

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

LESSON SEVEN

The Gospels: One Story, Many Dimensions

Introduction to the Gospels

What does the word, “gospel” mean? **Good news.**

Collectively, the gospels fully encompass the eternal existence, human conception, birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **Jesus is the good news.**

We could also describe the gospels as the sayings and narratives of Jesus Christ.

Sayings – **the teachings of Jesus Christ (red letters)**

Narratives – **the stories about the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (black letters)**

In many ways, it is a gift from God that we not only read His teachings, but also His acts. Jesus is the revelation of God, not only by presenting new truth but by living a perfect life before man (John 1:18). The gospels retain both His teachings and His actions so that this full revelation can be passed on to us.

John 13:34 – *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”*

How could we understand this passage from John if we only had the red letters of the gospel, without the black ones as well? The narratives and sayings are both essential and inspired.

“The gospels” are comprised of the first four books of the New Testament, each named for the individual who penned them. What do we know about each of these men?

Matthew: Read Matthew 9:9; Mark 2:14; and Luke 5:29. **A tax collector who left all to follow Christ. He was probably wealthy, at least before he became an apostle. He was Jewish. As an apostle, he had first-hand access to Jesus and was present throughout his ministry.**

Mark: Read Acts 12:11-12, 12:25, 15:37-40; Colossians 4:10; and 2 Timothy 4:11. **A son of the disciple Mary, nephew to Barnabas. He accompanied Paul on some journeys but deserted him and his companions at one point. Although he messed up, he later proved himself faithful and continued to assist Paul.**

Luke: Read Colossians 4:10-14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Luke 1:1-4; and Acts 1:1, 27:1-2. **A physician who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys. He also wrote the Book of Acts. He is generally believed to be a Gentile. Although Luke was not present during the days of Christ, he would have had access to those who were.**

John: Read Matthew 4:21, 17:1; and John 19:26, 21:20. **A fisherman and brother of James the Apostle. He was likely one of the youngest apostles and was given care of Jesus’ mother after His crucifixion. He refers to himself as the “disciple Jesus loved” in his gospel. John was Jewish.**

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The challenge of the gospels is to translate the ideas of first-century Judaism into our culture and context. This chapter is focused on learning biblical exegesis and hermeneutics of the gospels. Let's define those terms again:

Exegesis – to carefully study the Bible to determine its intended meaning to the original audience

Hermeneutics – taking the intended message for the original audience and translating it to today's audience (you)

The diagram below illustrates exegesis and hermeneutics:



The Nature of the Gospels

Because the gospels are a collection of sayings and narratives, it is much like reading a combination of Acts and epistles (letters) Paul wrote during his missionary journeys. Acts provides the historical context necessary to understand the Epistles, while the Epistles provide direct teaching. There are significant differences however, which we will further explore.

There are four gospels, each with its own unique literary style and purpose, and there are sometimes challenges in harmonizing their accounts. The challenges can be overcome through careful study and often enrich our understanding of the life of Jesus.¹

Jesus' primary language was **Aramaic**, (Matthew 27:46) while His teachings are recorded in **Greek**. They were then translated into our modern English translations. Given this fact and the different purposes each writer was guided to accomplish, it is appropriate, acceptable, and expected that two accounts of the same incident may ascribe slightly different words to Christ. When we view the sayings together, we don't find contradiction, but rather different emphasis or a more full recollection by one author than another.

Keep in mind that two of the gospel writers had to receive knowledge of Jesus' sayings from others because they were probably not present during His ministry. Being written by four different individuals rather than Jesus is part of their genius, not their undoing.

The first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) are called, "synoptic gospels"

Synoptic – constituting a general view of the whole of a subject

¹ Image from Wikipedia, "Synoptic Gospels", January 1, 2012.

