

### **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 Tree, catching sight of our name on the tag of a gift that will forever change our lives.

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.

God has a plan for the ending. All of human history is moving toward the grand climax, what we call the end of [*chronological*] time, when time will cease to be measured in terms of coming and going, and will be counted, instead, in continual fullness—when everything is always exactly as it should be, when everything has “come together” perfectly. Think of it this way: God is perpetually arranging things and working things toward that perfect end; despite our (often) wrong choices and sinful lapses—like those of Jesus' ancestors—God will bring forth His ultimate purpose “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4):

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law...

God is in control. He has the final word, the ultimate say. And He is patient, as well as full of mercy and grace. To this God, we get to bring the meager offering of our life.

### **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 1:22-23). Matthew's Gospel emphasizes God as PROMISE-KEEPER and as REDEEMER.

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."

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 OT passages related to the coming of the Anointed One:

1. A virgin will bear a Son called 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 and Hosea 11:1).

From the outset we're introduced by Matthew 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.

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.

#### **The Natural Seed, the Human Genealogy**

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 is 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—so they could take her—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... There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom...*” (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.

Jesus is also a descendant of exiles, captive people. God promised to restore His people to their rightful inheritance that they had forfeited because of their sin (Deuteronomy 30:4). The Babylonian captivity and restoration was hugely symbolic to the Jews as a picture of what Messiah would accomplish for them:

‘And I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile’ (Jeremiah 29:14).

Jesus is the Son of Man, who took on the likeness of our flesh to die as an offering for our sin (Romans 8:3; Philippians 2:7-8); to render the devil powerless (Hebrews 2:14); to become a merciful high priest who identifies with our struggles (Hebrews 2:17); and, to redeem us from the curse of the Law, adopting us as children of God (Galatians 4:4-5).

#### **Born of (Only) a Woman**

Why was it essential that Jesus was born of woman, but without the seed of man (v. 25)? 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). Death came into the world through Adam’s sin. That death spread to all people through their own sin, but also (first) because they were offspring of the “seed” of Adam (Romans 5:11, 13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). If Jesus had been born of Adam’s seed, He would have inherited Adam’s sin, and would not have been a sinless sacrifice.

But when we look into the stories of Jesus’ female ancestors, we discover that He descended from women whose lives were 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, an adulteress who married her husband’s killer.

#### **The Spiritual Seed, the Heavenly Genealogy**

The second portion of Matthew’s introduction to Christ centers on Jesus’ heavenly ancestry. If Jesus was merely a good man, someone who had managed to raise Himself to levels of goodness and spirituality, He would not have been able to save us from our sins. He might have been able to give us a great example to follow; He could have laid out a moral code or left behind inspirational writings. But His human nature alone would have been inadequate for God’s plan of salvation.

If Jesus was only a man, the son of human parents, then God could have used Him as a messenger or a servant or a tool, but it would not have been a sacrifice for God to use someone else’s son. No, the point of such great love with which God loves the people of the earth, is that His plan of redemption had to cost God the highest imaginable price: God so loved the world that He gave His own Son.

Jesus is the Son of God. He was in the beginning with God, as God—long before He came to earth (John 1:1-2, 14; Philippians 2:6). Jesus is the “*only begotten Son of God*” (John 3:16; Psalm 2:7), the exact likeness and essence of God (Hebrews 1:3, 5). Seeing Him is seeing the Father (John 14:9). Prophecy indicated that Messiah’s name would be Immanuel, meaning GOD WITH US. He would enable us to experience the ever-present nearness of God.

Though sin separates people from God, forgiveness of sin reunites them with Him. The Lord's sacrifice on the Cross brings those who were "formerly far off" from God near to Him again forever (Ephesians 2:13). Literally, Jesus translates as GOD-SAVED—saved by God Himself. His Name, the Name above all names (Acts 4:12), is a declaration of God's intent: to save us from a condition about which we can do nothing on our own.

### **Luke and His Gospel**

The differences between the Gospel writers are striking! We've read the record of Jesus' early life composed by . . . 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, the converted tax-shyster, 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 any 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.

So, when reading the Gospel of Luke look for the ways in which various individuals and groups of people react to what happens—whether it is to a visitation by an angel or to a deliverance ministered to a demoniac. *How* people respond is the key to everything.

