

Written for our Growth in the Knowledge of Christ ***A Survey of the New Testament***

LESSON 1—Introduction to Gospels

Our goal in this SS series is to get a better grasp on the background, structure, theme and message of each of the books of the NT. Each one is a distinct literary unit and makes a unique contribution to the overall message of the NT. In surveying the books of the NT as literary units, we will be looking at a variety of literary genres. However, we will have enough to cover in one lesson on, say, the Gospel of Matthew without having to devote time in that lesson to the nature and function of Gospels as a distinct literary genre.

Our next lesson will be on Matthew. After that, it will be several weeks before we come back to Luke. We will not cover Mark and John until the Fall (since we are approaching the NT books roughly in the chronological order in which they were written). So this first lesson is designed to furnish information and examples that will aid our understanding of the first major type of literature that confronts the reader of the NT.

The NT divides into 4 major categories, both in terms of genre as well as function:

- Gospels (“Biography”—Introduction of the Person and Work of Christ)
- Acts (History—Proclamation of the Person and Work of Christ)
- Epistles (Letters—Explanation of the Person and Work of Christ)
- Revelation (Prophecy—Consummation of the Person and Work of Christ)

Of course, these genre divisions are not absolute; there is some overlap (e.g., the Gospels are historical; and the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles all include some prophecy as well). But the broad categories hold.

Literary Nature of the Gospels

Many take pains to insist that the Gospels are *not biography*. That's true ... and not true.

- “Biography” is a (written) history of someone’s life. In that sense the Gospels certainly qualify as biography. Luke uses the term *diēgēsis* [dee-AY-gay-sis], a witnessed or researched narrative, account, record. Matthew (1:1) identifies his work as a “book” (*biblion*).
- Nevertheless, it is true that the Gospels are not normal biographies in the sense to which we are accustomed.
 - None of the Gospels even attempts to provide is a *complete* record of the life of Christ. While many biographies are selective in their material and focus, the Gospels are particularly selective.
 - Most of the Gospels are organized *thematically, not chronologically*
 - All the Gospels have an *underlying purpose* beyond relating the interesting story of a significant historical individual.

“Gospels” are a uniquely biblical literary genre—selective biography with a distinctive theological aim—“theological biographies” (Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 107). A Gospel might be called “theography” or “evangelography.” It is worth remembering that although we are accustomed to using the word “Gospel” to refer to one of the first four books of the NT, the word “gospel” did not originally designate a “book” or genre. “Gospel” means, of course, the announcement of good news—a fitting designation for the opening of the NT. Its appearance at the head of Mark’s Gospel (1:1, “the beginning of the **gospel** of Jesus the

Christ”) probably contributed to its eventual adaptation as a technical term to refer to the first four books of the NT. “It was Justin (d. 165 CE), writing in his *First Apology*, who referred to these documents as ‘the memoirs of the apostles, which are called Gospels’ (66.3)” (Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 63).

Distinctive Aims of the Gospels

It is a common misapprehension that the four Gospels are largely repetitive and cover all the same material in much the same way. In spite of the fact that they do cover the life and ministry of the same person, the literary character and thematic emphases of these four Gospel writers—even in recording many of the same words and events—could hardly be more different.

Each Gospel answers the core question of investigation: *who, what, when, where, why*. Each Gospel also includes some statement of explicit purpose, function, or focus.

- **Mt. 1:1—*Apologetic***
 - **Who?**—“the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ”
 - Matthew is a declarative defense of the identity, origin, and history (“genesis”) of Jesus Christ—the son of David, the son of Abraham.
 - Some think 1:1 refers only to the genealogy of vv. 1-17; yet 1:1 provides a “title” that fits the whole theology and emphasis of Matthew throughout his “book.” (The opening line of a formal document often functioned as its title.)
- **Mk. 1:1—*Annunciatory***
 - **What?**—“the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ” = “*This is how the good news all started*”
 - “gospel” = “good news” throughout the NT, the announcement of the arrival of the King and the

message of salvation/deliverance via submission to Him.

