

CHAPTER 3

LIFE OF CHRIST

[Good references for the life of Christ: standard harmonies of the Gospels; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (3rd ed., 2 vols., 1886); F. W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (rev. ed., 1893); James Stalker, *The Life of Jesus Christ* (1880); Donald Guthrie, *Jesus the Messiah* (1972); John Stirling, *An Atlas of the Life of Christ* (1966); Samuel J. Andrews, *The Life of Our Lord upon the Earth* (3rd ed., 1900)]

Chronological Summary of Jesus' Life

Birth of Jesus, ca. 7-6 B.C.

- Reign of Herod the Great (Matt 2:1-19; Luke 1:5)
 - Died 4 B.C.
- Governorship of Quirinius (Luke 2:2; spelled Cyrenius in KJV)
 - Appointed military overseer of Province of Syria by Augustus (12 B.C. – A.D. 17; actual governor A.D. 6-7)
- After census ordered
 - Roman censuses every 14 years; last one 22 B.C.; later one in A.D. 6-7 (referred to in Acts 5:37 and Josephus *Ant.* 17:13:5 and 18:1:1); thus census between in 8 B.C.
- Possible correlation with star conjunction of 7 B.C. (Jupiter and Saturn in Pices)

Beginning of public ministry, A.D. 27

- About 30 years old (Luke 3:23)
- 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1)

- Made co-emperor with Augustus (A.D. 13)
- Sole emperor when Augustus died (A.D. 14)
- Using inclusive years: A.D. 13 + 14 years = A.D. 27
- 46 years after temple building started (John 2:20)
 - Started by Herod in 19 B.C.; 19 B.C. + 46 years = A.D. 27

Length of ministry, 2 or 3 years

While the Synoptic Gospels indicate a ministry of 2 or 3 years, Mark seems to favor a 3-year ministry:

- Mark 2:23, harvest implies spring of the year
- Mark 6:39, “green grass” implies spring of the year again
- Mark 14:1, final Passover, in the spring

John gives a more detailed chronological framework, as he mentions Jesus’ participation in a number of the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. This framework works well for a three-year public ministry.

Chart of Jewish feasts:

Month	Feast	Occasion	OT Reference
March	Purim	Deliverance of Jews under Xerxes	Esth 9
April	Passover*	Exodus from Egypt	Exod 12; Lev 23
May	Pentecost*	50 days after Passover (barley harvest)	Lev 23
October	Tabernacles*	Sojourn in wilderness from Egypt	Lev 23
December	Dedication	Temple rededicated by Judas Maccabee	1 Macc 4

*(Pilgrim feast—adult males to celebrate festival in Jerusalem)

Feasts mentioned in John’s Gospel:

Year	Feast	Reference in John (or Acts)
A.D. 27	Passover	John 2:13, 23
A.D. 28	Passover (conjectured)	John 5:1
A.D. 29	Passover	John 6:4
A.D. 29	Tabernacles	John 7:2, 37
A.D. 29	Dedication	John 10:22-23
A.D. 30	Passover	John 12:1; 13:1; 19:14

A.D. 30	Pentecost	Acts 2:1
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Death of Christ, A.D. 30

- Prefecture of Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36)
- High priests at the time (John 11:49; 18:13; Acts 4:6)
 - High priesthood of Caiaphas (A.D. 18-36)
 - His father-in-law Annas still living, the previous high priest (A.D. 6-18)
- Three-year public ministry would end in A.D. 30

Birth, Infancy, and Childhood of Jesus

The NT says little about these years of Jesus' life; the gospels concentrate on his adult years—his ministry, Passion, and resurrection. However, what it does say is important as it provides background for his adult life.

Genealogies of Jesus (Matt 1; Luke 3)

There are two genealogies of Jesus in the NT. They are quite different from each other at various points. Two major interpretations reconcile these differences.

Traditional interpretation.—Both are genealogies of Jesus through his adopted father Joseph. The differences are due to following different branches of his family, branching at legal adoptions or levirate marriages. The earliest extant writer to suggest this was Julius Africanus (ca. A.D. 230, quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1:7). It is the view of J. Gresham Machen in *The Virgin Birth*.

Mary interpretation.—Matthew uses the genealogy of Joseph, while Luke uses the genealogy of Mary. This suggestion is offered by several modern conservative scholars.

Either interpretation can harmonize the differences in the genealogies. The point is that Jesus is not only fully human, but that he can rightfully claim the line of Abraham and the throne of David.

