesus’s line all the way back to Adam. Matthew provides the

legal lineage and follows the royal line from David through Joseph to Jesus. Luke provides the physical lineage from David through Mary (what most Bible scholars believe given the stark differences between the two genealogies) to Jesus.

There is something interesting to note about these two genealogies. Do you remember Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel from the book of Ezra? He was the Jewish leader who led the large delegation back home after exile. He also directed the rebuilding effort of the temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel and his father Shealtiel are the only two people who are listed in BOTH genealogies between David and Jesus.

The last gospel, John was written by another man named John, NOT John the Baptist. We will talk about him later. His gospel begins this way: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. The Word was with God in the beginning.** (John 1:1-2) John goes on to tell us who this “Word” is: **Now the Word became flesh [human] and took up residence among us. We saw His glory – the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father.** (John 1:14)

John then connects “grace and truth” to Jesus when he says: **For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ.** (John 1:17)

John’s account of the life of Jesus was written for his stated purpose toward the end of his gospel: **But these are recorded that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.** (John 20:31)

So then, Jesus must be really significant for four different writers take the time to tell His life story. The Four Gospels contain testimonies by many people about who they say Jesus is. So far we have heard from John the Baptist who says that Jesus is **the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.** We have heard from Matthew who says that Jesus **is called Christ**, in other words, Messiah, the one prophesied in the Old Testament. We have heard from Mark. He says that Jesus is **the Son of God.** We heard from Luke who points out later in his gospel that Jesus’s many followers anticipated Jesus to be **the one who was going to redeem Israel.** (Luke 24:21) And we have heard from the writer of the Gospel of John who states that Jesus is **the Christ, the Son of God** and that there is **life in His name.**

As we will see in our journey thru the Gospels, all of these men agree that Jesus is: (1) the “Christ,” the promised MESSIAH that God’s people have been waiting for all these years; (2) a real flesh-and-blood HUMAN being, a man, though certainly not an ordinary man; (3) the divine SON OF GOD, God Himself, God residing with us; and (4) the SAVIOR, on a mission to bring life, to save sinners. Everything these four Gospel

writers will tell us about Jesus – His words, His actions, His teachings, His claims, His parables, His miracles, His signs, yes, His very character – everything they mention is to prove to their readers that the things they believe about Jesus ARE true.

While the events mentioned in the four Gospels are not necessarily written in chronological order, we are going to cover them that way. This will require us to jump back and forth between the four Gospel accounts. Many of the unanswered questions we have at this point in the story are about to get resolved.

Let's begin by looking at Jesus's humanity. As I pointed out earlier, Matthew and Luke provide us with Jesus's human lineage by way of genealogies. Both writers trace Jesus's line back through David. At the end of Matthew's genealogy it says... **and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.** (Matthew 1:16) Notice that Matthew does NOT say "Joseph the father of Jesus." There is no bloodline connection between Joseph and Jesus.

In Luke's genealogy he says this... **So Jesus, when He began His ministry, was about thirty years old. He was the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of [Eli].** (Luke 3:23) The Luke genealogy connects Mary's bloodline to Jesus (Eli is most likely Mary's father). Like Matthew, Luke tells us that Jesus had a "supposed" father in Mary's husband, Joseph. In other words, Joseph was NOT Jesus's biological father.

So this begs an obvious question – IF Joseph was NOT Jesus's father, then who was? The answer to this question is supplied in the narrative that follows next. You will recognize it as part of the Christmas story.

Both Joseph and Mary live in the village of Nazareth which is up north in Galilee. They are engaged to be married. God sends the angel Gabriel to visit Mary. This is the same Gabriel who had visited Daniel 500 years earlier. **The angel came to her [Mary] and said, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled by his words and began to wonder about the meaning of this greeting.** (Luke 1:28-29).

Gabriel tells Mary not to be afraid. She has found favor with God. Then he tells her God's plan...

**"Listen: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will never end."** (READ Luke 1:31-33) The angel is referring to God's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 and to the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9. This is a whole lot for a young Jewish girl to take in! "What? MY baby is going to be the Messiah?"

Mary is perplexed by what the angel has just told her. She is not even married yet! So Gabriel explains the details to her. **The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be holy; He will be called the Son of God.”** (Luke 1:35)

This is exciting news! But -- what will Joseph her fiancé think when all of a sudden Mary turns up pregnant? He will certainly know the baby is not his. God will have to deal with Joseph personally about this matter when that time comes. And just a few months later, it happens!

