



Aim of lesson

To review the narrative books of the New Testament in their historical context.

Bible background

Matthew, Mark, Luke John and The Acts of the Apostles.

Preparation required

There is a lot to do in this lesson so you will need to decide whether you are going to take more than one week or choose what is appropriate for your class.

It would be useful in the lesson to have an Authorised Version, a concordance, and a modern translation with section headings.

Some practical preparation may need to be done for some of the exercises in the students' books.

Outline of lesson

It isn't the aim of this lesson to cover the stories in the Gospels. The students should know that we have four accounts of the life of Jesus so you could start the lesson by asking why there are four. You could ask them each to tell you about an event that they all went to and notice how their versions vary according to what interests them. Emphasize that the coming of Jesus was an event that the earth had been waiting for since it was first promised in Eden and we sometimes fail to appreciate its significance as we are so familiar with the stories.

The Gospels

They all tell about Jesus. Gospel means 'Good news'. The first three are called the 'Synoptic Gospels'. This means they describe happenings from the same point of view. They look at the life of Jesus from a historical point of view and concentrate mostly on his ministry in Galilee whereas John dwells more on the meaning of Jesus life and teachings and concentrates on his work in Judea.

Note on the class or personal timeline when the events in the five books happened and note when the books were written on the timeline in the students' books.

Acts was presumably completed around 60 AD, when Paul was in house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30). We know that Luke was written before Acts (Acts 1:1), maybe during the two years that Paul spent in prison in Caesarea - 56-58 AD, and since the introduction to Luke refers to other gospels it seems reasonable to think that Matthew and Mark (at least) were written before then. Traditionally, John's gospel was written last, around 85 AD.

Ask the class what they know of the Gospel writers and the writer of Acts. They could jot some notes in the boxes in the students' books. There are references there if they need help. Typical notes could be:

Matthew

He was an apostle. He was a tax collector. He is also called Levi. Notice that in his own Gospel Matthew he doesn't call himself Levi. In Mark 2:14 he is called Levi the son of Alphaeus, so he could be the brother of James the son of Alphaeus - the two always appear together in the lists of apostles. He left everything behind to follow Jesus.

His is a gospel for the Jews. Use the references in italics in the students' books to see that Matthew refers a lot to the Old Testament; he starts with a genealogy; he often calls Jesus the son of David and he doesn't feel the need to explain Jewish customs. Matthew wants to show that Jesus is the promised Messiah. (1:23, 2:2, 25:31 27:37)

Mark

He was probably the John Mark of Acts and he may have been the young man in Mark 15:51. He was cousin or nephew to Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). He was well known to Peter who called him 'his son', so Peter may have told him the things he wrote in his gospel.

Mark's is the shortest of the gospels. He wants to show his readers that Jesus is the Son of God and to show us that Jesus came to serve people - references in italics in the students' books. It is thought that Matthew and Luke may have used Mark's Gospel in their own writing.

Luke

He was a faithful friend of Paul who accompanied him on many of his travels even to prison. He was a doctor and a Gentile (see Colossians 4:10-11, where Paul mentions the Jews who were with him, and then refers to Luke in v14. Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, and was with Paul at the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:11).

His Gospel mentions many historical details. It emphasizes Jesus' humanity and his acceptance of Gentiles, women, children and the poor. The account of Jesus' life is made up of four journeys from Nazareth to the temple in Jerusalem: at his birth; when he was 12; in his mind during his temptations; and during his ministry. Luke is telling us that Jesus left behind his human origin and travelled to the house of God.

John

He was an apostle - the brother of James and son of Zebedee. Jesus called James and John 'sons of thunder' (Mark 3:17). John called himself 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. He also wrote three short letters, and the book of Revelation.

John doesn't tell us any of the parables. He only tells us about the miracles (he calls them 'signs') that he needs to make a point. This is best illustrated by looking at Chapter 6:1-15 & 35 and 9:1-11 & 39. Although the words John uses are very simple (in Greek as well as English) they are often very hard to understand.

Feasts

John records several occasions when Jesus went to Jerusalem because there was a feast. He records three passovers explicitly (2:13, 6:4 and 13:1), and probably a fourth: John 4:35 says that there were four months to the harvest (which is in April-May), so the next feast (5:1) would be the passover.

The Acts of the Apostles

We have established that this book was written by Luke. The references in italics in the students' books show times when Luke was actually with Paul on his journeys.

How much you revise of the events in Acts will depend on your class. There is a set of pictures in the students' books which could act as memory joggers or you could photocopy a set and get the class to put them in order, or the students could try to identify which chapter each picture illustrates. The answers are:

Altar at Athens 17:23	The ascension of Jesus 1:9	Philippian jailor 16:27
Dorcas 9:30	Shipwreck 27:15	Ananias 5:2
Ethiopian 8:30	Peter's vision 10:11	Eutychus 20:9
Philippi 16:13	Paul's arrest in Jerusalem	At Lystra 14:13
Stephen 7:59	Peter in prison 12:7	Pentecost 2:3
Conversion of Saul 9:3	Healing the lame man 3:3	Handkerchiefs 19:12

Acts 1:8 is an important verse because it shows that Jesus wanted his disciples to tell the gospel message to all the world. The crowd at Pentecost returning home and the dispersion after Stephen's death started this and faithful followers like Paul worked to make it happen.

Relevance to our lives

A knowledge and understanding of the Gospels and the Acts is obviously important as it provides us with the knowledge of Jesus, his perfect example, teachings, and God's purpose with the earth. Seeing Jesus' first coming in its historical context helps us to realise he was a 'light shining in the darkness' (John 1:5; Isaiah 60:1).

Extension activities

- Talk about how by comparing the gospel narratives we can build up a fuller picture of Christ's life and extend our understanding of the lessons he teaches. Use the example of the 'Feeding of the 5,000' (which is one of the few events

recorded in all 4 gospels) to illustrate the point. Ask the students to compare the four texts, which are printed in the students' books, looking for similarities and differences in order to build a larger picture of the event.

- Choose a character (John the Baptist, Mary and Martha, for instance) or an event (a miracle, parable, or the temptations of Christ) and find any references to them in the gospels, using a concordance or gospel parallels book. A picture can then be built up using the different accounts. Devise fact files using information gained from the gospel accounts.