

From the Pastor's desk: Greetings to you brothers and sisters: Lesson 1, Title The World in Which Christ Lived

Today we will begin the Light of the World series. This series focuses on the life of Jesus Christ based upon the four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As we study together, we will learn details about Jesus' life, and also how Jesus can meet your personal daily needs. Today we will focus on the title The World in Which Christ Lived

AUTHORITY FOR OUR STORY: As the source of our story, we have the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which are accurate and inspired accounts of Jesus' life. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us much about what Jesus did. John tells us who and what He is and seeks to picture the divine beauty of Jesus—*the sinless years that unfolded beneath the blue Palestinian skies*—the righteousness, truth, divine holiness, and love that shone from Christ's person.

These biographies were written by men who lived when Jesus was here on earth and who were well qualified to write about Him. We turn to these four books in the New Testament for our authority. Here the actual facts about Jesus Christ are presented—His pre-existence, His birth, His life, His ministry and teaching, His death, His resurrection, and His promise to come to this earth the second time. Jesus is more than a mere man, He is the Light of the whole world.

This series will present the events in the life of Christ in their natural order as nearly as possible and also reveal the many sides of Christ's life.

As sunlight passing through a prism that is broken up into the beautiful colors of the rainbow, so Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, becomes more attractive when we look at him as the Master Teacher, the Great Healer, the Friend of sinners, the Prophet of God, the Miracle Worker, the Savior of mankind, and the Son of God. To use another illustration—before a diamond has been cut, it looks much like any other stone to the casual observer. But in the hands of a skillful artisan, it is cut and ground and polished until its dozens of facets seem to flash with living fire. So, the life of Christ has many facets which, when put together, reveal perfectly the great Light, which is Christ himself. Efforts have been made to relate these pieces of Christ's life to one another in such a way that they present a full revelation of the most beautiful life this world has ever known

LET'S LOOK AT THE SURROUNDINGS OF JESUS: Jesus was born in Palestine, a country about the size of the state of Massachusetts. Palestine is approximately one hundred fifty miles long and as much as seventy miles wide in places. Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, is only seventy miles from Jerusalem in a straight line.

The Roman Emperor Augustus ruled a great part of the world in those days, and Jesus' tiny homeland was a part of the vast Roman Empire. Julius Caesar, uncle to Augustus, was the great builder of the empire, which included all the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Here are some facts that will help you to understand what life was like in Christ's day:

1. **LANGUAGE**—Greek was the language spoken in the eastern Mediterranean countries, while Latin was prevalent in the western area. The language Christ and His disciples spoke was Aramaic, a language which had long been used in several nations surrounding Judea. Aramaic was also widely used as the language of business and trade. After the Babylonian captivity, it had gradually replaced Hebrew among the Jews, until by Christ's time Aramaic was the language of the masses. Hebrew was understood only by scholars. We will end here today. Be enlightened as we learn more about Jesus. “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (KJV John 17:3). Get to know more about Jesus and grow in grace. Compiled by Pastor Obadiah M Ngwenya Byo City Center Pastor).

From the Pastor's desk: Greetings to you brothers and sisters: Lesson 1, Title The World in Which Christ Lived part two.

2. POLITICS—During the forty-five years of Augustus's reign (31 B.C. - A.D. 14), peace and prosperity largely prevailed throughout the empire. Comparative peace continued also under Augustus's immediate successors. People of many lands enjoyed Roman citizenship, and there was harmony, more or less, among the races under the worldwide government of Rome. This gave trade and commerce great opportunities for expansion and also prepared the way for the spread of Christianity.

3. RELIGION—There were many confused ideas about God at this time. The supporters of Emperor Augustus regarded him as a god. Statues were erected to him throughout the empire, and a religious cult developed around the emperor. Other religious ideas were prevalent as well, Stoicism was a sort of pantheistic philosophy that regarded God as present in all living things. And since the world is controlled by divine law, the Stoics contended that man should freely conform to his destiny—whatever that might be—unmoved by joy or grief, pain or pleasure. The Epicureans, in opposition to the Stoics, taught that pleasure is the highest good, although they also recommended virtue. Stoicism and Epicureanism were popular chiefly with the Greeks.