- Again, some think 1:1 refers only to vv. 1-8; but the whole emphasis and aim of his book is the “gospel” (of which 1-8 is just the “beginning”).
- **Lk. 1:1-4—*Edificational and Confirmatory***
 - **When/Where?**—“I have written a narrative accurately and sequentially (in chronological order) ...that you may know the certainty of those things you have been taught.”
- **Jn. 20:30-31—*Persuasive and Evangelistic***
 - **Why?**—“I have written...that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God...”

Each Gospel has a distinctive theological focus that is underscored by its Spirit-superintended selection and arrangement of material.

“Kinds” of Gospels

The first three Gospels are known collectively as the Synoptic Gospels.

- Why “Synoptic” gospels?
 - In distinction to John, each provides a concise overview (*synopsis*) of the life and ministry of Christ (whereas John is much more narrowly selective in his focus).
 - In combined distinction to John, they “view together” (*syn* [with] + *opsis* [view]) much of the same material.
 - That is why their material can be largely placed side-by-side in a Harmony of the Gospels (and why most of John’s material is located in huge solo segments).
- Distinctions of John from the Synoptics:
 - Written 20-50 years after the others (depending on which other Gospel you are talking about)
 - Highly and expressly theological

- Highly and expressly selective (“*these* are written...”)
 - Only Gospel to include no parables
 - Only 7 discourses/interviews
 - Only 7 miracles
 - Only Gospel to include “I am” statements of Christ

Timeframe of the Gospels

Matthew and Luke open with an account of the birth of Christ, then jump to the ministry of Christ. Mark and John essentially begin with the ministry of Christ.

If we had only the Synoptics, we might think that Christ’s ministry lasted only one year, since the Synoptics record only one Passover (the last one, when Christ was crucified). From John we learn that there were at least 3 Passovers during the ministry of Christ. That is how we know His ministry lasted 3⁺ years (there is a chance of a fourth unmentioned Passover, making his 3-year ministry book-ended by the 1st and 4th Passovers; see Thomas and Gundry, *Harmony of the Gospels*, p. 348):

- 1st year—the year of “obscurity”
- 2nd year—the year of “popularity”
- 3rd year—the year of “animosity”

All four Gospels end with an extended focus on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

“Point” of the Gospels

The Gospels recount the life and ministry of Christ. But what about Him is most important? To what point do they drive? Where do they go? How do they end? The bulk of Gospel material does not concern Christ’s

- Miraculous Birth—only Matthew and Luke have only 2 chapters each
- Early Life—a few verses in Luke only
- Teaching—all the teachings of Christ combined would amount to only 6 brief sermons; Sermon on the Mount takes 15-20 minutes to recite
- Miracles—Gospels record about 48 miracles, but most of the accounts are brief and matter-of-fact

Rather, the single largest segment of material devoted to a single topic or time-span is as follows:

- Matthew 21-28—8 of 28 chapters on *one week* (1/3 of Matthew)
 - In other words, Matthew devotes 20 chapters to 33 years of Jesus' life, but 8 chapters to *a single week* in Jesus' life.
- Mark 11-16—6 of 16 chapters on *one week* (1/3 of Mark)
- Luke 19-24—6 of 24 chapters on *one week* (1/4 of Luke)
- John 12-20—9 of 21 chapters on *one week* (nearly 1/2 of Jn.)
 - In addition, John devotes 7 chapters (1/3 of John) to just one 24-hour period within that one week (Jn. 13-19)

In other words, 29 of 89 Gospel chapters (1/3 of total Gospel material) focus on **one week** in the entire 33-year life and 3-year ministry of Christ. You can see why the Gospels are not “normal” biography. Normal biographies do not devote such large blocks of material to one week or one day of their subject's life. But Gospels are not “normal” biography because this is not a “normal” person or life. No wonder one scholar has “described a Gospel as a passion narrative with an extended introduction” (I. Howard Marshall, “Jesus in the Gospels,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, I, 518).