### **John, Called the "Baptist"**

John is given his assignment by the Lord even before he is physically conceived. His role is to ready people for Jesus' ministry, persuading the disobedient to do things God's way (vs. 16-17), and proclaiming God's eagerness to grant freedom from and pardon for sins (v. 77).

An angel instructed his father not to name him *Zacharias (God Remembers)*, but John (*God is Gracious*). Instead of the threat that God will remember our sins and pay us back for them, the prophet who will point people to Messiah has a name that communicates the essential quality of God's dealings with us: graciousness. The modern-day caricature of John-the-Baptist as a fire-breathing, finger-wagging hellfire-preacher is totally inaccurate.

Of John it is said, he will be “great in the sight of the Lord” because he will point people to Jesus by bringing them joy and gladness, reconciling those who are estranged from others, preparing people for all God has for them (Luke 1:13-17). Jesus will later speak of John,

“Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”  
(Matthew 11:11)

John is conceived after Elizabeth was presumed barren, and after both his parents were beyond the normal age for having children (vs. 7, 18). For many, many years they have prayed and faithfully gone on with their (spiritual) lives. God intervenes when there seems to be little reason for them to expect anything different happening. Zacharias doesn't believe; Elizabeth is nervous in believing that God is really going to answer her prayer after so many years. Giving birth to John takes away the shame and reproach Elizabeth has born for so long.

Mightily moved by the Lord, Zacharias prophesies about the meaning of his son's birth—what God was saying/doing by sending John before Messiah(1:68-79):

1. “God has visited us and accomplished redemption for us.”
2. “He has raised up a horn of salvation to deliver us from our enemies.”
3. “Being delivered from our enemies, we can serve God without fear.”
4. “God will explain ‘salvation’ by granting forgiveness for our sins.”
5. “With tender mercy, God will shine in our darkness, and guide us into true peace.”

#### **Mary, Betrothed to Joseph**

Mary is troubled by the angel's greeting—“Favored One”—because, like most of us, she does not see herself as worthy of favor [grace] in the sight of God (vs. 28-30). Though she questions how it is possible to have a child without a man involved in the process (v. 34), she accepts and welcomes God's word for her life (v. 38). God has already intervened in each of our lives with a “word.” The best and most fulfilling life will be ours as we welcome His plan rather than our own (vs. 45-48). God's intervention takes care of any and all “missing” elements—especially what we consider essential...

#### **The Lord, the Mighty One**

As the central character in the whole Bible, God is the primary focus of this first chapter. 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 does great things for us and remains steadfastly merciful throughout all time (vs. 47-50).

To highlight mercy as one of His most consistent and significant qualities, God gives help [supports, succors, actively takes a part in] in our life circumstances, and He turns the existing order of things upside down, to balance the scales of justice (vs. 51-54). God constantly checks on us to see how we're doing, to make sure that we are not being overwhelmed, and 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 (vs. 68-74).

His “tender mercy” [inward affection, active compassion] keeps shining a light at our feet, so that we can see our way in the dark night, and find the way of peace [quietness, rest, prosperity of heart] (vs. 77-78).

### **Mark and His Gospel**

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; LUKE, the linear-thinking physician, who loves to compile all the facts, lays out the evidence for us to decide on our own whether or not Jesus is the Son of God.

(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) 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—“Then he did this, and you won’t believe what happened next...”

“It was so cool, man. Jesus totally did a number on everybody. Right after he gets baptized, he says, like, ‘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 like a weird voice and was doing bizarre things, and 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? 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 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:

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.

### **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.

#### **Flesh and Blood Incarnation**

In the beginning, before all else was, Jesus was with God. He was God. 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). He made everything in both realms of reality, and He holds everything together (Colossians 1:16-20).

The Logos became flesh and lived in the midst of the material, mundane world (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, mercy-eyed Savior. Jesus embodies (eternal) life—the way God originally designed things to be (1:4-5, 9).

Jesus is the exact (earthly) representation of God our Father (see John 14:7-11; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). He manifests the most significant qualities of God, the characteristics that fill the heart of our Heavenly Father—grace and truth. Jesus’ whole purpose for coming to our world was to “take away” our sins (1:29). To any one who believes in Him, Jesus grants the privilege of becoming (again) a child of God (1:12).