

RAY C. STEDMAN

Adventuring Through the Bible

A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible

New Enhanced Edition



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Jesus and His Church

The Old Testament was shadow. The New Testament is sunshine.

The Old Testament was type and symbol. The New Testament is reality and substance.

The Old Testament was prophecy. The New Testament is fulfillment.

In the Old Testament, we must piece together a complex mosaic of Christ. In the New Testament, Jesus blazes from the page in three-dimensional realism.

Though the Old Testament speaks of Jesus, it does so in shadows, types, symbols, and prophecies that anticipate His advent. He appears on almost every page in the form of symbols, shadows, types, rituals, sacrifices, and prophecies. You cannot read the Old Testament without being aware of that constant promise running through the text: “Someone is coming! Someone is coming!”

But as we open the gospels, it becomes clear that the long-awaited moment has arrived. The promised and prophesied *Someone* has arrived—and He steps forth in the astonishing fullness of His glory. As John says, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Here, in the form of a living, breathing human being is the one who satisfies and fulfills all the symbols and prophecies found in Genesis through Malachi. As we move from the Old Testament to the New, we find that Jesus of Nazareth is the focal point of both Testaments.

LEFT: Ruins of a First Century Synagogue

To me, the Gospels comprise the most fascinating section of the Bible because they provide eyewitness accounts of the life of the one around whom the entire Bible revolves. In the Gospels, we see Christ as He is. The gospels confront us with the fact that Jesus may not always be what we think He is or what we would like Him to be. His actions are sometimes startling. His words astonish us. No matter how many times we have read the Gospels before, He continues to challenge our assumptions about who He is.

We encounter this man, Jesus Christ, through four separate portraits—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Many have asked, “Why is it necessary to have four gospels instead of just one? Why couldn’t one of these writers have gotten all the facts together and presented them for us in one book?” Well, that would be like trying to use one photograph of a building to adequately represent the entire structure. One picture could not possibly show all four sides of the building at once.

The same is true of Jesus. His life, His character, and His ministry are so rich and

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

In this chapter, we take an orbital overview of the first five books of the New Testament, the books of New Testament history. This chapter answers the questions: Why do we need four gospels? Why isn’t one gospel enough? Why do we need the book of Acts? And why does Acts end so abruptly? Here again we see profound evidence that these books, written by four human writers, truly spring from the mind of a single Author.

multifaceted that a single view cannot tell the whole story. God deliberately planned for four gospels so that each would present our Lord in a unique way. Each gospel presents a distinct aspect of Christ, and our understanding of who He is would be much poorer if even one of these Gospels was lost to us.

The Fourfold Image of Christ

The Old Testament is filled with pictures of the coming Messiah that correspond to the portraits of Jesus that have been “painted” for us in the four gospels. First, Jesus is pictured in many prophecies—particularly those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah—as *the coming King of Israel*. For obvious reasons, the people of Israel have loved the image of the Messiah as the king of Israel. That, in fact, is one of the reasons Israel rejected Jesus when He came: He did not look like the king of their expectations. But Matthew, in his gospel, emphasized the kingly aspects of Jesus and His ministry. Matthew, then, is the gospel of the King.

Second, Jesus is portrayed as *the suffering servant*. We see images of the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah and in the book of Genesis through the life of Joseph, who is seen as a type of the One who would come to suffer and serve. The Hebrews found these two images of the Messiah confusing—the ruling Messiah-King versus the suffering Messiah-Servant. Many Jewish scholars concluded that there must be two messiahs. They called one, “Messiah Ben-David” (Messiah the son of David, the kingly messiah) and the other “Messiah Ben-Joseph” (Messiah the son of Joseph, the suffering messiah). They couldn’t imagine that the king and the servant could be

the same person. Mark, however, understood the humble servant nature of Christ, and that is the aspect he presents to us in his gospel.

