



Introduction

Lesson 1

Something happened nearly 2,000 years ago that has radically altered human history. A Jewish prophet began roaming the country of Galilee, proclaiming the message that God's kingdom was near and instructing his fellows Jews to love their neighbor as themselves, even if the neighbor was their hated enemy. This Jewish prophet would stir up a hornet's nest in Jerusalem, threatening the systems and structures that the religious elite had put in place, and for his insolence he would pay with his life. Shortly thereafter, his disciples had begun believing that he had come back from the dead and now was ascended to the right hand of God. As implausible as it might seem, this movement exploded and eventually made its way on to every continent and countless different cultures all throughout the world.

For the past 2,000 years theologians have been asking the all important question: so what exactly happened? In theology, this is called Christology: the study of Jesus Christ. Over the next few weeks, we will have a crash course in Christology. We will be studying who Jesus was and how we should think about him. As we begin, though, it's important to set up how this study will work by asking and answering several important questions.

In our first study, we will ask why we should study Christology, what are the dangers of studying Christology, how should we study Christology, and finally what do we study in Christology?

Why should I study Jesus?

As we begin diving into this study, it's always good to know why we're taking the time to study what we're studying. We will look at three reasons why the series we are about to start is an important one for every Christian to learn.

- **Be Prepared for False Teaching**

Another problem is that The history of the study of Christ is a long and complicated one. Throughout the history of the church, different doctrinal issues have been the focus of more intense study. During the era of the Reformation, the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) was the center of the battle between the protestants and the Catholics. During the era of the early 1900's, the liberals the fundamentalists battled over the doctrine of Scripture (bibliology). But the first issue that the church had to address? The question of what we do with Jesus. Early theologians battled long and hard over whether or not Jesus was human, divine, and how exactly those two facets interacted and didn't

interact. It took them several hundred years to nail it down, but their answers have often been challenged, even recently.

What are some wrong teachings about Jesus that are common today?

Are you ready for a Mormon to try and convince you Jesus is “a god” and not “the God” because there is no article before the word for God in John 1:1? What will you say if a Muslim says to you that the trinity is blasphemous because it teaches that there is more than one god? How surprised would you be if a Hindu sat behind you and “Amened” an Easter service on how God sent Jesus to save the world. To respond to all of these, you need to be prepared and you need to know doctrine.

- **Understand Doctrine Better**

“Doctrine” is a word that fills many people with fear and suspicion. Most Christians acknowledge that it’s probably a good thing that their pastor know doctrine, but many wonder why it is that people in the pew would need to know doctrine. But doctrine is just teaching, and all of God’s people need to understand the teaching of Scripture! Why? Because right doctrine leads to right living.

Paul makes this point in the book of Titus. In Titus 2:1, Paul exhorts Titus to “teach what accords with sound doctrine.” We could translate the same phrase this way “speak what is fitting for right teaching.” Paul then gives several examples of what this kind of living looks like for different age groups: what does it look like when old men, old women, young women, and young men live in a way that accords with right doctrine.

Read Titus 2:1-11. What types of things should be in the lives of people who hold to right doctrine? What is the connection between right teaching and right living in these verses?

Understanding who Jesus is and what he has done is more than just empty theory. It can radically change the way you live. The right knowledge of God ought to lead to right living before God.

What are some ways that a right knowledge of Jesus can help us to live holier lives?

What are the dangers of studying Jesus?

In the previous section, we saw that right thinking about Christ should live to right living. But that doesn't always happen. We can all think of the stereotype theologian who knows a whole of theology but is arrogant and not a lot of fun to be around. We rightly react to such an extreme by realizing that something has gone very wrong, and yet too often people think that what has gone wrong has been careful study of theology. We have argued that isn't the case, so then what has gone wrong?

When we consider the study of Jesus, or any theology for that reason, it's helpful to imagine someone riding a bike along a very steep mountain. On either side there is a deep hill, and veering too far off the road could lead to disaster in either direction. On one side is the danger of sentimentality, and on the other side is the danger of rationalism. We will look at each of these in turn.

- **The danger of sentimentality – Love without knowledge produces confusion.**

A quick perusal of the music of the church today will show that sentimentality is a very real problem. Sentimentality happens when there is an emphasis on the love of God, passion for God, and dedication to God but without a whole lot of content.

Different flavors of Christianity struggle with shallowness in different ways. What are some different ways that Christians struggle with shallowness?

The danger in this is that a genuine passion for God but devoid of knowledge will lead to all kinds of problems. People will be genuinely passionate, but in their fervor they might make harmful decisions. They will not understand and be ready for difficult times that come their way, or be confused why Christianity does not meet their expectations. They will continue to struggle with sin and not understand why victory eludes them. They will have a lot of heat but no light.

This does not mean that every person needs to be an expert on systematic theology, but it does mean that believers should be seeking to growing in their knowledge of who God is and how his world works.

How do Christians grow in their knowledge of doctrine?

- **The danger of rationalism – Knowledge without love produces arrogance.**

Rationalism is related to the word rational, a word which refers to our thinking. Rationalism, as we are using the term, refers to an overemphasis on logic, knowledge, and data. There certainly are men and women who know much about God but have been fundamentally unchanged by it. There are people who study the Bible for a living who don't believe it, and are headed for a Christless eternity in hell. This sad and sobering reality should be enough to warn us that knowledge alone will not be enough.

Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 8:1 that “knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” The church in Corinth prided themselves on their knowledge of one God which they thought meant they could eat food sacrificed to idols since in their minds it didn’t matter. Paul warned them that this knowledge was not filling them with love for God and others, it was being used in selfish arrogance to do what they wanted.