Judaism, the religion of the Hebrews with its multiplied forms and ceremonies, was widely held. Millions of Jews, descendants of the tribes that had been scattered by the Assyrians and Babylonians, had carried their religion with them everywhere, and there were many Gentiles who had accepted the faith of Israel. Judaism, however, was divided into several sects. Chief among these were the Pharisees, who were most anxious to keep the nation true to the traditions of the past and to keep alive the hope and expectation of a coming Messiah. The Sadducees, composed mostly of wealthy, influential persons, were strong rivals of the Pharisees. They stressed the moral law, but denied the authority of tradition and the doctrines of the immortality of the soul, the resurrection, and the existence of angels. They also discounted the Messianic hope. The Essenes opposed the ritualism and formalism of the Pharisees. They took no part in public affairs and passed their lives in retired places, seeking by self-denial and prayer to realize their ideal of ritual purity. They believed in the immortality of the soul, but denied the resurrection of the body. It was into this kind of world that Christ came to reveal the true God to humanity.

LET'S NOW LOOK A BRIEF PREVIEW OF CHRIST'S LIFE: The moral condition of the people at the time of our Saviour's birth was very low. Vice, crime, and disease were rampant. Jesus came into the world to penetrate this darkness with the light of His gospel of love and healing. The following tribute from an unknown author points out the beauty and power of the life that you are about to study: Here is a young man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that were ever built and all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as has that One Solitary Life. "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (KJV John 17:3). "Saving knowledge is here defined as that which is centered upon the true God..., and upon Jesus Christ. Men will be rejected in the last day because they rejected the essential knowledge. Get to know about Jesus and receive eternal life.

Compiled by Pastor Obadiah M Ngwenya Byo City Center Pastor).

From the Pastor's desk: Greetings to you brothers and sisters: Lesson 2, Title The Babe of Bethlehem

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity. . . . For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way" (Hebrews 2:14, 17).* Let us open the Bible, look into its inspired pages, and discover the secret of Christ's life of power. As we journey by His side through His ministry in Palestine, we will witness His mighty miracles and wonderful works. From one thrilling scene to another, we will travel with Jesus from Bethlehem to the great climax when He died as mankind's Redeemer on the cross of Calvary and rose triumphant from the tomb. Every step of the way, we will walk in the light—first, in the bright rays of the star that shone over Bethlehem, then on to the light that radiated from the tomb when Christ arose from the dead. It will be a heart-warming experience, and you will not want to stop until you have finished the journey.

We will acquaint ourselves with the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. To begin with, let's be sure of one thing—Jesus Christ was a real person, an historical character, who lived on this earth. His life was spent among humble people who in many respects were just like Himself. He was born in a small town in Palestine about 4 B.C. At the time of Christ's birth, the world did not realize that all history was to focus on Him. It was not until over five hundred years later that the idea came about of reckoning all time as either before or after the birth of Christ. But after that much time had elapsed, it was not easy to compute the exact date, and it was later discovered that an error of about four years had been made, a fact which places the date of Christ's birth at about 4 B.C. The exact day and month cannot be absolutely fixed.

At the age of thirty three, Jesus died at Jerusalem about five miles from the scene of His nativity. According to His own statement, His life work was "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). He came to be the Savior of mankind and to show us how to live and how to die with the hope of a resurrection to eternal life. To accomplish this, He became a real man with human flesh. His life of complete triumph over human selfishness placed Him in a position where He can solve all the problems that distress our world. Let's turn now to the Scripture record, where the Light shines clearly for all to see. Kindly read Matthew 2 and Luke 2:1-38.

WHERE WAS JESUS BORN?: "Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod" (Matthew 2:1). Jesus was born in the quiet town of Bethlehem where David, the shepherd boy, had kept his flock centuries before. There was widespread expectation among the people that a great king would arise out of Judea. This is mentioned by many historians. At this time the wicked and cruel King Herod ruled Palestine. He belonged to a family that furnished the rulers for Palestine during the latter half of the century before Christ and throughout the first century of the Christian era. The coming of mankind's Redeemer had been the theme of all the Old Testament prophets. Let's notice just two of these prophecies:

According to Micah. The birth of Jesus in the town of Bethlehem had been foretold by the prophet Micah. Here are his words as written seven centuries before Christ: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times"(Micah 5:2).

Daniel. The prophet Daniel had predicted the first coming to the earth of the Messiah, or Christ, and more especially the time when He would enter into His public work (see Daniel 9:25). From the earliest days of human history, men had been expecting Christ to appear on earth. Just before Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden because of sin, God pronounced a curse on the serpent that had enticed Eve, and at the same time promised a Redeemer for mankind. God said: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Christ was the promised Seed of the woman. On the cross, He was bruised by Satan, the serpent, but the tomb could not hold Him. Ultimately, the head of the serpent will be bruised when Satan is destroyed in the lake of fire.