Combined, the four Gospels comprise the four-chambered heart of the Bible, with their 4-fold introduction of the One anticipated in all that precedes them (OT) and the One proclaimed and explained in all that follows (in the rest of the NT). And the heart of the Gospels is the Passion of Christ as the central feature of His life and ministry, the work He came to accomplish. The death of Christ was not the unfortunate end to the promising life of a great man who thought ahead of his time. That neither adequately nor rationally explains the massive emphasis of every gospel account on this event. The heart of the heart of the Bible is the sacrificial, substitutionary, redemptive work of Christ on the Cross, and His victorious resurrection conquering death.

Distinctive Portraits of the Gospels

Why do we need four Gospels? Why not just one that includes all the important features of each?

- *Why more than one?*
 - Multiple witnesses necessary to establish credibility (“In the mouth of 2 or 3 witnesses let every word be established”).
 - Multiple records necessary to encompass and express more of the truth by approaching it from different perspectives. (Why aren’t diamonds just cut in flat slabs? Wouldn’t that be pretty? More facets allow the fuller and more multi-faceted manifestation of the Light.)
- *Why four?*
 - Two by original apostles; two by “second generation” converts and believers
 - The Lord alone knows the full answer to this, but here is an observation. The Gospels function as the Introduction of Christ, a Divine Person of multiple dimensions. Two Gospels focus on

opposite dimensions of His Position, two on opposite dimensions of His Person.

POSITION		PERSON	
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
King*	Servant†	Man*	God†

*Genealogical lineage is necessary for Kings and significant to Man.

†Genealogical lineage is insignificant for Servants and impossible for God.

The Gospels are the heart of the Bible. Like the human heart, the heart of the Bible has four “chambers” that fit and function together perfectly. Two “chambers” focus on complementary aspects of the position of Christ—Matthew emphasizes His rank as King, while Mark underscores His role as Servant. And two “chambers” focus on contrapuntal aspects of the person of Christ—Luke accentuates His humanity, while John highlights His deity. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John form the four-chambered heart of God’s self-revelation to man in Christ.

Apostolic Testimony to the Gospels

John and Peter, two apostles who wrote Epistles and Gospels, give individual testimony regarding the value and purpose of the Gospels.

John’s Testimony to the Content and Purpose of the Gospels (1 Jn. 1:1-3)

- They are a record of the apostles’ actual, personal, historical, sensory experience of Christ.
- They were written that readers might share fellowship with the apostles—that is, share in their experience of Christ and be able to hold that in common with them—and with God the Father and the Son.

- They were written that readers may experience a full joy.

But someone might protest, “Yes but *they* actually got to see and touch and talk to Him. How can I share that? Their experience was superior to mine, more real, more trustworthy. They actually got to see Him transformed before their eyes, so that the glory of His real intrinsic deity actually shined through Him. If I could have an experience like that, it would forever silence any doubts that sometimes nag at the edges of my faith in the reality of all this.”

Peter’s Testimony of the Trustworthiness of Gospels (II Peter 1:15-21)

- The written record of the Gospels is more sure and reliable than even the personal sensory experience of the kinds of events they record.
 - 1:15—Future tense (“I will endeavor”) suggests that he is not referring here to this epistle (which he was in the process of writing), but to a written, apostolic gospel record through the pen of Mark (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13).
- By specific application, then, the Gospels are a firmer and clearer basis for faith than even the Apostles’ sensory perception of Christ. Why?
 - Apostles had 3 years of sensory perception before they even *began* to really comprehend.
 - Personal sensory experiences can be completely misconstrued (Peter at Transfiguration) and even forgotten.
 - Personal sensory experiences do not guarantee faith (Judas).