



Gospel Portraits of Jesus: A Lenten Study

SESSION 1

Jesus is the name given by the messenger of the Lord to the One who would be born of Mary by the Holy Spirit.

Introduction to the Lenten Study

Our study in these weeks leading to Easter will focus on some of the many names and titles by which Jesus was known or addressed. We will spend most of our time with passages in the four Gospels. You will find at the end of each session a series of daily Bible passages. You can read the suggested passages each day the week prior to the group study or you can read them following the study. Either way, you will find that these selected passages will help you focus on the week's featured names or titles of Jesus. One of the goals of this study is that participants will be able to reaffirm their knowledge of and belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The theme passage for this first session is Philippians 2:1–11 where the apostle Paul, from prison, writes to his friends in Philippi of his belief in Jesus as God incarnate. Read the whole passage and notice particularly verses 9–11, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The Meaning of the Name “Jesus”

As we might expect, our first encounter with the name *Jesus* is in the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Though these accounts of his birth are quite different,



The name *Jesus* in Greek is the same as the Hebrew name *Joshua*, which means “God saves” or “God’s salvation.”

both explain that the name of the child to be born of Mary is given by a messenger from God. In Matthew “an angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph]” (1:20), while in Luke “the angel Gabriel was sent by God . . . to a virgin . . . [named] Mary” (1:26, 27). Joseph is told by the angel “you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). After being told by the angel Gabriel not to be afraid, that she would conceive and bear a son, Mary is told, “you will name him Jesus” (Luke 1:31). The name was confirmed again in the Luke narrative. “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (2:21).

In the Matthew narrative we receive a clue as to the meaning of Jesus’ name: “. . . he will save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus in Greek is the same as the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “God saves” or “God’s salvation.” Luke does not give us the meaning of the name *Jesus* but includes other names that suggest

who he will become, “Son of the Most High” (1:32) and “to you is born . . . a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11). Also in Luke we read that after the babe Jesus was presented to him Simeon proclaimed, “for my eyes have seen your salvation” (2:30).

As we consider these passages we are mindful that Matthew and Luke were written several decades after the events. The writers give testimony to what they understand and believe to be the essence of the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are not writing eyewitness accounts but are writing from a faith perspective as those who believe that the promises of God in the writings of the prophets are fulfilled in the risen Jesus, who is Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

According to Vincent Taylor, “In the first century the name [Jesus] was by no means uncommon. Josephus mentions about twenty persons so named. A striking change, however, is manifest from the second century onwards . . . the name was abandoned by Jews by reason of antagonism to Christianity, and was avoided by Christians from motives of reverence.”¹ Even today we seldom encounter persons who bear the name *Jesus*, except among some Latin American cultures.

Jesus in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the name *Jesus* appears 999 times in 960 verses. As you might expect, the name appears most often in the four Gospels: 642 times in 623 verses. The writers employ this common name throughout the Gospels and Acts to describe the actions of the man, Jesus, or to identify the words he spoke. It appears the Gospel writers, as well as the authors of the other New Testament books, use the name *Jesus* alone when describing or emphasizing his humanity.

There are many examples where the name *Jesus* is accompanied by other names to underscore his divine nature as the One who is God incarnate. In the New Testament we find *Jesus Christ* in 135 verses and *Christ Jesus* in 82 verses, for a total of 217 verses, where the word *Christ* is associated with *Jesus*. *Jesus Christ* appears only three times in the Gospels (Mark 1:1, John 1:17, 17:3). However, there are 51 verses where the word *Messiah* is used in the Gospels in reference to Jesus. In each instance, in the NRSV, there is a footnote that reads “or Christ.” *Christ* is the Greek word that translates the Hebrew word *Messiah*. We will focus more specifically on the names *Christ* and *Messiah* in session 4.



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Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

We would need an extended period of time to look at all of the *Jesus* references in even one Gospel, let alone all four. In order to explore the name *Jesus* we will focus on Mark, the shortest and earliest of the Gospels, limiting our focus to several representative passages that introduce us to Jesus as an extraordinary servant of God.

The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry (1:1–2:28)

After an opening introduction of thirteen verses, Mark launches into Jesus' ministry with the words, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God . . .” (1:14). The good news is, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). In the first two chapters Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, John (1:16, 19), and Levi (2:14) to join him in his mission of healing and proclaiming the good news. Later, seven more men are named among the twelve disciples (3:18, 19). Jesus responds to people's needs with four healings: a man with an unclean spirit, Simon's mother-in-law, a leper, and a paralytic. In addition, questions are raised by the religious authorities regarding Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, fasting, and keeping the Sabbath.

Reactions to Jesus vary. Those whom he calls respond quickly to his invitation. Those in need of healing are made well. Those with questions are challenged. Jesus was unlike anyone the people had ever met. Mark reports, “His fame . . . spread throughout . . . Galilee” (1:28), “people came to him from every quarter” (1:45), “they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this’” (2:12), and “The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (3:6).

From the beginning of his ministry Jesus aroused much interest in response to his actions, his teachings, and

his answers to questions. No one was neutral. People responded to him with either devotion or disdain.

It is not difficult to “translate” these first-century responses to Jesus into a contemporary context. Surely Jesus’ fame has spread wide across our land. We have been exposed to many who speak in Jesus’ name or about him. We read the good news of his ministry of teaching, healing, and challenging. How do we respond to this message and Jesus’ invitation to join him in his mission? How does Jesus call persons to follow him today? What are our infirmities and limitations for which we need healing and restoration to wholeness? What questions do we bring to Jesus or have about him?