Compiled by Pastor Obadiah M Ngwenya Byo City Center Pastor).

From the Pastor's desk: Greetings to you brothers and sisters: Lesson 2, Title: The Babe of Bethlehem Section 2 with the Tithe WHO WERE JESUS' PARENTS?

The mother of Jesus is identified beyond question in the Gospel of Matthew, and so is her husband, Joseph. "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:18, 19). Joseph, a carpenter of Nazareth, was "a righteous man." He was perplexed to learn that the virgin Mary to whom he was engaged was soon to have a child, so he made plans to break the engagement. Then God revealed to him in a dream that Mary was "with child through the Holy Spirit."

"But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' " (Matthew 1:20, 21.) This relieved Joseph's anxiety (see Matthew 1:25). Both Joseph and Mary were direct descendants of David, the greatest of Israel's kings.

In Matthew 1:1-17, the family line is traced through Joseph. In Luke 3:23-38, the family tree is that of Mary, although it appears to be Joseph's, but that is only because it was not customary for a woman's name to appear in genealogies. Joseph was really the son-in-law of Heli. So Heli—Eli, in Hebrew—was actually Mary's father, not Joseph's. Both Mary and Joseph descended from a royal line, that of David. Jesus was of royal distinction as far as His earthly parents were concerned, yet at His birth there were no royal courtiers from Jerusalem to greet Him, only the humble shepherds of the field.

WHAT WELCOME WAS EXTENDED TO JESUS? Nazareth, in northern Palestine, had been the home of Mary and Joseph prior to the birth of Jesus. But a decree from Emperor Caesar Augustus "that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Luke 2:1), required that they go to Bethlehem, their own city, to register. After their arrival, Jesus was born, and the following experience took place. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' . . . So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger" (Luke 2:8-12, 16).

The humble shepherds, instructed by a band of heavenly angels, hurried to the town of Bethlehem where they found the baby Jesus lying in a manger. Mary and Joseph had found temporary lodging in the stable of an inn, because all the available rooms were rented, and here the Christ child was born. The Bible record is very simple: "And she [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

Mary and Joseph were encouraged by the visit of the shepherds, and when they learned that angels had actually directed them to Bethlehem, a new sense of responsibility seized them.

Thought Questions: But why were not more of the children of Israel present to welcome Jesus? And why were not representatives from other lands there to rejoice at the birth of the world's Redeemer? **The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.**" (Mt 4:16). See the Light! Compiled by Pastor Obadiah M Ngwenya Byo City Center Pastor).

From the Pastor's desk: Greetings to you brothers and sisters: Lesson 2, Title The Babe of Bethlehem Section 3 with the Tithe Who Were Among The First To Worship Jesus?

The record is that wise men came from an eastern country to worship the infant Jesus. These men were the first converts to Christ from a foreign land. Let's read the story of their visit: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him' " (Matthew 2:1, 2).

Making their way from the east to the city of Jerusalem, the wise men—the Bible does not say how many—made inquiry concerning a mysterious star that they had seen in the night sky and which had guided them to Jerusalem. They also asked about the birthplace of the new-born King of the Jews. But apparently no one in Jerusalem, not even the priests and rulers, were aware of the great event that had taken place in Bethlehem. If they did know, they did not seem concerned about it. When King Herod learned of the visit of the wise men, his suspicions were aroused, and he demanded an explanation of their mission. This the wise men were eager to give. They wanted information about Jesus. Where was He? Couldn't anybody tell them? Summoning the priests, Herod instructed them to tell him where the Christ was to be born. " 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied, 'for this is what the prophet has written' " (Matthew 2:5).

With this information, the wise men left the palace of the king and set out for the city of David. Then the star reappeared and led them to Jesus, as the Scripture says: "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route" (Matthew 2:9-12).

