
FOUR ORDINARY MEN

Introduced Jesus To The World

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INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS

The Gospels are synopses (brief overviews), not moment-by-moment biographies that record every event in Jesus' life. Although the Gospel accounts accurately record actual, historical events and conversations, their main purpose is to reveal a PERSON and a PURPOSE, a MESSENGER and a MESSAGE—Jesus Christ and God's ultimate plan to rescue the world from itself.

The Gospels answer two fundamental questions: *Who is Jesus?* And, *Why did He come to earth?* Each person on earth must answer those questions—and live with our answers forever...

All of the Gospels tell the *good news* about Jesus Christ from slightly different angles, corresponding to the uniqueness of the narrators and their listeners, and this reminds us that the message of God's gift to the world has marvelous and varied implications for us individually. How fascinating to realize that God's Spirit inspired and directed four *different* men to record their awareness of the natural/spiritual happenings surrounding Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

While the focus in each of their accounts is Jesus, their narratives reflect His glory through lenses shaped by personal history, education, intended audience, etc.

That's why it is a mistake to try pressing the Gospels into a *uniform* sequence of events, and to puzzle over why one writer includes certain facts when others leave them out. Have you noticed how difficult it is to pin down a precise itinerary and timeline for Jesus' life when you hop from one account to another?

That is not to say that the Gospels contradict one another; they do not! Instead, they are like "*surround-sound*" speakers, filling the air with enough sound waves to be sure that no corner of the room is a dead-zone. Remember, the authors were real people, each overcome in the most magnificent and profound manner by the love, mercy, grandeur and grace of Jesus, the only begotten Son of God—so much so that they had utterly surrendered their lives to Him.

When you begin to appreciate that the Gospels are not just detached, objective reports penned by disinterested observers, but that they are examples of how Jesus changes everything in our lives, then you see the real focus of the Christmas story: not an accounting of which stores we went to when to get what; not recipes, a grocery list and a shopping cart; not the trek to the tree lot, nor the late-night wrapping—but being gathered close around the Christmas tree, catching sight of our name on the tag of a gift that will forever change our lives.

MATTHEW AND HIS GOSPEL

The New Testament begins with narration by a social outcast and collaborator whose life has been forever altered. Matthew, a former tax collector (Matthew 9:9-13), wants to show his Jewish brethren that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Hence, he makes constant reference to how Jesus' life fulfills Old Testament prophecies (see Matthew 1:22-23). Matthew's Gospel emphasizes God as PROMISE-KEEPER and as REDEEMER.

Writing primarily to his fellow Jews, Matthew draws upon Old Testament passages to convince his listeners that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah; hence, he references several Old Testament passages related to the coming of the Anointed One:

1. "*Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*" (Isaiah 7:14);
2. A star will herald the coming of the One who has dominion (Numbers 24:17-19);

3. The Ruler/Shepherd of God's people will come forth from tiny Bethlehem (Micah 5:2); and,
4. God's Son will be called out of Egypt (Numbers 24:8; Hosea 11:1).

From the outset, Matthew introduces us to an essential, but heretofore-inconceivable reality: the Messiah Jesus is fully Man and fully God—the Son of both God and Man. The first several verses of Matthew's Gospel are mostly names of long-ago people who are the ancestors of Christ, and though many present-day readers are tempted to skip over those names looking for more meaningful statements about Jesus, Jesus' family tree actually reveals one of the most profound truths on Matthew's heart as he writes his narrative.

Jesus is not only the sinless Son of God, begotten by the Holy Spirit (without the seed of man), but He is the descendant of very sinful humans—both male and female. That truth embodies the message of God's heart to us: though we descend from a long line of unrighteous ancestors, we can be made as sinless as Jesus if we become "*born again (from above)*" by the power of that same Holy Spirit.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

The ancestors of the Messiah teach us that God's ultimate plan does not depend on our ability to order our steps aright—or to keep them perfectly ordered. Our only hope for being used by Him to accomplish His aims on earth, indeed our hope for eternity itself rests in turning back to God, who abundantly pardons and who is in ultimate control.

Jesus' forefathers led very uneven lives. They were good and bad, right and wrong interchangeably and often simultaneously:

Though **Abraham** is called the "*Father of Faith*," he was also the chief of cowards, having lied not just once, but twice, about his wife; he was afraid that her beauty would tempt powerful men to kill him, in order to take her themselves, so he claimed she was just his sister. God promised to bless all the people of the earth through Abraham's seed (Genesis 22:18). The promise was not made through the Law, but by faith (Romans 4), and righteousness is reckoned to anyone who believes God's word: "*...it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants*" (Romans 9:8).

Jacob, “*the Deceiver*” was a mama’s boy who cheated his older brother out of his *birthright blessing*—twice! His trickery was visited back upon him when his father-in-law swapped brides on him at the last minute. He was so obstinate that God had to make him limp to remember that he could not do everything with his quick wit and natural strength.