Jesus with His Disciples (4:35–41)

Jesus and the disciples were in a boat in the midst of a violent storm. In this brief narrative we see two things that give clues as to the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. First, Jesus criticizes the disciples for their lack of faith, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:40). Second, the disciples do not fully understand who Jesus is, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:41). The disciples wonder who this man is but they must have sensed that he could do something when they admonished him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (4:38). This dual theme appears several times in Mark: the disciples do not understand the nature of the man they left their nets to follow, and Jesus challenges his followers to have faith, to believe that God is at work in their midst.

This passage invites us to reflect on our relationship with Jesus. If we have read about his miraculous works, heard sermons calling us to have faith, and studied Jesus’ teachings, what is our response? What is our understanding of and belief in Jesus of Nazareth? What are the dangerous or challenging moments that cause us to cry out for help as the disciples did? What is the nature of our plea to God in times of crisis? When God does rescue us from peril? Do we wonder, as the disciples did, who this is that saves us? Might we also be chided for being so afraid and having such little faith?

Jesus in His Hometown (6:1–6)

Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and on the Sabbath went to the synagogue, where he taught the people. Prior to returning to Nazareth, Mark reports in chapters 1 to 5 that Jesus performed ten miracles and



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taught his followers with several parables. The gathered believers in the synagogue “were astounded.” They questioned the source of his “wisdom” and “deeds of power.” After all, he was a familiar member of the community, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of . . . ?” (6:3). Matthew 13:54–58 parallels Mark’s account, also placing the event later in Jesus’ ministry, after people had witnessed his miracles and heard his teachings.

Luke’s account of the event is quite different (4:16–30), and takes place at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath, reading and commenting on a passage from the prophet Isaiah. In all three accounts the people are impressed with his teaching. Matthew and Mark report that the people “took offense at him,” that Jesus was unable to do “any deeds of power,” and that Jesus “was amazed at their unbelief.” In Luke, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (4:22). Jesus declared that he was the fulfillment of the prophet’s words and reminded them of two accounts of the prophets Elijah and Elisha reaching out to marginal, unacceptable persons who were blessed by God. After this surprising, outrageous declaration of God’s mercy, the people of Nazareth are determined to kill Jesus, but he moves through the hostile crowd untouched.

Those who knew him best were unable to recognize who he was, God’s spirit-filled servant seeking to establish a new reign of peace, justice, and love for all. Jesus “could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them” (Mark 6:5).

It is easy to believe in Jesus who speaks truthful words and does powerful deeds, as long as he does not disturb or question our treasured beliefs and accustomed behaviors. How open are we to receive God’s abundant grace and to hear challenging words that call us to a new reality in God’s reign? Is it not true that it is difficult to accept the authority of and believe in someone we know

well? Imagine a congregation full of pride for a youth who speaks at their Youth Sunday service. Later, the youth returns as a young adult to the neighborhood and church after college and graduate school. She suggests something to the church that runs counter to the way “we have always done it.” The pride that was shown on Youth Sunday becomes distrust and disbelief.

Jesus and the Children (9:33–37 and 10:13–16)

The disciples accompany Jesus throughout Galilee. They often have difficulty understanding his teaching. They are in awe of his marvelous works. But they are confused by his words when he says he is to suffer and die. They arrive in Capernaum, a village by the Sea of Galilee which is Peter’s hometown and home base for Jesus. The disciples argue as to who among them is the greatest. “[Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’” (9:35–37). The disciples are again reminded that their values and practices are not consistent with what Jesus expects.

The second passage (10:13–16) is another example of the disciples misunderstanding Jesus’ mission. It is not surprising that they would want to protect Jesus in the midst of the crowds where everyone pressed in upon him seeking a blessing. It is also not surprising that parents would desire for their children to receive a blessing from the touch of Jesus. These competing motives result

in a confrontation where the disciples prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus. Can you visualize the scene? Jesus sees what is happening and rebukes the disciples, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (v. 14).

Jesus is so consistent. He welcomes the lowly and reaches out to the marginalized: the children, tax collectors, fishermen, women, lepers, sinners, and people with evil spirits.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the actions and words of Jesus? Clearly, he is a complex, mysterious person who challenges us to the core of our usual ways of thinking, believing, and behaving. He invites us to join with him in his ministry of healing and teaching, of reaching out to the least, and he wants us to be open to new ways of understanding the good news.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. Vincent Taylor, *The Names of Jesus* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1953), 5.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Sunday: Philippians 2:1–11

What does it mean that God gave Jesus the name above every name? Pray to God in the name of Jesus, expressing your faith and trust in him as Lord.

Monday: Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:26–38

Imagine yourself in Joseph's or Mary's place. What are some thoughts and emotions you might have had? Pray that you might be as faithful as Joseph and Mary when you are surprised by a message from God.

Tuesday: Mark 2:1–12

Read this narrative from three perspectives: the crowd's, the disciples', and the scribes'. What do you think of Jesus from each perspective? Pray for wisdom to understand Jesus from your perspective today.

Wednesday: Mark 4:35–41

What are the perils you face? Pray to God to "still the storms" of your life.

Thursday: Mark 6:1–6 and Luke 4:16–30

Consider times when you lacked faith to believe that Jesus had the power to transform your life. Pray to God that you will be open to receive the good news Jesus offers.

Friday: Mark 9:33–37 and 10:13–16

Who are the ones who have been overlooked or put down because of their status? Pray for an open, welcoming spirit that you may reach out to others who are the least or the forgotten.

Saturday: Mark 10:17–31

What is it that prevents you from receiving what Jesus offers? Pray that your priorities will be ordered according to what Jesus expects.