Why is knowledge without love so dangerous? How do we keep ourselves from growing in knowledge but not in love? How do we keep warm hearts as we continue to learn doctrine?

- **Striking a balance – Knowledge with love produces holiness.**

God presents us with a balanced view in Scripture. God wants our heads and our hearts. He wants us to know his Word and the teaching in it but he also wants that teaching to stir our hearts to greater love for him. Knowledge alone produces arrogance. Knowledge with love and humility produces Christ-likeness.

How Should I Study Jesus?

So if studying theology, including studying Jesus himself, is so important then how do we go about doing that? The best way to begin is to simply read Scripture. See what God’s Word has to say about Jesus. After all, in the end all theology is boils down to trying to explain what Scripture says. Once you’ve done that, consider reading what others have said about Jesus by reading what systematic theologians and others have had to say. Again, in all of this make sure that you don’t fail to grow in love of Jesus as well as in knowledge of Him! In the section below, we will look at these two main ways to study Jesus: reading about him directly in Scripture and seeing what others have had to say.

Read about Him

- **Read the Gospels!**

The Gospels give us the story of Jesus’ ministry on earth, so this would be the obvious place to start. They tell us of his miracles, his teaching, his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. What’s important to realize is that the gospels are not just giving us facts about Jesus life. They are each attempting to present Jesus in a slightly different light for a slightly different audience. Just as four people sharing memories and perspectives on your grandfather would give people a fuller idea of who he was and what he was like, each of the four gospels will give a different yet truthful representation of Jesus.

From what you know based on previous Bible reading and/or preaching, how do each of the four gospels present Jesus?

- **Read the Letters!**

Ever finished watching a movie or TV show or complete a book with a major twist at the end? Ever sat there with your mind spinning about all that changes because of this last minute revelation? Sometimes TV series will set up an entire upcoming season with a shocking turn in a season finale. Sometimes books will set up a sequel or an entire spin off series with a few pages of explosive plot twists. Entire websites are dedicated to fans of books and movies and TV series hashing out the meaning of these unexpected developments.

The letters of the New Testament serve this function for the church. Jesus' death and resurrection was quite surprising! Within less than two months he went from marching into Jerusalem claiming to be the Messiah to being brutally executed by Rome at the insistence of the religious leaders of the people, to being gloriously raised to new life and ascending to heaven. Talk about an emotional roller coaster!

The letters serve as a commentary on the life and ministry of Jesus. They are the Holy Spirit directed reflections on what life looks like now that God's Son has come and won us salvation. The Gospels give us the raw story of Jesus, but the letters reflect on this story and on help us understand better who Jesus really was (and is) and what it is that Jesus has and will do.

Can you think of any passages in the New Testament letters that explain for us in greater detail who Jesus is and what He did?

- **Read Revelation!**

Finally, read the book of Revelation. Revelation 1:1 begins with these words: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." Some debate whether this means "the thing Jesus revealed" or whether this is saying "Jesus is revealed." Although the context probably favors the former (i.e., God gave this revelation to Jesus), the book itself is clearly the revelation about Jesus given by Jesus. His ultimate victory over the powers of evil at the end of the age gives great hope to believers today. Jesus is the one watching over his churches, the one unleashing the judgment of God on sinful humanity, and the one who will reign on earth for a thousand years, and then in all of eternity. Revelation is a wonderful book all about Jesus!

Learn what others have said about him

As with any area in theology, it can be helpful to learn what others have said about him. Often this can be found in systematic theology books, but it can also be found in other books and in sermons, podcasts, and other avenues of personal study.

What are some ways that you have found helpful to study theology? What are some books or resources you would recommend to others?

A quick note about jargon. Almost all of us use jargon. Doctors, engineers, farmers, factory workers, accountants, truck drivers, virtually every profession or job teaches a specialized vocabulary. For the most part, we find it annoying when two people begin having a conversation we can't understand because we aren't a mechanic like they are and don't understand what the words coming out of their mouths mean, or when we're confused by the terms two computer programmers are using because it's over our head. Normally, though, we understand the value of jargon when it comes to our job, because we realize that it enables us to have a very specific conversation very quickly. We could explain in great detail all that we are discussing so that everyone in the room gets it, but that would take a lot longer! While it might be rude to do at parties, using jargon on the job is helpful because it allows us to communicate quickly and efficiently.

Theologians use jargon as well for the same reason we all use jargon: to have a conversation quickly and specifically. Certain very specific terms come to have very precise meanings. The good news is this allows theologians to have very detailed arguments with one another and be able to be precise when they are forming their arguments. The bad news is this often leaves the uninitiated feeling like they could never learn theology. This simply isn't true. While words like "hypostatic union" and "Christophany" are certainly intimidating, the truths behind them can be understood by all believers.

When you come across theological terms you don't understand don't get discouraged, and don't think theologians are just being arrogant (that might be the case, but not necessarily). Look up the term if you are confused, and most importantly make sure you understand the concept behind the term. And don't worry if you don't know a lot of jargon. While knowing the precise theological terms theologians use can be a help in studying Christ, you don't need them. In this study, we will seek to discuss concepts and at the end attach the label to the concept so that you can recognize it when it shows up later.

Jesus is the greatest figure that ever walked this planet, of that there is no doubt. But he is more than that, and ought to be more than that to each one of us. Jesus is the Savior, King, Judge, Creator, Sustainer, and Teacher who came to save us from our sins. In this series, we will drill down into who he was and is and what makes him tick. Hopefully this series will teach you some important truths about Jesus, but even more than, hopefully this series will help you love Jesus more.