Jesus is a descendant of **David**, king of Israel. God promised to “*establish [David’s] seed forever, and build up [his] throne to all generations*” (Psalm 89:3-4; see Isaiah 11:1-5). In a passage made famous in our modern culture by the song from Handel’s Messiah, God promises to set a ruler on David’s throne forever:

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.” Isaiah 9:6-7

And yet, David committed both adultery and murder while sitting on that throne, and the son of that *adultery-to-marriage* relationship was chosen as the next king. His name was **Solomon**, the wisest man on earth, who loved the Lord in everything...except he still worshipped/sacrificed at the “high places” (forbidden, convenient/pagan locations thought to be close to the spirit-world). And he had 700 wives, many of whom were devoted to foreign gods; eventually they had a part in turning him away from worshipping God.

After the **Fall of Adam and Eve**, God decreed consequences for man, woman and the serpent, but He also prophesied His plan for our redemption: the “seed of woman” would eventually “bruise” [break, overwhelm, cover over] Satan (Genesis 3:15). If Jesus had been born of Adam’s seed, He would have inherited Adam’s sin, and would not have been a sinless sacrifice. Hence, He was born only of woman.

When we look into the stories of Jesus’ female ancestors, we discover that He descended from women whose lives were just as uneven—to say the least: **Tamar** had a child by her father-in-law, after getting him drunk enough not to know with whom he was sleeping; **Rahab** ran a brothel and betrayed her own people when it became clear that they could not defeat Israel; **Ruth**, though probably the most noble lady in Jesus’ ancestry, was a foreigner who married the son of a prostitute; and **Bathsheba**, was an adulteress who married her husband’s killer.

Matthew's Gospel overflows with gratitude for the forgiveness and mercy he has received personally. It is a message of hope for anyone whose life is set on a course from which there seems to be no return. *"Regardless of what I have been or done,"* Matthew exudes, *"I am not excluded from the promises of God or from His Kingdom because Messiah has rescued me."* (Reference Matthew 9:11-13.)

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Just as four children raised in the same home will express their unique qualities and manifest their different personalities, so the Gospel writers relay the essential life-message of Jesus Christ in four profoundly distinct narratives: Matthew, who was radically converted (later in life) from a hopelessly irreligious lifestyle, keeps reminding us that we can be changed just as profoundly as he has been.

(John) Mark is quite a contrast to the other writers. First of all, he is young—a member of the “next” generation in his day—and he went through some inevitable misunderstandings with powerful, older personalities (see Acts 13:13 and 15:36-39) on the way to becoming a vital spiritual leader in his own right. Probably fiery and impetuous, he sometimes rubbed people the wrong way because he was so action-oriented. That's what is most striking about his account of Jesus' life: there is very little doctrine compared to the amount of action.

That's the tone of Mark's Gospel (paraphrased)—

"Then he did this, and you won't believe what happened next... It was so cool. Jesus totally did a number on everybody. Right after He gets baptized, He says, 'I'm changing everything—so get ready, think about it differently and trust Me.'

Just like that, he tells these fishermen to drop everything they're doing, and hang with Him. Then He starts saying and doing stuff that was blowing everyone's mind: some guy had a weird voice and was doing bizarre things. He starts shouting at Jesus. Jesus just says, 'Come out' and the guy falls on the ground, twitching and then goes all still and normal. For about a minute nobody moves. Whoa! Then everybody starts talking at once..."
Mark 1:14-28

Mark keeps focused on the great battle in the cosmos. He describes Jesus' interaction with people in the material dimension, but he just as quickly shows us how Jesus takes authority over powers and personalities in the spiritual realm.

Over and over again, Mark details Jesus miraculously intervening against the ruinous incursion of what is sinful, satanic and sick. As important as it is for us to believe the truth on our own, it is very encouraging to know that Jesus is actively doing things for us.

What Does Mark Tell us is the Beginning of the Good News?

He tells us of an announcement, spoken to people lost in the wilderness, that might be best translated, *“It’s not over. There’s still hope. Even in the wilderness where you’ve ended up as a result of what you’ve done wrong, God is coming to meet you and to get you back (home) where you belong. He’s sending a Search and Rescue Person (Jesus) to seek for and to save what’s lost—and that means you!”*

And since Mark is so action oriented, he sums up Jesus’ ministry assignment in his narrative by retelling this sort of episode over and over:

“And He said to them, ‘Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.’ And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons.” Mark 1:38-39

LUKE AND HIS GOSPEL

The differences between the Gospel writers are striking! We’ve read the record of Jesus’ early life composed by *Matthew the Cheat, and Mark the Agitator*. Next we turn to the historical account compiled by a physician named Luke—and discover that he takes an entirely different approach to the story of Jesus’ life. Being trained in the sciences, Luke writes about everything *“in consecutive order”* after *“having investigated everything carefully from the beginning,”* so that people can *“know the exact truth”* about Jesus for themselves.