Perhaps, the wise men of the east were students of the ancient scrolls of the prophets, and by reading these forecasts, they knew that a Saviour would appear in Israel. "A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel," the prophet Balaam had declared in Numbers 24:17. Could the mysterious star which they had seen in the night sky be a sign that the Light of the world had penetrated the darkness to shine upon the hearts of men? They determined to find out. As they followed the light of the moving star, they found the infant Redeemer and laid their precious gifts at his feet. Then, being warned by God in a dream not to tell Herod of their discovery, they returned to their own country by a different route. The gifts which they left behind, the first ever presented to Jesus, no doubt helped to finance the long journey of the family to Egypt. **WHAT MESSAGE CAME TO JOSEPH IN A DREAM?** After the visit of the Magi, or wise men, an urgent message came to Joseph in a dream. The angel of the Lord had grim news for him. "When they [the wise men] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up,' he said, 'take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him' " (Matthew 2:13). When the wise men failed to return to Jerusalem, Herod sent soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the children under two years of age (see Matthew 2:16, 17). Herod's action had been prophesied in Jeremiah 31:15. This monstrous deed was executed with the hope that the infant Jesus, whom Herod feared as a possible rival to the throne, would be killed in the general massacre. But in a dream an angel appeared to Joseph and warned him to flee to Egypt. This he did without delay, barely escaping with Mary and the baby Jesus. Soon after the slaughter of the innocent children, Herod himself died a horrible death. The Light of the world has penetrated the darkness to shine upon the hearts of men, receive Him. "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." (John 12:36) (Compiled by Pastor Obadiah M Ngwenya Byo City Center Pastor).

From the Pastor's desk: Greetings to you brothers and sisters: Lesson 2, Title The Babe of Bethlehem Section 3 with the Title: What Experience Took Place In The Temple?

It was customary among the Jews for the firstborn of all male children to be dedicated in the temple. So, before their flight into Egypt, Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus to Jerusalem to dedicate him to the service of God. God had promised to give His only begotten Son to save sinners, and this gift of heaven was to be acknowledged in every home in Israel by the consecration of the firstborn son to God's service. "Joseph and Mary took him [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord')" (Luke 2:22, 23). This was in harmony with the accepted Jewish practice for male children and took place about forty days after the nativity (see Leviticus 12:1-4), but probably before the visit of the wise men. Mary brought two turtledoves as an offering (see Luke 2:24). These gentle creatures were without blemish and were symbolic of the perfect child she presented. Jesus was healthy and without physical defect of any kind. He was the "lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19). He was an example of what God intended every child to be, physically as well as spiritually.

On this occasion, Anna, a prophetess, and Simeon, a just and devout man, were divinely led to the scene of dedication, where they announced to the priests and the people that this holy child was the promised Savior. Simeon declared openly in the temple: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32).

Then Simeon illustrated the exact work Christ was to do. He said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34). All must fall and be broken in repentance for sin before they can rise to live triumphantly over pride and selfishness. Later, when Christ began His public ministry, He showed that true humility is one of the first essentials for citizenship in His kingdom. Here are His exact words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

WHY DID CHRIST COME INTO THE WORLD? And now let's find out why Christ came to this earth as a man. We have a partial answer in our guiding text: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity. . . . For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest" (Hebrews 2:14, 17). Christ became a man so that He might experience the trials of our humanity. Clothed in human flesh, He was able to understand the tests that come to us in this life. Jesus, as the Son of man, can sympathize with those whose hearts are torn and broken by trial and temptation. He is "merciful and faithful" to all. Many in Christ's day were afraid of God because they thought He was harsh and severe. Jesus came to correct this misconception and to show that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

In this story of the blessed Babe of Bethlehem is revealed "the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Romans 11:33). It teaches us that sinful human beings may be reconciled to God and brought back to Him. Here is shown His great love! Christ lived for us, and He died for us on the cross to redeem us from our sins. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but has He been born in our hearts? That's the all-important question.

Some years ago in London, a non-Christian made fun of an uneducated man who had recently been converted. "What do you know about Jesus Christ?" he asked scornfully. "I know a few things," was the humble reply. "When was He born?" was the first question. To this the new Christian gave a wrong answer. "How old was He when He died?" Again, the answer was incorrect. The unbeliever asked many questions, always with the same result. Then he said with a cold sneer, "See, you do not know as much about Jesus as you thought, do you?" "I know very little," was the Christian's reply, "but I know this: Three years ago I was one of the worst drunkards on the east side of London. My wife was a broken-hearted woman, and my children were as afraid of me as if I had been a wild animal. Today, I have one of the happiest homes in London, and when I come home at the close of the day, my wife and children are glad to see me. Jesus Christ has done this for me. That I know!" So the story of Bethlehem is wonderful! And why? Because it brings us face-to-face with Jesus the Savior and it reveals His love and power. (Compiled by Obadiah M Ngwenya Byo City Center Pastor).