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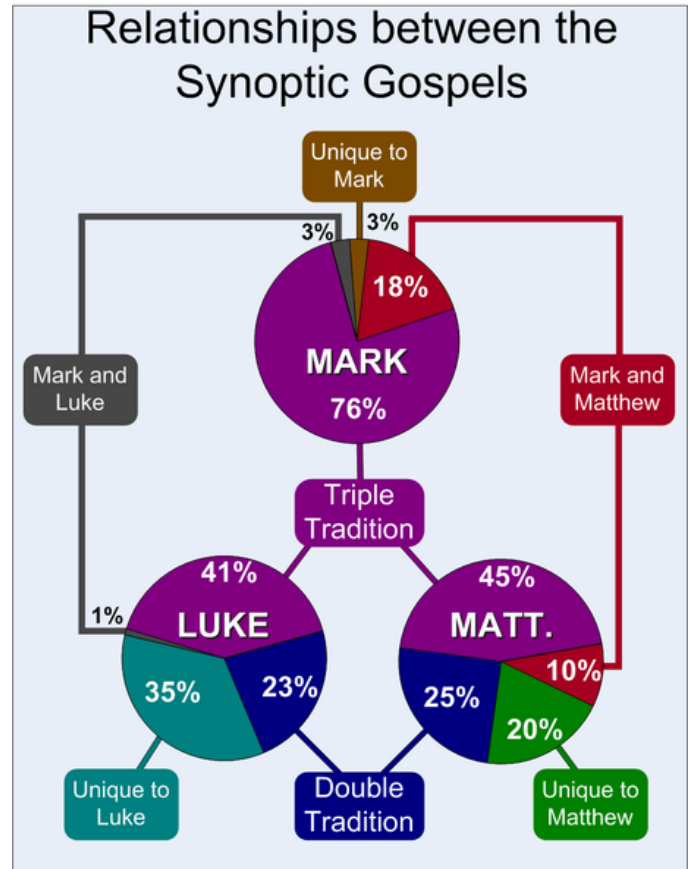
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The first three gospels are called synoptic because they include:

- many of the same **stories**,
- are often in the same **sequence**,
- and sometimes the exact same **wording**.

Many scholars believe they are interdependent. Either way, it doesn't change their established inspiration by the Spirit of God. Why have four gospels? Here are some things to consider:

- 1) The fullness of Jesus cannot be contained in a **singular** book, let alone four distinct gospels (John 21:25).
- 2) Different Christian communities with **different** backgrounds/perspectives each had a need for a book about Jesus.
- 3) No gospel **supersedes** the other. They simultaneously stand alone and harmonize, providing a more complete perspective of Christ.
- 4) We can have greater confidence in a **multitude** of witnesses (2 Corinthians 13:1).



The Historical Context

The historical context of the gospels has to do with:

- 1) understanding **Israel** in the time of Christ; and
- 2) understanding the individual writers and their **reasons** for writing.

This will help us to understand the kinds of questions we should be asking as we read.

The Historical Context of Jesus – in General

It is good to understand the world in which He lived. For example:

Who were the Sadducees and what were their beliefs? (See Matthew 22:23) **They were a significant Jewish religious sect in the days of Christ who did not believe in the resurrection.**

Why didn't they believe in the resurrection of the dead? **They only believe the first five books of the Old Testament are inspired by God and the resurrection is not explicitly taught there.**

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How did this affect how Jesus responded to them? (See Matthew 22:29-32 and Exodus 3:6) **Jesus used a quote from Exodus to point out that resurrection was alluded to by Moses.**

The Historical Context of Jesus – in Particular

Many of the narratives about Jesus are there just to provide a context for a teaching of Jesus. Remember, the message of Jesus was passed down orally through eye-witnesses for about 30 years before they were written down and distributed broadly. Being an eye-witness of the ministry of Jesus was one of the requirements of apostleship (Acts 1:21-22), men who were the foundation of the New Testament Church (Ephesians 2:19-20), with Jesus Himself being the Chief Corner Stone.

Sometimes sayings were passed down orally, perhaps without their context, that were not included in the gospels but are presented elsewhere (see Acts 20:35). We will sometimes find the same sayings in different gospels, presented in different contexts. There are two reasonable explanations for this.