Birth and youth of John the Baptist (Luke 1)

Since Mary and Elizabeth were related, perhaps cousins (Luke 1:36), John and Jesus were also related, perhaps second cousins. The relation between the two expectant women, implying a spiritual relationship between their two children, shows that the human spirit exists in unborn babies.

Birth and infancy (Matt 1-2; Luke 1-2)

The Annunciation.—The angel Gabriel is an important messenger of God (cf. Dan 8:16; 9:21).

The virgin birth.—While not often stated in the NT, it is a vital doctrine, with strong implications into his person. Matthew quotes Isa 7:14, using the technical Greek word “virgin,” as did the LXX.

Bethlehem.—The ancestral town of David, prophesied in Mic 5:2. It was the Roman census that caused the Nazarenes Mary and Joseph to be there for the birth of Jesus.

The shepherds.—Mentioned only in Luke. Mary remembered them, perhaps was Luke’s source (Luke 2:19).

Circumcision.—On the eighth day of Jesus’ life, when he would have been named (Luke 1:21). “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” meaning “he will save.” Joseph had been instructed by the angel to give the baby this name (Matt 1:21).

Purification of Mary and presentation of Jesus.—Forty days after Jesus’ birth (Lev 12:3-4). Since we know that Mary brought two birds for the sacrifice, we deduce that they were poor (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev 12:8). Firstborn sons were to be consecrated to the Lord (Exod 13:2, 12); this would have been done at the same time. Simeon and Anna gave their testimonies to the newborn Savior.

The Magi.—Recorded only in Matthew. Traditionally translated Wise Men. Probably they were astrologers and historians from ancient Babylon. They saw the Star “in the East,” that is, in the Babylon area. The Star may have been a natural phenomenon (nova, conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, etc.), or a miraculous sign. The Magi probably were familiar with Daniel’s prophecies (especially Dan 2-7, written in Aramaic). They went to Jerusalem because they did not know the town of the king’s birth. They arrived in Bethlehem and gave their gifts; money from these gifts may have supported the young family as they fled to Egypt, lived there, and traveled home to Nazareth.

Flight to Egypt.—Joseph and his little family may have lived with friends or relatives in Alexandria. Herod the Great’s slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem is not recorded elsewhere, but was typical of his murderously jealous paranoia in his last years. After Herod died, Joseph decided to return, but avoided Judea because of the bad reputation of Herod’s son Archelaus. The time in Egypt fits with Jesus being the antitype of the nation of Israel (Hos 11:1).

Childhood and youth (Luke 2)

Childhood in Nazareth.—Jesus was an obedient child (Luke 2:40). Joseph and Mary apparently had four other sons and several daughters (Matt 13:55-56). Jesus probably attended synagogue school and grew up as other Jewish children, only without sin. The later made-up stories of fantastic miracles and astounding wisdom of the child Jesus were pure fantasy (e.g., the *Infancy Story of Thomas* [ca. A.D. 200; in Hennecke 1:392-399, also ANF 16:78-85]).

Visit to the temple.—At twelve years old, Jesus would enter religious adulthood, and would be required to attend the pilgrim festivals in Jerusalem. The Passover lasted a week. He by this time had great interest in Scripture and his place in God's purposes for Israel. The teachers were amazed by his interest, questions, and knowledge. He recognized God as his "Father," with primary claim to him. Again, Mary remembered this and may have told Luke (Luke 2:51). This is the only story we have about Jesus between his infancy and his baptism by John.

Silent years.—For about the next twenty years there is no scriptural record, except that he continued to live and grow "in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Probably during this time he learned his carpenter trade from his father (Mark 6:3). The Greek word for "carpenter" (*tekton*) is also used for stone workers in construction, a common need in Galilee at the time, as there were many building projects there. We assume that during these years Joseph died, as he is not mentioned as being alive any more in the Gospels. As the oldest son, Jesus would have responsibility for his family.

Preparation for public ministry

Before Jesus could enter his public ministry, the Father needed to prepare him through baptism by John and his trial in the desert of Judea. In these actions he repeated the history of Israel with Moses in the Red Sea and the wilderness, only in perfect obedience.

John the Baptist was raised up the last OT prophet by God. He was in the tradition of Elijah, calling people to repentance. His ministry was foretold as a precursor for the coming Messiah (Mal 4:5-6). Jesus was baptized by him, not because of needing repentance, but because he had to "fulfill all righteousness," living as a perfectly obedient Israelite should. Jesus' perfect keeping of the law is called his "active obedience" by theologians; it is imputed to us when we are justified by God.