Third, we have frequent Old Testament pictures of the Messiah coming as a man. He was to be born of a virgin, grow up in Bethlehem, and walk among human beings. He was to be *the perfect human being*. That is the image presented to us by Luke in his gospel.

Finally, we have the Old Testament pictures that speak of the Messiah as God, the *Everlasting One*. For example, Micah 5:2 predicted that the Messiah would come out of the small town of Bethlehem Ephrathah (where Jesus was, in fact, born) and that His origins would be from everlasting (that is, He is eternal and is God). This description fits with the picture of Jesus found in the gospel of John, the gospel of the Son of God.

So all of the Old Testament prophecies and pictures of Christ can be placed under these four gospel headings: king, servant, human being, and God. It’s significant that in four places in the Old Testament the word *behold* is used in connection with each of these four pictures.

In Zechariah 9:9, God says to the daughters of Zion and Jerusalem, “Behold, thy King cometh” (KJV). This prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord entered Jerusalem in triumph.

Then in Isaiah 42:1, God says, “Behold my servant” (KJV). Notice it is not “thy servant” but “my servant.” Christ is not the servant of humanity but the servant of God.

In Zechariah 6:12, the Lord says, “Behold the man” (KJV). This is a passage regarding the Messiah.

And in Isaiah 40:9 we read, “Say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!” (KJV).

Four times the word behold is used, each time in connection with a different aspect of Christ. So we can clearly see that God has woven a marvelous and consistent pattern into His Word, in both the Old and New Testaments. This pattern reveals the many facets and dimensions of Jesus the Messiah.

Unity, Not Harmony

It’s fascinating to notice all the techniques, details, and nuances used by each gospel writer to paint a comprehensive portrait of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew, the gospel of the King, we see many evidences of Jesus’ kingship: The book opens with Christ’s genealogy, tracing His royal line back to David, king of Israel, and to Abraham, father of the nation Israel. Throughout the book, Jesus speaks and acts with kingly authority: “Moses said to you so-and-so, but I say to you such-and-such.” To the Jews, Moses was the great authority, so for Jesus to supersede the authority of Moses was to act as a king.

Jesus demonstrated authority to dismiss evil spirits and to command the sick to be healed and the blind to see. With kingly authority, He passed judgment on the religious leaders of the nation, saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” The key phrase Jesus uses again and again throughout Matthew’s gospel is “the kingdom

of heaven”—which occurs thirty-two times. In Matthew’s account of the Lord’s birth, he states that Christ was born King of the Jews; and in his account of the crucifixion, he says that Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews.

Mark, the second gospel, pictures Christ as the Servant. As you might expect, Mark does not provide a genealogy for Christ. From a human perspective, who cares about the genealogy of a servant? Nobody. In Mark’s gospel, our Lord simply appears on the scene. Again and again in this gospel we encounter the word immediately. That is the watchword of a servant, isn’t it? When you give a servant an order, you want it carried out immediately. So again and again we read, “Immediately, Jesus did so-and-so.”

Whereas both Luke and Matthew are filled with parables on many subjects, Mark, the gospel of the Servant, contains only four parables—and each is a parable about servanthood. The parables portray Jesus as the Servant of Jehovah—the suffering servant pictured in Isaiah 53. As you read through the gospel of Mark you will never see Jesus called Lord until after His resurrection—another mark of His servant role. Mark 13:32 is a verse that profoundly illustrates Jesus’ servanthood—and is a verse that has puzzled many. In this verse, the Lord speaks of His second coming: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

How could Jesus be the omnipotent God and still not know the time of His own return? This is a mystery—at least until you understand the character of Mark’s gospel. Mark describes Christ in His role as the suffering servant of God. It is not a servant’s

place to know what his Lord is doing—even when that servant is the Son of God Himself.