- 1) Jesus said the **same** thing more than once (as most preachers/teachers do); and
- 2) The inspired purposes of the writer **affected** how they arranged the sayings of Jesus.

For example, Matthew tends to combine teachings on the same subject matter into one dialogue, while Luke sometimes puts them into a different (perhaps chronological) order. Consider the example below.

Matthew	Luke
<p>Chapter 10 (Apostles sent)</p> <p>5 These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; 6 but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ 8 “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. 9 “Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, 10 or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. 11 “And whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave that city. 12 “As you enter the house, give it your greeting. 13 “If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. 14 “Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. 15 “Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city.</p>	<p>Chapter 9 (Apostles sent)</p> <p>2 And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing.</p> <p>3 And He said to them, “Take nothing for <i>your</i> journey, neither a staff, nor a bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not <i>even</i> have two tunics apiece. 4 “Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that city.</p> <p>5 “And as for those who do not receive you, as you go out from that city, shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”</p>

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Matthew	Luke
<p>16 “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.</p> <p>17 “But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues;</p> <p>18 and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19 “But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say.</p> <p>20 “For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”</p>	<p>Chapter 10 (the 70 sent)</p> <p>3 “Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.</p> <p>Chapter 21 (Instructions to Disciples)</p> <p>12 “But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name’s sake. 13 “It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 “So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute.</p>

What we take away from this is that it is useful to compare accounts from different gospels to broaden our perspective on the context of a particular saying. The latter part of the passage from Matthew refers to what the apostles would experience in the future after the ascension of Christ, not during their initial ministry. Did Jesus give this to them all at once or did Matthew just group all of these teachings to ministers of the kingdom together? It may not be possible to know for sure, but neither answer makes these words any less inspired.

The Historical Context of the Evangelist

We find from repeated patterns within each gospel that there were certain points they were led to drive home. Let’s spend a few moments recognizing these patterns in the Gospel of Mark. He begins his gospel by recognizing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

Christ – Anointed, the Messiah

Did Jesus promote Himself and His identity? Read Mark 1:23-25, 34, 42-44; 3:11-12; and 5:42-43. **No, Jesus did not want everyone to know who He was, at least from a fleshly perspective. Jesus muffled the demons so they would not proclaim His identity. He also charged those who were healed to remain silent.**

This begs an important question. Why didn’t Jesus want people to know His identity? There were practical considerations, of course. The more the word of His ability to heal and cast out demons spread, the larger the mobs became who followed Him. While it would seem to be a good thing, it inhibited His time with the Father and His ability to teach and preach. Healing consumed a lot of His time. There seems to be another significant reason as well.

There is a noteworthy span of narrative and teachings in the eighth chapter of Mark. We first come across a miracle that is not recorded in any other gospel. Read Mark 8:22-26. Now we come to the crux of the matter; who is Jesus Christ? Who better to know and understand this than His apostles; read Mark 8:27-30.

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At this point, we see a pivot point in Jesus' teachings; read Mark 8:31-34. What is the new teaching that Jesus reveals to them? How is this connected to what they had just discussed? What is the response of the disciples? What does Jesus begin to teach them about discipleship?

Jesus now begins to tell them of His impending suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. This contrasts sharply with their perspective of what the Messiah was all about. They believed He was the Christ and Jesus admitted as much. Peter went from being a mouthpiece of God to one of Satan as he rebuked Jesus for what was going to befall Him. Jesus' responded that Peter had an earthly perspective, not a heavenly perspective. He then begins to teach the disciples that following Him involves sacrifice, sometimes great sacrifice. He doesn't begin to teach this until He foretells His own sacrifice, the greatest of all.

Two other times He told them about his impending crucifixion; read Mark 9:30-32 and 10:32-45. How did they respond to this teaching? They never seemed to get it. In fact, James and John asked to sit on His right and left hand in the kingdom, not realizing how such an honor would be achieved. They didn't understand that the Messiah came to save them from sin, a salvation that would require great sacrifice. Personal sacrifice is tied to true discipleship.