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ happened this way. While His mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.** (Matthew 1:18) Under normal circumstances when a young woman becomes pregnant with her first child she is eager to share the news with someone. But given that Mary is young and still unmarried, she keeps the matter private. There is only one person Mary feels comfortable sharing her pregnancy with and that is her cousin Elizabeth.

Mary hurries off to the Judean hill country to visit her older cousin Elizabeth, who is now six months pregnant. Mary arrives and greets Elizabeth. **When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She exclaimed with a loud voice, “Blessed are you [Mary] among women, and blessed is the child in your womb! And who am I that the mother of my Lord should come and visit me? For the instant the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”** (Luke 1:41-44) Elizabeth’s baby who “leaped for joy” is the prenatal John the Baptist. He is the person we met earlier who will grow up to be the forerunner of Jesus, the voice crying in the wilderness.

Elizabeth’s confirmation of Mary’s baby as the long-awaited Messiah prompts Mary to break into a song of praise. Mary’s song is sometimes called “The Magnificat”: **And Mary said, “My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has begun to rejoice in God my Savior, because He has looked upon the humble state of His servant. For from now on all generations will call me blessed, because He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.”** Her song goes on to recall God’s covenant promises to Israel.

Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months. After that she returns home to Nazareth to face Joseph. You can just imagine Joseph’s surprise when he finds out that Mary is several months pregnant! Joseph is undoubtedly hurt by this. But he is a good and kind man and does not want to subject Mary to any public humiliation. He loves Mary. **Because Joseph, [Mary’s] husband to be, was a righteous man, and**

**because he did not want to disgrace her, he intended to divorce her privately.**  
(Matthew 1:19)

**When he had contemplated this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”** (Matthew 1:20-21)

The writer Matthew then ties the miraculous conception by a virgin mother, Mary, back to the sign that Isaiah had given King Ahaz back in Isaiah 7. **This all happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet [Isaiah] would be fulfilled: “Look! The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call him Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.”** (Matthew 1:22-23) Matthew applies an event from centuries ago that had a fulfillment back then to what is taking place currently. This prophecy has a dual fulfillment. Jesus will literally be God WITH us!

Rather than divorce Mary (break off the engagement) as he had planned, Joseph does as the angel told him. **When Joseph awoke from sleep he did what the angel of the Lord told him. He took his wife [Mary], but did not have marital relations with her until she gave birth to a son, whom he named Jesus.** (Matthew 1:24)

I made the point earlier about Matthew that he uses many of the Old Testament scriptures to make his case that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel. We just saw an example of that referring back to Isaiah 7 with the virgin birth. Matthew now recalls another important prophecy surrounding the birth of the Messiah. King Herod, a Jew who is the puppet king of the Roman government, asks the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (the Messiah) was to be born. In response to him they said **“In Bethlehem of Judah”** (Matthew 2:5a) Then they quote from Micah 5. **“For it is written this way by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are in no ways least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’”** (Matthew 2:5b-6) So these religious leaders know from their scriptures that when the Messiah comes he is going to be born in Bethlehem.

Here we are presented with a small problem. As mentioned before both of Jesus’s earthly parents to be, Joseph and Mary, live in Nazareth. This is some 60 miles to the north of Bethlehem. In that day when travel was done mostly on foot with no paved roads, 60 miles is a long way. So how is God going to work out this little detail? There are a lot of ways God could do this – a family reunion, a death in the family, a new job opportunity for Joseph, etc. But God doesn’t do it any of these ways. No, God pulls the most powerful man in the entire civilized world, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, into His plan. God does it big and the emperor doesn’t even know it!

**Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the empire for taxes. Everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem because he was of the house and family line of David. He went to be registered with Mary. (Luke 2:1,3)**

At this point Mary is well into her pregnancy. Her condition makes the long journey over some rough terrain that much more difficult. It takes several days. Most pictures show Mary and Joseph traveling alone, but more than likely they traveled with a group – it was much safer to travel in numbers. When the couple finally arrives in Bethlehem it is late. They find the city packed with many other travelers. They are unable to get a room at the local inn. They are directed to a cave-like shelter nearby that is used for livestock. That is where they bed down for the night.

Let me close for now with a scene from the Christmas story that we don't often see...

Our young couple is exhausted. They're probably hungry and thirsty. They find themselves in a strange town far from home where they don't know anyone. Think about it. If they had family in Bethlehem they wouldn't be where they are. They would be in a house. Mary is close to delivering her baby. There's no midwife or medical staff available. Only her man Joseph is there with her. You hear the sounds of animals moving around. The stench of urine and feces permeates the air. Mary's contractions get closer together. Her pain level increases.

"Joseph," Mary says with a concerned voice, "I think it's time..."