Luke, as the only Gentile writer in the New Testament, approaches *the good news* in a far more universal manner. Unlike Matthew, who addresses a fairly narrow audience of fellow Jews, Luke’s Gospel is written to anyone and everyone in the Roman Empire—whether or not they have Jewish roots. His educational background and (medical) training compel him to record many details, almost like a physician’s report or a guided tour going back to the beginning when the “symptoms” first appeared.

Whereas Matthew is well versed in Hebrew scripture and history, Luke is a man of the world, exposed to ideas and peoples beyond the narrow confines of historic Israel. By the 1st Century, *Pax Romana* had created an incredible melting pot of ideas, cultures, religions and people; travel was widespread among soldiers, traders and slaves, so provincial identities were giving way to more universal understandings. Greek thought and Roman rule leveled the playing field and stimulated intellectual and spiritual curiosity among the population of the Empire. That is why Luke's account emphasizes the widespread appeal of Jesus' words, and the provision available to all people—Jews and Gentiles—to have their sins forgiven.

The Bible is not a fanciful, mythological rendering of super-humans; instead, it is better than any reality show—giving us a glimpse of how people like us responded to Jesus' words and deeds. In Luke's Gospel, each person has a personality and a distinct part in the unfolding drama; Dr. Luke gives us an incredible mosaic of people/history, constantly revolving around choices they make about God's working in their midst. Luke writes this account of the birth and ministry of Jesus around 60 AD, and he composes the Book of Acts (the birth and ministry of the church) a few years later.

Almost like an attorney assembling all related bits of evidence, Luke starts his narrative with the manner in which God first set the stage for Messiah through the predicted birth of John the Baptist: he was (miraculously) born to an elderly and barren couple named Zacharias and Elizabeth, who had been praying for a child for many, many years. Luke fills his pages with a huge cast of supporting characters and interesting sub-plots surrounding Jesus' life (like the interaction between Elizabeth and Mary while both are pregnant). Because of this, the Gospel of Luke offers us a complete view of everyday people's reactions to God's plan.

Luke gives us a remarkably revealing portrait of God's heart motivation for all that He does in sending His only begotten Son to earth: He is a personal Savior [Deliverer, Protector, Healer] who is especially aware of people in difficult, depressed circumstances, and as the Mighty One, He actually does all the real work to ransom and rescue us from our enemies, and He grants us deliverance from our spiritual enemies—the powers and forces that have manipulated and oppressed us (Luke 1:68-74).

JOHN AND HIS GOSPEL

John writes his Gospel account from a completely different angle than that of the other writers. Matthew concentrates on Jewish theology and a redemptive Messiah; Mark glimpses events from the vantage point of the early Church and *Christ as the King who has come*; Luke composes his analytical letter to appeal to secular and pagan people throughout the wider Roman empire. John directs his communication to the prevailing philosophical mindset of the day—focusing heavily on Platonic dualism. The Gospel of John is written to decidedly non-religious people.

Central to the intellectual/philosophical framework of the Hellenistic world were three basic ideas that John addresses in his opening statements about Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

1. ***There are two worlds***—a transcendent (ideal) reality of eternal perfection (spirit); and, an imperfect, finite world of nature, matter and human history. The physical world around us is a mere “copy” of the ideal.
2. ***The cosmos has a divine order*** that unifies and governs it, a transcendent intelligence that gives it meaning and purpose. This cosmic order, set in place by the supreme being/intelligence, is the fundamental truth of all. It is called the LOGOS—the universal message of order and beauty.
3. ***The highest good for any person is to discover this truth***, to achieve an inner realization of the LOGOS. The quest of the philosopher is to grasp and be grasped by the supreme order revealed in the cosmos.

While Plato and others believed that pure reason and human intelligence could discover the LOGOS, John makes it very clear that such revelation about the truth can only come from God Himself. It was an absolutely impossible thought for the Hellenistic mind to imagine the LOGOS becoming flesh, to have the Creator of the cosmos and the LOGOS enter the mundane world from out of the realm of the ideal (spirit). Such claims were virtual (philosophical) heresy.

When everything commenced—creation, time, etc.—Jesus and the Father had already existed. Everything in the cosmos was generated (assembled, made, brought into existence) through Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 8:6). He is the Maker and the Heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2). The LOGOS became flesh and lived in the midst

of the material, mundane world (John 1:14; 16-18), and we get to “see” Him. He is not an impersonal set of doctrines or laws governing the universe, but a kind, loving, merciful Savior.

That is what amazed John, so his account of Jesus’ life and ministry blends the profoundly philosophic with the intensely personal: “I’ve found the meaning of life; it’s God. And Jesus loves me! I can’t believe it—He loves *me*...”