Like the twice-touched blind man, the disciples needed the repetitive teaching and ultimately the death and resurrection of Christ to begin to see things clearly. That was a very timely miracle to be recorded before Jesus' teaching on His identity as the Messiah and how it connected to His purpose of death. Now consider the historical purposes for which Mark wrote. Read the background section for Mark in a good study Bible (I personally enjoy the MacArthur study Bible for historical insights). What does history tell us about the occasion of Mark's writing? How does this relate to what we have studied in Mark? He was likely writing Peter's memoirs (1 Peter 5:13) at a time when Roman Christians were enduring great persecution for their faith (Mark 15:21 and Romans 16:13). By addressing the subject of suffering for Christ through Christ's own teachings, He allowed the Lord to strengthen the faith of those suffering saints (1 Peter 4:12-13).

The Literary Context

The Gospels are a collection of narratives and teachings from the life of Jesus Christ. Often, the narrative and teaching parts are woven together into what Bible scholars call a "pericope." A pericope is a passage from the Gospel that describes:

- 1) what was going on; and
- 2) what was said at that time.

For example, when studying the temptation of Christ, we would read Matthew 4:1-11. This discusses the context of His time in the wilderness and what happened there. The Sermon on the Mount spans Matthew 5:1 through 7:29.

As we study the gospels, it helps to think in terms of these entire blocks of material. The placement of chapters and verses was not divinely inspired and sometimes breaks up things that are better understood together. For example, read Matthew 16:24 through 17:13. Are these really two different narratives or are they meant to be understood together? Why or why not?

"Some standing here" seeing the Son of man coming in His kingdom was fulfilled by the next event recorded on the Mount of Transfiguration. These passages are meant to be read together.

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What do we learn from this? Don't let chapters and verses trap you. Read through all the material surrounding a verse so you can determine the boundaries of the pericope.

Thinking Across the Gospels

As you identify the distinct blocks of material in the gospels (good study bibles often help you do this), you can compare them with retelling of the same event in other gospels. Always keep in mind as you read one gospel that there are three others and there is a good chance the same thing is addressed elsewhere. There are two good reasons to do this:

- 1) The parallel passage may help us appreciate what is unique about each Gospel account (remember that each gospel is a stand-alone book); and
- 2) The parallel passage will help us gain insight into the fuller context of what Jesus is trying to say to us within the gospel we are studying.

Here is an example from the sermon Jesus preached on the Mount of Olives:

Matthew 24:15-16	Mark 13:14	Luke 21:20-21
<p>Therefore when you see</p> <p>the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place</p> <p>(let the reader understand),</p> <p>then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains.</p>	<p>But when you see</p> <p>the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION standing where it should not be</p> <p>(let the reader understand),</p> <p>then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains.</p>	<p>But when you see</p> <p>Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near.</p> <p>Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city;</p>

Do you see the bigger picture by putting these together?

A helpful resource to use in bringing together such a study is a synopsis, also known as a parallel gospel. It places passages from the gospels that address the same events side-by-side.

Interpreting the Gospels as Wholes

The Apostle John had a very specific burden that prompted him to write His gospel. By the direction of the Holy Spirit, He chose specific sayings and events to record and left others out. Read John 20:30-31 and 21:25. What was His purpose in writing? **Jesus wanted people to believe that Jesus is both the Messiah AND the Son of God, and that these truths would lead them into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.**

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How does this purpose affect what John included in his gospel? Consider John 1:1-18 in comparison with the beginning of the other gospels. **John was intent upon helping people to understand that Jesus is God in the flesh. The beginning of John's gospel was focused on this very purpose. Rather than starting with a genealogy or diving into a narrative, He showed how Christ is the eternal God; His life didn't begin in the womb.**

Although the other gospel writers were not as explicit as John, there is no reason to believe that they were any less guided in selecting what to write, how to arrange it, and how to adapt what they were saying to the audience upon their heart. We already demonstrated how the Gospel of Mark appears to be written with the Church of Rome in mind.

