

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 60: An Introduction to The Gospels

Introduction:

The second major part of the Bible is called "the New Testament," which literally means "the New Covenant." Remember, a covenant is an agreement made by a person which another person could accept or reject, but could not change.

The Old Testament deals primarily with God's relationship with Israel based on the covenant He gave through Moses at Mt. Sinai, while the New Testament describes a new arrangement, or "New Covenant" of God made with man through Jesus, the Christ. (Ex. 24, Lk. 22, II Cor. 3)

The Old Covenant revealed the holiness of God in the form of a righteous standard called "The Law" and promised a coming redeemer; the New Covenant shows the holiness of God through His Son, Jesus.

The central theme of the New Testament is SALVATION and centers around the Person who gave Himself for the remission of sins, and the people who have received His salvation.

The Gospels introduce the Savior. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles describes the spreading of this message in the first century AD. The Epistles explain and detail the doctrine of Salvation and its application to daily living, and The Revelation previews to culmination of this salvation.

I.WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

The word "gospel" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word **godspeel**, **god** meaning **good**, and **speel** meaning **story or news**. The word **speel** came from the patterers, or men who went from town to town telling the latest items of news often embellishing them into vivid stories. *We still say a salesman who has a good line is giving us a speel.*

Later, the Greek word **evangellion**, which meant "**a good report**" was also translated gospel. This is fitting since the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the best news ever reported.

A. Why were they written?

1. The Rapid Spread of Christianity

When persecution and missionary zeal caused Christianity to spread, there was a need for an accurate accounting of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Many legends of His life, especially fantastic tales of miracles in His childhood, warped the purpose and meaning of His coming, so an accurate, eye-witness account was necessary. A telling focused on the purpose and meaning of His life, ministry, and death.

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2. The Death of Many Witnesses

As the years went by many of the major characters in, and witnesses to the events began to die. There was a need for written accounts of their testimony of what they had "seen, heard, and touched with their hands."

They provide authoritative answers to the important questions about Jesus and certainly strengthen our confidence in the reality of our faith.

B. Why These Four of Many?

1. Authors

There were numerous other "gospels" written, many which are included in apocryphal literature and accepted by some churches. The evidence is clear, however, that only these four were accepted by the early church.

The early church accepted only the four written by an Apostle or one closely associated to and under the authority of an Apostle. Later church councils confirmed this decision.

2. Content

Others have content that is not real or consistent with other Scripture. Fanciful stories of Jesus in childhood (illustrate) and writings supporting heretical or pagan points of view were excluded from the canon.

II. WHY ARE THERE FOUR GOSPELS?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when compared to John, share a common point of information. They share a common point of view or "see together," thus they are called by the Greek term "*Synoptic*." John varies in that He focuses on the ministry of Jesus in Judea, while the others report primarily on His ministry in Galilee.

The most important reason for the existence of four distinct books and the main differences between the accounts have to do with the authors themselves, their audiences, and their purposes for writing.

A. Authors

The phrase, "*All Scripture is God breathed*," tells us that God spoke through human instruments, guiding them to present the message He desired with complete honesty and accuracy.

But men wrote, "*as they were moved*," using their own words, revealing their own personalities, drawing on their own life experiences, and speaking in their own styles and vocabulary. Matthew, the tax collector, Mark, a young Roman Jew, Luke, a doctor, and John, a fisherman all different, all witnesses of Jesus.

Understanding this is important because it helps us to believe their work is valid. Let me illustrate:

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1. Reliability of Witnesses

The Scriptures and civil law agree, "*By the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.*" (Matt. 18:16)

Imagine you are on a jury in a trial. The suspect has been charged with shooting a convenience store clerk and there are four eye-witnesses. The witnesses take the stand and tell their accounts and they are exactly the same, almost word for word.

What would you, the juror, think? Collusion, perhaps?

Now imagine the same four witnesses coming into court, telling their eye witness accounts, with each story quite different, but agreeing on most of the important evidence.

They then identify the suspect as the shooter. How will you now respond? You tend to accept them as creditable.

The Gospels tell essentially the same story with agreement on all the vital data, but in the words of four independent, honest, and reliable witnesses. We can believe their testimony.

2. Reality of Witnesses

Four accounts, from four unique people will be colored by their personalities, talents, education, and culture.

Look at a face in a painting by Vincent Van Gogh.

Van Gogh is an Impressionist. He paints not a detailed photographic impression, but the impression a subject makes on his innermost being. He is emotional. Therefore his painting is in bright colors, bold brush strokes, with lots of energy.

Now, look at a face painted by Rembrandt.

Rembrandt is a Supra-Realist. He paints with great detail, in natural tones, with smooth strokes, true to life.

Next, a face by Norman Rockwell.

Norman Rockwell is an Illustrator. He paints with a real, almost photographic approach, but his tones are homey, healthy, middle America, friendly.

Last, a face by Walt Disney and friends.

Disney and his artists are Cartoonists. They use simple, stylized, exaggerated, ink and watercolor wash to convey a mood with minimal detail.

Now, imagine these four artists doing a portrait of the same man. Could you recognize the person? Of course you would. Would they all look alike? Of course they wouldn't.