Luke shows us Christ as a human being. Here we see the perfection of His manhood—the glory, beauty, strength, and dignity of His humanity. As we would expect, Luke also contains a genealogy of Christ. If Jesus is to be presented as human, we want to know that He belongs to the human race. And Luke makes the case for Christ's complete identification with Adam's race by tracing His genealogy all the way back to Adam.

In Luke, we often find Christ in prayer. If you want to see Jesus at prayer, read the gospel of Luke. Prayer is a picture of humanity's proper relationship to God—total dependence upon the sovereign, omnipotent God. In Luke, we see Jesus' human sympathy most clearly—His weeping over the city of Jerusalem, His healing of the man whose ear Peter cut off when the soldiers arrested Him in the garden. No other gospel relates these two incidents that so powerfully show the sympathetic, human nature of our Lord. Luke relates the fullest account of Christ's agony in the garden where He sweats drops of blood, so eloquently symbolic of the human being who fully enters into our sufferings.

John's gospel presents Christ as God. From the very first verse, this is John's potent, unmistakable theme. Many people fail to realize that John's gospel, like Matthew's and Luke's, opens with a genealogy. The reason so many people miss the genealogy in John is that it is so short:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1).

That's it! That's John's entire genealogy of Christ—two people, the Father and the Son. Why is this genealogy so short? Because John's purpose is simple: to set forth the account of Christ's divine nature. In John's gospel we see seven "I am" declarations (I have listed them in chapter 52). These seven declarations echo the great statement of the Lord to Moses from the burning bush, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14).

In addition to these seven dramatic "I am" declarations, we read about an incident in the garden where the "I am" statement of Jesus has a powerful impact. It happens when Judas leads the soldiers to the garden to arrest Jesus. When the soldiers tell the Lord that they are seeking a man called Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus responds, "I am he," and the force of that great "I am" declaration—a declaration of His own godhood—is so powerful that the soldiers fall back in stunned amazement (see John 18:3–8). John clearly states that his purpose is not to set down an exhaustive biography of the Lord but to inspire saving belief in the godhood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30–31).

Finally, before we move on to examine these four gospels individually, we should note that it is impossible to chronologically harmonize these accounts because they are not intended to be chronological accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not sit down to record a chronological biography of

Jesus. They wrote to present specific aspects of the Lord's life and ministry. None of these books claim to be a chronology of His life. The chronology of these events, of course, is hardly the most important information to be derived from the Gospels. Though we cannot precisely harmonize these events, it's possible to obtain a fairly reliable sequence of events by comparing the Gospels, especially if we rely on John's gospel, which appears to be the most chronologically precise of the four.

The Synoptic Gospels and John

Matthew, Mark, and Luke comprise what is called the Synoptic Gospels (synoptic means "viewed together"). Although all four gospels complement and reinforce each other, the style, theme, and viewpoint of the Synoptic Gospels differ markedly from that of John, which has a very different tone, style, and selection of details. When we read the Synoptics in parallel, they impress us with many similarities and overlapping detail, although each gospel has its own distinct atmosphere, voice, and emphasis.

Each of the four gospels is addressed to a specific audience. Matthew wrote his gospel primarily for the Jews, so it is filled with references and quotations from the Old Testament. Luke wrote his gospel for the Greek, or philosophical mind, so it is filled with the Lord's table talk, as He sat with His disciples in intimate fellowship, exploring realms of spiritual truth—the Greeks loved this. Mark wrote his gospel for the Roman mind; so it is the gospel of haste and action, which were characteristics of the Roman spirit. And John wrote his gospel for the Christian, which is why the gospel of John is dearest to Christian

hearts; it not only emphasizes the deity of Christ, but unveils the teaching of the rapture of the church (see John 14:1–3), the ministry of the Holy Spirit (see John 16:12–25), and the intimacy of fellowship and communion between the Lord and His own.