Let's look at an example from the gospels that shows what initially appears to be a contradiction but is better understood when we see the different purposes the Spirit had in mind for each gospel. Read Mark 11:12-26 and Matthew 21:18-22. Where does there seem to be a contradiction? **In Mark's account, the curse is given on one day and the fig tree is found to be withered on the next day. In Matthew's account, it appears that the fig tree withered right away.**

Now read Hosea 9:10 and Jeremiah 24:5. What has the fig tree been used to represent in the Old Testament and how does this help us understand the additional material we read in Mark between the curse and the withering of the fig tree? **The fig tree has been used to represent the nation of Israel in Scripture. After Jesus gave the curse upon the fig tree, He came into the temple and drove out the money changers. He went to the temple expecting to find worship and found unabated sin instead. Much like the fig tree, Israel had the appearance of godliness but was found wanting when they were searched for true fruit. As a result, the Lord was going to cause her to dry up as a nation and turn to the Gentiles.**



What was Mark's purpose in recording this event, in comparison to Matthew? **Matthew uses the fig tree to solely provide an example about faith. Mark uses it to show both a teaching on faith and as an object lesson on the Nation of Israel and its future.**

How can these be harmonized? **Nothing in Matthew requires that "presently" means in a moment of time. Presently could have been overnight. Also, Mark's gospel doesn't eliminate the possibility that the tree withered immediately. They only, "heard" Jesus curse the tree. There is no mention of them watching what happened. Matthew also qualifies the disciples' response with, "and when the disciples saw it." This must have been the next day, when they passed by again, as explained in Mark. There are things we don't know, but there is no reason to assume a contradiction.**

Other Literary Forms in the Gospels

As we read the gospels, it is also useful to recognize the diverse literary forms Jesus used. He is a master communicator and took advantage of several literary devices to make profound points. If we are ignorant of how He communicated, it severely limits our ability to understand what He was trying to communicate.

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- Hyperbole (purposeful overstatement) – Matthew 5:29-30
- Proverbs – Matthew 6:21
- Similes and Metaphors – Matthew 10:16; 5:13
- Hebrew Poetry – Matthew 7:6-8
- Questions – Matthew 17:25
- Irony – Matthew 16:2-3

A Few Observations

We can be easily overwhelmed by the commands of Jesus Christ. As they are sometimes given in the midst of His explanation of Old Testament law, they can be confused as law (consider Matthew 5:17-48). New Testament Christianity is based on grace, not on keeping a set of laws (Ephesians 2:8-9). How do we rightly interpret such commands?

We don't need to dodge them or explain them away. They show us what the Christian life should be like because of what God has done for us. A key passage is Matthew 5:45, which explains that we should do good to our enemies, "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." That's the spiritual family resemblance (like Father, like son/daughter). Jesus couldn't hold up a lower standard when telling us to be like God. He is perfect! Remember that while salvation is by grace, godly obedience comes from gratitude.

Remember also that the narratives (telling us what is going around Jesus) provide us with a context to Jesus' teaching, examples of His obedience, and illustrations of what He is teaching. We need to understand and use them in the right way so that we don't abuse them.

Finally, remember that the coming of the Messiah was loaded with Jewish expectation. There were many things they all thought the Messiah would do and say, even the disciples (see Acts 1:6). John the Baptist preached the coming of the Kingdom and Jesus continued the same message. People were waiting for the end with great anticipation. The crucifixion and resurrection was not what they expected. The gospels are loaded with this tension. The Jews expected the giving of the Spirit, peace, health, prosperity, and worldwide Jewish exaltation. The New Testament view (illustrated by the diagram) was a stark contrast to their expectations. Remembering this tension will help you to understand what was going on in the minds of Jesus' disciples and the questions and confusion they often carried.