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We would have four different renderings of the same guy: I would like the Van Gogh; A more conservative viewer would be more comfortable with Rembrandt or perhaps Rockwell; A less serious person may prefer Disney.

ONE FACE: FOUR RENDERINGS . . . FOUR TALENTS . . . FOUR PERSPECTIVES . . . FOUR STYLES . . . FOUR VIEWS

Thus -- Four Gospels! Four points of view giving us together,

ONE GREAT PORTRAIT OF JESUS, THE CHRIST.

B. Audience

The gospels were written not just from four points of view, but to reach four specific audiences:

1. The Jews

The Jewish people were, and are, an ethno-centric group with strong culture, customs, and traditions. **They have HISTORY!** The New Testament Jew was immersed in the Old Testament Scriptures and aware of the patriarchs, law and prophets. So, Matthew writes about the great promise of the Old Test., presenting **Jesus, the Promised King, The Messiah**

Jesus was the one promised in their ancient prophecies--the Son of Abraham, from the tribe of Judah, in the line of King David, coming to set up a New Kingdom on earth. Matthew dwells on genealogy, the fulfilling of the law, and Jesus' words and actions. Matthew 5-7 is especially powerful as Jesus presents the proper view of the law in the Sermon on the Mount.

2. The Romans

The Romans were the "Masters of the Universe," rulers of the known world, men of few words and much action. They have no knowledge of the Old Testament of Jewish culture, therefore no interest in prophecies fulfilled or Messiahs given. They will, however, be interested in a leader claiming special authority and seeming to have supernatural power. They do see a new man of action as a potential threat to their order. So, Mark writes of a man who does not just speak, but **Jesus, the servant of an all-powerful God, who acts.**

No genealogies (who cares), no prophesy (who believes), few words (who would listen). Just a man of power, actions, and miracles, a man the Romans could admire and understand. Mark is a good book for us today. It is an adventure movie with action and little narrative. *Just show us the action!* Mark uses the word "**and**" 1375 times, indicating a virtual list of actions and events, deeds not words.

3. The Greeks

The Greeks were lovers of culture, art, poetry, beauty, health, and knowledge. They collected man's wisdom, man's art, man's accomplishments, man's myths, even man's gods. They worshiped the human mind and body. So, Luke, a Greek doctor, writes to them of **Jesus, the son of man, the perfect Son of man.**

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There is a genealogy, but this one goes back, not to Abraham, but to Adam and Eve, those perfect human specimens. There are angels singing, kings worshipping, fireworks, an ultimate myth come true as the son of man is also the Son of God.

4. Everybody

Anybody with a need, or in trouble, or under pressure, or with hard questions, (Did I leave anybody out?) needs John. John writes to all of us presenting the only answer that can transcend our human capability. We need **Jesus, the Son of God, who just happens to also be God!**

He presents Jesus "*in the beginning with God*" and exposes God's master plan to provide salvation for us. His emphasis on Jesus' teaching on salvation is the only truly "good news" that is effective to save the world.

III. WHY THE ROMAN EMPIRE?

Galatians 4:4 and 5 --"*But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that he might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*"

When God considered the time absolutely right, He sent Jesus into the world to redeem us. Why was it during the Roman Empire. Why not in Egypt, or Greece, or Persia, or England? There can be much enjoyable speculation to which I will add my own. I believe Jesus came into the world at the time of the Roman Empire for at least three reasons:

A. Pax Romana

Pax Romana was peace by force. It was a peace made possible by the power and control of the Roman army. For the first time in recorded history citizens of an empire had the right to travel throughout an Empire with the protection of the government.

The Roman Empire was not perfect and bandits and invaders did exist, but criminals were punished harshly and so travel, communication, commerce, trade and travel were encouraged. So, Jesus was free to travel and preach with relative freedom.

After his death and the explosive growth of the church brought persecution to the new Christians by Jewish and Roman leaders alike, the people were able to travel "into the uttermost parts of the world" taking the gospel with them.

B. Roman Roads

Rome built an unbelievable system of roads. Virtually every city, town, and village throughout the Empire was reached by a road, many of them paved. In fact, they had almost twice as many miles of paved roads between major cities as we have freeways today.

This made it possible for the Christians, whether exiles or evangelists to travel to every area of the Empire with the gospel message.

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C. Greek Language

Rome chose to teach their citizens Greek. Greek was taught in Roman schools as the official language of the Empire. It was also used as the major trade language for those wishing to do business with the government.

This meant that, although the people spoke Aramaic, or Hebrew, or Cyrian, or other languages, they could communicate with each other in Koine Greek, making the spreading of the Gospel more efficient.

These factors, along with intense persecution brought about the exact fulfilling of the great commission in Acts 1:8 as the Christians became witnesses of Jesus at home, in their communities, in their provinces, and throughout the known world.

It would do us well to remember that that commission has never been rescinded and the job of evangelizing the world is still ours.

Homework:

Read: The Gospel of Matthew.

Think: What did it cost the Jews to become believers and accept Jesus as their Messiah?

Apply: Take advantage of our freedom to share the Gospel with someone.