If you understand that the four gospels were written for four different purposes, from four different perspectives, to four different audiences, you will understand why you find certain differences among them. For example, people often wonder why John's gospel doesn't mention the struggle of our Lord in Gethsemane. We find the record of Gethsemane's agony in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but nothing about it in John. The answer is because in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out and questioned the Father, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

Now, it's not Jesus in His role as the Son of God who questions the Father, because God cannot question God. It is Jesus in His humanity who does this, so the Gethsemane account is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which present the most complete and compelling record of His human struggle. In John, the gospel of the Son of God, this record is omitted. This is not a discrepancy or a contradiction among the gospels; it's simply a difference in theme and emphasis.

Here we see the supervision of the Holy Spirit at work in that the gospels are not mere copies of each other. The Holy Spirit deliberately designed the uniqueness of each gospel as well as the unity of all four gospels. We make a mistake if we think the four gospels are four biographies of the Lord, intended to be the complete life and times of Jesus Christ. They are not biographies

but character sketches, intended to present different dimensions of the complex reality of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Book of Acts

You might think I've just thrown Acts into this section with the gospels because it doesn't fit with the epistles. No, I have deliberately included Acts with the gospels because it continues their story. Written by Luke, it is a sequel to Luke's gospel, and truly serves as a fitting sequel to all four gospels. While the gospels tell the story of Christ in His earthly ministry, Acts tells the story of the body of Christ, the church, which continues His work on earth after His ascension into heaven.

In many ways, Acts is the key to the New Testament. We couldn't understand the New Testament if this book were left out. The four gospels teach us that the apostles have been sent to preach the gospel to Israel—and only Israel. But in Acts we learn of God's command that the gospel is to be taken into all the world, to the Gentiles as well as the house of Israel.

If we leave out the book of Acts and skip directly to Paul's epistles, we find that another apostle has mysteriously been added—some fellow named Paul! Instead of talking about God's kingdom, Christians are talking about a new organization—the church. Instead of a gospel that is confined to Jews in the region around the city of Jerusalem, Christianity has spread—in the short span of a single generation—to the limits of the then-known world. All of this is explained in the book of Acts.

The key to understanding Acts is the realization that this book is not a record of the acts of the apostles but the acts of the Lord

Jesus Christ! Notice how the book begins:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach (1:1).

Notice Luke's choice of words! In the gospel of Luke, he recorded what the Lord Jesus began to do. But now, in Acts, Luke gives us the record of what our Lord is continuing to do. So it is the Lord who is at work throughout both books. Luke is volume one; Acts is volume two.

During World War II, Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, broadcast an announcement of the victories of the allied forces when they had swept across North Africa and were about to launch the invasion of Sicily. Churchill summed up his announcement with these words: "This is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. But it may be the end of the beginning."

That is what we have in the four gospels. When Jesus ascends into heaven, it is not the end of our Lord's ministry. It is merely the end of the beginning. But in the rest of Acts we have the beginning of the end.

The book of Acts records Christ's continuing ministry through the instrumentality of men and women who are just like you and me. In Luke 12:50, shortly before going to the cross, Jesus tells His disciples, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!" In other words, "How limited and shackled I am until this thing is accomplished!" Well, that baptism has been accomplished now. Our Lord is no longer limited and shackled. When He ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit came to us, His followers. Through the

baptism of the Holy Spirit, the omnipotence of God was unleashed in the lives of ordinary men and women, enabling us as Christians to do extra ordinary things in His name.

Acts is the one book of the Bible that is not yet finished. Notice it ends abruptly with the last two verses simply telling us that Paul had reached Rome.

I never close this book without wondering, “Well, what happened next?” The book of Acts leaves you hanging. And there is a reason why it seems unfinished. It’s because Acts is the biography of a living person—Jesus Christ. The last chapter of His story has not been written yet.

I have in my library an autobiography of Dr. Harry A. Ironside, and it ends on the same sort of note. It leaves you hanging. You wonder what happens next. It isn’t complete because, at the time it was written, his life hadn’t ended.

