



CORNERSTONE

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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Welcome to this Cornerstone course of study on the four gospels. These first four books of the New Testament not only serve as an introduction to the Christian Scriptures, but are also its largest books by far, collectively taking up forty-six percent – approximately half – of the New Testament writings. Their size alone makes the gospels significant, but their key importance, of course, is that together they give us a wealth of information about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ that we would not otherwise have. Without the gospels we would also have no idea of the true significance of a great deal of what is written in the Old Testament.

Although all of Scripture is important, the four gospels remain the heart and core of the New Testament and provide much of the basis for Christianity itself. As a result, many Christians read and re-read these books often and may feel they know them well, but as this course hopes to show, a new and different approach to even the most familiar material can sometimes open our minds to far greater understanding and appreciation of what we might presume we already know.

COURSE APPROACH AND GOALS:

Many in-depth Bible courses consist of either analytic studies of the individual books of the Old or New Testament or, alternately, they are synthetic – bringing together scattered scriptures relative to selected themes or doctrines. The problem with these approaches is that on the one hand, book-by-book studies can usually only give surface treatment to many important topics because of the sheer volume of material they must cover, and on the other hand, narrow thematic and doctrinal studies frequently miss the richness of the context in which the individual scriptures are found.

The present course takes a totally different approach by looking closely at key events in the life and ministry of Jesus. This is the way the Bible presents its material to us – in terms of God's actions in the history of the world and within the lives of the people through whom he worked.

When we understand this, we begin to see that the fundamental unit of scriptural understanding is the *event* rather than a single book of the Bible or an isolated doctrine. Study focused on the whole book of Mark, for example, is going to miss a great deal of the important aspects of Christ's ministry such as the Sermon on the Mount recorded by Matthew and in slightly different form in Luke. On the other hand, study of an isolated doctrine found in the Sermon on the Mount is going to miss a great deal regarding the setting and significance of the sermon as a whole. It is in the study of events such as these that we see the Bible's message most clearly and completely.

Based on this underlying philosophy, this course looks closely at the most important events recorded in the gospels. Beginning with the pre-incarnate existence of Christ and ending with his ascension, the course does not cover everything mentioned in all four gospels (an impossible task for any single course), but it offers a detailed overview of the key events that results in insights not gained by other methods of study.

The specific goals of this course are for the student to learn to focus on the most important events mentioned in the gospels, to learn to analyze them effectively, and to learn additional background information that will help in better understanding the New Testament at a much deeper level than reading the text alone can provide. This is not to minimize in any way the value of simply reading the Bible – but to stress that the more relevant knowledge we can bring to our study of the Scriptures, the more understanding we will gain from them.

The material in the course is presented for the most part from a Protestant perspective, but the approach is non-denominational and non-dogmatic. This means that where Christians of different backgrounds view sections of Scripture differently, the major viewpoints are summarized, and an attempt is made to give a fair evaluation of the different views. This approach provides vital understanding for those wishing to pursue sharing or teaching the word of God, as well as for our ability as individual Christians to communicate properly with other believers. A major thrust of this course – and of all Cornerstone courses – is to teach the importance of the underlying message of the biblical accounts over and above individual or sectarian viewpoints about their details.

STUDENT APPROACH AND GOALS:

You may take this course at any pace you wish. There are no deadlines, but we recommend that you set a goal to cover at least one lesson unit each week. It is also a good idea to try to set aside a specific time each day to work on the course if you can, in order to establish a pattern of study as a habit.

More important than our *scheduling* for effective study and learning is our *attitude* toward the material in this course. Study of the Bible involves much more than simply learning facts. The simple meaning of the words in the Bible can be understood by anyone – whatever their attitude and approach may be. But the significance and fullness of the meaning of those words are only attainable by those who are humble enough to let the Bible truly speak to them (Matthew 11:25) and who approach its message prayerfully (Psalm 119:18). Accordingly, whenever you approach the word of God, be sure to pray for the understanding that only God can give (Luke 24:45). Your study will be incomparably richer with that approach.

Whether you are taking this course because you cannot attend formal Bible school or seminary classes, to supplement them, or to enrich your own personal study and understanding of the Bible, we hope that you find the course challenging and helpful.

COURSE TEXTBOOKS:

1) *The Bible*. You may use any translation of the Bible for the readings assigned in this course, though for detailed study we recommend a more literal (word-for-word) translation such as the ESV (English Standard Version), rather than a paraphrased (idea-for-idea) version such as the Living Bible. The NIV (New International Version) is a good balance and is quoted in this course unless otherwise noted. If you do not have a Bible, you can select one from those available for free download from our website **FreeChristianEBooks.org**. Of the Bibles offered on that site, we recommend the BSB (Berean Study Bible) for use with this course, as it is quite literal yet very clear.

2) *Inside the Four Gospels* by R. Herbert (a free download from the CornerstoneCourses.org website).

You will also need a notebook or blank sheets of paper to complete the course assignments.

Further Readings. Other books may be recommended as optional readings at times throughout the course, but all are available for free download from the FreeChristianEBooks.org website.

EXAMINATION AND CERTIFICATION

For those who wish to receive certification for completing the course, a basic test can be completed on the course website at CornerstoneCourses.org. Students passing the test can request a certificate of completion which will be delivered online in PDF format that can be printed or viewed on any computer.

COURSE OUTLINE:

Unit Topic	Unit Topic
01. Introduction to the Course	10. The Miracles of Jesus
02. The Background to the Gospels	11. The Transfiguration
03. The Preexistence of Jesus	12. The Triumphal Entry
04. The Birth of Jesus	13. The Last Supper
05. The Baptism of Jesus	14. The Crucifixion
06. The Temptations in the Wilderness	15. The Resurrection
07. The Calling of the Disciples	16. The Ascension
08. The Teachings of Jesus	17. Course Conclusion
09. The Conversations of Jesus	–

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