God then led Jesus to the desert in Judea, to be tried and tested by the devil (Matt 4; Luke 4). This condition and these temptations mirror the experience of Israel in the wilderness under Moses. Whereas the Israelites failed many times and fell into sin and judgment, Jesus steadfastly resisted these temptations, quoting from the law in the same places where they had sinned (Deut 6, 8). Having passed the test and been refined, he now was ready to proclaim his mission to the people.

Public ministry

James Stalker has titled the three years of Jesus' public ministry; we will follow that outline. These years are structured by the festivals recorded in John's Gospel. Material in the Synoptic Gospels falls naturally into this structure.

1. Year of Obscurity (Passover 27 – Passover 28)
2. Year of Public Favor (Passover 28 – Passover 29)
3. Year of Opposition (Passover 29 – Passover 30)

Beginning of public ministry

After his baptism and temptation in Judea in the fall of A.D. 26, Jesus gathered his first five disciples (John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, Nathaniel = Bartholomew). He traveled with them to Galilee, where he performed the first of the signs recorded in John's Gospel, changing the water to wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. This early ministry is recorded only in John. Afterwards the disciples left him and returned to their own homes, where they resumed their normal vocations, several of them at least being fishermen.

Year of Obscurity (A.D. 27-28)

The activities of this first full year are mostly recorded in John 3-4. They begin in the spring of A.D. 27, when Jesus appeared in the temple at Passover and drove out the money changers, accusing them of making God's house "a house of merchandise." At the end of his ministry he cleared the temple again. Jesus apparently had done some miracles prior to this time, as Nicodemus came at night and said that no one could do such miracles if God were not with him. Nicodemus appears three times in John, ending as a disciple helping to bury his body.

After the Passover Jesus returned to Galilee, going through Samaria. There he met the Samaritan woman, leading to the conversion of her whole village. This account is in John; later the apostle John, along with Peter, was very interested in the spread of Christianity in Samaria (Acts 8:14). When Jesus reached Galilee, he was rejected in Nazareth, and therefore moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Lake of Galilee. Initially he stayed in Peter's home. Capernaum was to become his headquarters. Several of his closest disciples lived there.

The Synoptic Gospels record how Jesus selected his first disciples by the Lake of Galilee, as they were repairing their nets. They were two sets of brothers: James and John (sons of Zebedee), and Peter and Andrew (sons of Jonah). He told them to follow him and he would make them fishers of people. Actually, most of them had followed him for a while the previous year (as recorded in John), but they had returned to their secular occupation. Now Jesus called them to follow him permanently; so they left their work and followed him, forsaking their parents and earthly means of support (Matt 4:22; Luke 5:11).

During the next months Jesus performed many miracles, especially healings, and traveled around Galilee, preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. There was a continually growing band of disciples that followed him.

Year of Public Favor (A.D. 28-29)

Assuming John 5:1 records a Passover feast, Jesus was in Jerusalem for that festival. John 5 records how he healed the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda; this healing led to one of his early disputes with “the Jews” (a term John uses for the Jewish leaders). In this dispute Jesus declared himself to be the Son of God, and gave the evidences of the witnesses to him: his miracles, John the Baptist, the Father, and the Scriptures of Moses.

[The original Pool of Bethesda from the time of Jesus recently has been discovered in Jerusalem by archeologists. The pool previously named as such was from a later time.]

After Jesus returned to Galilee, many more crowds and disciples followed him everywhere. He performed many great miracles, healing all sort of diseases and demon possessions. At the end of this period he continued his great miracles with the feeding of the five thousand (recorded in all four gospels) and his walking on the water and stilling the storm.

Jesus taught the people as a rabbi, using simple, direct teaching, and employing a vivid style using proverb-like sayings and parables. The Synoptic Gospels record most of these teachings and events.

During this time Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount and selected and ordained his twelve apostles. These included the original disciples plus several others from various backgrounds, as Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot. Eleven apostles were from Galilee; only Judas Iscariot was from Judea.

During this year Jesus’ fame continued to surpass that of John the Baptist, and John the Baptist was imprisoned and beheaded by Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. This took place in the fortress Macherus, fifteen miles southeast from the mouth of the Jordan at the Dead Sea. John bore faithful witness to Jesus all during his life; Jesus paid tribute to him (Matt 11:2-19; 17:10-13).