The book of Acts continues to be written today by the lives of men and women in the body of Christ, the church. That phrase, “the body of Christ,” is not a mere metaphor. We are literally His body on earth, carrying out His unfinished work on earth. Even though Jesus has been taken up in the clouds, His body life goes on! It goes on in your life. It

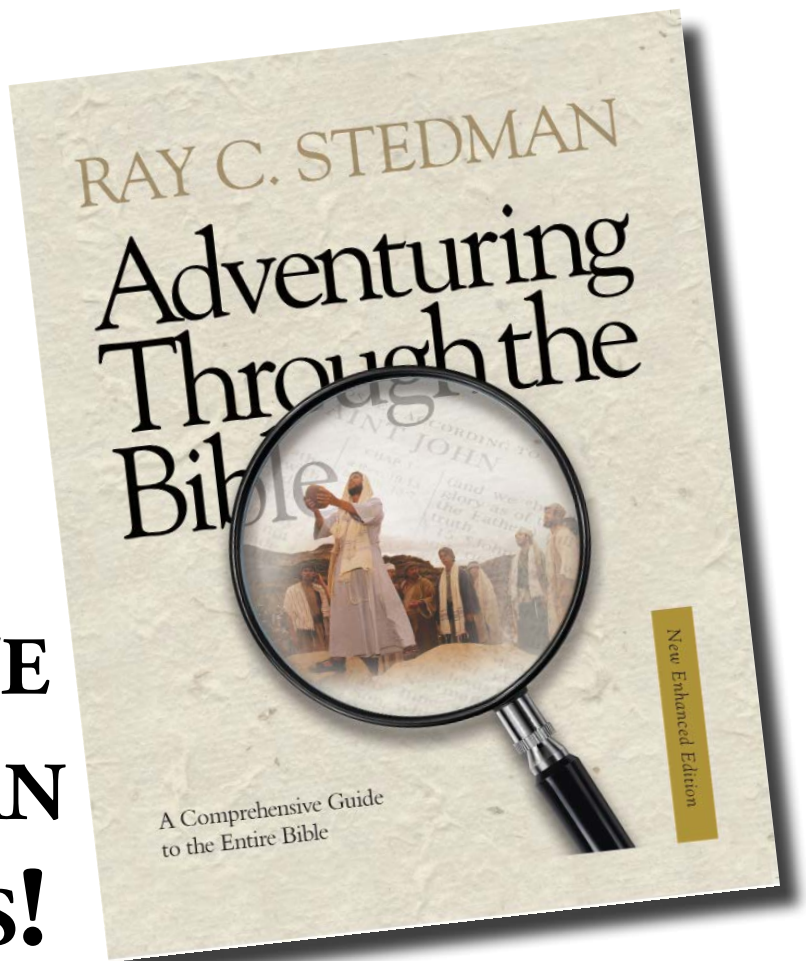
goes on in my life. It goes on and on, outliving and outlasting the lives and institutions of mere mortals, of nations, of civilizations.

Rome has fallen, the empires of the Huns, the Mongols, the Aztecs, the Manchu Chinese, and the British have all risen and declined. Colonialism has collapsed in the Americas, Africa, and Asia; Soviet Communism has come and gone; two world wars have been fought; we have gone from the Dark Ages to the Internet Age—and still the body life of Jesus Christ goes on, the book of Acts continues to be written. We haven’t seen the last page yet.

You and I are still writing the book of Acts today because it is an account of what the Holy Spirit continues to do through us and through Christians all around the world. We are the body of Christ. We are His miracle-working, ministering hands of service. We are His eyes of compassion and love. We are His voice of truth, calling the world to repentance and faith in Him. We are His feet, swift to carry His message around the world.

So as we study the five books of His life—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts—let us view them as a guide to our own way of life. And let us prayerfully invite Him to live His life through us.

THE COMPLETE BOOK CAN BE YOURS!



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