Year of Opposition, A.D. 29-30

By the time the Passover of A.D. 29 arrived, Jesus’ enemies in the Jewish establishment were getting bolder and more vicious in their opposition to Jesus, viewing him as a threat to their leadership and their cherished beliefs. This hostility centered in Jerusalem, but often opponents dodged his steps in Galilee as well. According to John 6:4 Jesus did not attend the Passover that year, but instead ministered in Galilee and other areas.

After he fed the five thousand, the people tried to force him to become king, but he turned away from that path. From that point many “turned away” from him (John 6:66). His opposition steadily increased.

About half way through that year Jesus centered his attention on his coming Passion, making several short trips to Jerusalem interspersed with time spent in Perea, parts of Samaria and Galilee, and in areas of Judea outside Jerusalem. This transition is marked by Luke: “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Jesus spent some of this time away from the Jewish areas entirely, traveling with his disciples north to the area of Tyre and Sidon and to the territory of Philip the Tetrarch near Caesarea Philippi. There he heard the great confession of Peter, and was transfigured before his three closest disciples. He began preparing his disciples for his coming sufferings, death, and resurrection. At that point his disciples did not comprehend what was happening. All four gospels discuss this time in Jesus’ life. John centers more on his ministry in Jerusalem while the Synoptics emphasize his ministry in the other areas; Luke has an extended section on Jesus’ time in Perea (Luke 13-17).

During these last months Jesus attended two Jewish festivals prior to his last Passover. In the fall of A.D. 29 he attended the Feast of Tabernacles, and then in December the Feast of Dedication. John records the controversies he had with the Jewish leaders during both those visits, as well as his great miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead (John 7-11). Events outside Jerusalem recorded in the Synoptics, especially in Luke, can be harmonized and fit between the final visits to Jerusalem recorded in John.

Final Events

While the last week of Jesus’ life, his sufferings and death, and his resurrection all took place in just a few days, these events are of immense importance for the church. All four gospels devote many chapters to this small slice of time. There are 89 chapters in the Gospels; 30 of them, more than a third, are devoted to these events.

The final week

Jesus’ last week before his crucifixion is divided into two parts. All during the week he stayed at night in Bethany at the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, a short distance southeast of Jerusalem. The first part of the week he went every day into Jerusalem, where he usually argued with the Jewish teachers and leaders. The second part of the week he did not go to Jerusalem, staying with his friends and disciples. He did not reenter the city until the time of the Lord’s Supper.

Sunday: The triumphal entry.—The procession led from Bethpage on the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley and into the eastern part of the city. Jesus formally presented himself to the Jewish nation as its Messiah (note the messianic proclamation of the crowds [Matt 21:9; cf. Ps 118:26]). He did this in a literal fulfillment of prophecy (Zech 9:9). Jesus entered

the temple and “looked around at everything” (Mark 11:11). The leaders, followed by the people, rejected this final presentation.

Monday: Second temple clearing.—Recorded in the Synoptics (John has the first temple clearing). Jesus expelled the money changers and hawkers, saying that they were making God’s house “a den of robbers.”

Tuesday: Challenge to authority.—Jesus defended his authority to clear the temple, and described the Jewish leaders by means of parables.

Wednesday: Debates with the Jews.—Jesus in turn disputed with the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees.

On the way back to Bethany that evening Jesus gave to his disciples the Olivet Discourse, describing the coming destruction of the temple, and the events at the end of the age. That night in Bethany Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha, anointed him with precious ointment.

Thursday: preparation of the Passover.—Jesus sent out two disciples to prepare the Passover in Jerusalem, obtaining a room and the lamb. That night, after sundown, Jesus celebrated his last Passover with his disciples, instituted the Lord’s Supper, and delivered his Upper Room Discourse to his disciples (John 12-17).

Late that night he crossed the Kidron Valley with his disciples, and went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There he was arrested by the troops sent from the Jewish leaders, led by Judas Iscariot.

The Passion

Friday: trial, crucifixion, and burial.—Jesus was taken from the Garden to begin his trials. There were six trials; all the Jewish trials were held at night, ending at dawn on Friday morning; his Roman trials took about three hours, ending about 9 a.m. Friday morning.

- Jewish trials
 - Before Annas, former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas
 - Before Caiaphas and other leaders
 - Formal trial before Sanhedrin

- Roman trials
 - Before Pontius Pilate
 - Before Herod Antipas
 - Again before Pontius Pilate

During and between these stages of his trial, Jesus was mistreated, beaten, mocked, taunted, and brutally scourged. In all his sufferings he was bearing our sins, and he responded without sin or malice.

Jesus was crucified between two robbers, just outside the city wall, on the hill of Golgotha (the Skull). The probable site is the tradition one in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

During the first three hours on the cross (ca. 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.) Jesus is reported to have uttered three “sayings.” All three of these sayings are directed to the benefit of others. During this time he was the object of continual mocking and ridicule from the crowds below.

1. To his Father, about the Roman soldiers, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (in Luke; text doubtful—rated by UBS {C})
2. To the repentant thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” (in Luke)
3. To Mary his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to John “Here is your mother.” (in John)

During the next three hours darkness covered the scene (12-3 p.m.). During these hours Jesus bore the full weight of our sin and endured the wrath of the just God. All of Jesus’ recorded four sayings during these hours are near the end, just before he died. They all show Jesus’ relation to his Father in one aspect or another.

4. “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*—My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (spoken in Aramaic, his native tongue; translated into Greek by the gospel writer; Matthew begins with the Hebrew form *Eli*, while Mark begins with the Aramaic form *Eloi*)
5. “I am thirsty.” (in John)
6. “It is finished.” (in John)
7. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (in Luke)

Jesus died about 3 p.m. Friday afternoon. Joseph of Arimathea later asked Pilate for permission, removed Jesus’ body from the cross, and buried it in his own tomb, which was near the place of crucifixion. Nicodemus provided 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to be used with the linen wrappings. They wrapped his body and closed the tomb just before sundown Friday evening. That point would mark the beginning of the weekly Sabbath, when everyone had to rest. The women who followed Jesus intended themselves to prepare his body more carefully after the Sabbath was over.

[The traditional sites of both Golgotha and the tomb are in the large Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the time of Christ that location was outside the city wall. The modern site called Gordon’s Calvary has no real historical claim to authenticity; however, it does provide a more serene, garden-like atmosphere.]

Saturday: Jesus in the grave.—Since no work could be done on the Sabbath, further preparation of Jesus’ body came to a standstill. At sunset, after the Sabbath was over, some of the women brought additional spices to Joseph’s house, to be used by them the following day (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1).

Resurrection and appearances

Jesus actually arose sometime very early Sunday morning, while it was still dark. His resurrection itself was not witnessed by anyone. When the angels appeared to the guards, Jesus had already been risen (Matt 28:2-4). They opened the stone door, not so Jesus could come out, but so that people could look and go in—to see that the tomb was empty.

At first Mary Magdalene and the other women and Peter and John go to the tomb and find it empty, sometimes receiving a message from angels there. Then Jesus himself appeared to his followers.

Early appearances in or near Jerusalem

First Sunday: 1. To Mary Magdalene (John & [Mark])
2. To other women (Matt)
3. To two going to Emmaus (Luke)
4. To Simon Peter (Luke & 1 Cor)
5. To apostles without Thomas (Luke, John)

Next Sunday: 6. To eleven apostles, including Thomas (John)

The early appearances promised a new meeting in Galilee (angels at tomb—Mark 28:7 = Mark 16:7; cf. Luke 24:6; Jesus to the women—Matt 28:10).

Middle appearances in Galilee

Now it was the end of Passover week, and the disciples could travel back to Galilee.

Days not specified:

7. To seven disciples at lake (John)
8. To disciples on mountain (Matt)
—Perhaps the 500 people at once (1 Cor 15:6)
9. To James (1 Cor 15, perhaps in Jerusalem)

Later appearances in or near Jerusalem

With the feast of Pentecost approaching, the disciples returned to Jerusalem.

10. Final teachings in Jerusalem (Luke, Acts 1)
11. Ascension from Mount of Olives, near Bethany (Luke, Acts 1)

[For a good harmony of the gospel accounts of the events at the tomb and Jesus' appearances, see A. T. Robertson, *Harmony of the Gospels* (1922), also the interesting discussion by Gilbert West, *Observations on the History and Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (1749).]

Ascension

For forty days after his resurrection Jesus appeared at various times to his disciples and taught them about the kingdom of God. He was to return to heaven until the kingdom would be given to him at his second coming. During this interval his church is to be his witness, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke in Acts 1 describes the ascension of Jesus into heaven at the end of the forty days. This ascension was given for the disciples' sakes; it was an indication that he would come "in the same way." Zechariah had predicted that the Messiah would come and stand upon the Mount of Olives (Zech 14:4); and that is where Jesus was standing when he went into heaven. Encouraged by the angels, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and awaited the promised coming of the Holy Spirit.