

*The Gospels***Introduction.**

In this lesson we survey the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We will see why we have four gospels and why they are different. We will also look briefly at each writer, his purpose, and his audience.

I. Matthew and John: We Wrote What We Experienced

In lesson one, we saw that the New Testament is primarily about Jesus. He is the key figure. In this lesson, we look at the four gospels, which are the primary source of information we have about Jesus' life and ministry while He was on earth. The word gospel means "good news" and is an appropriate name for the documents that proclaim the message of Jesus Christ and His salvation. Two of those gospels, Matthew and John, were written by eyewitnesses. They were with Jesus in person. In fact, John began his first epistle by writing, "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life . . . was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim" (1 John 1:1–2 NASB). What a magnificent privilege it was. So when we read John's gospel, we are reading the record of somebody who was there. It's the same with Matthew. He could also claim that he didn't hear Jesus' teaching from other people. This was his own recollection of a personal experience with Jesus.

II. Mark and Luke: We Wrote What We Discovered

Mark's gospel was probably written by one of Peter's disciples and so gives us Peter's account of Jesus' life. And Luke tells us that he wrote as a historian. He introduced his gospel by informing us that like the eyewitnesses who wrote their account, "it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:2–4 NASB). Luke was a researcher. He was not a Jew, so he had no ethnic biases. He was not one of Jesus' disciples, so his version shows us how an outsider saw

Jesus.

III. The Synoptic Gospels

Three of the gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are called the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic means to “see together.” Although each gospel presents an accurate record of Jesus, we benefit most when we read them together and integrate their material because some include details others don’t and provide different perspectives on Jesus’ teaching and actions. A richer, deeper picture emerges when you read all three.

IV. John’s Gospel

John is not one of the Synoptic Gospels. John’s gospel is more of a theological treatise while the Synoptics are more biographical. John told us his purpose in John 20:31: “These [things] have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (NASB). He structured his gospel around seven of Jesus’ miracles and used them as evidence to support his claim that Jesus is God’s Son. Because his gospel includes some material the Synoptics ignore, John adds an essential contribution to our understanding of Jesus’ life.

V. Why Are the Gospels Different?

We read all four gospels to get the most complete picture of Jesus’ life. We would expect them to have many similarities because they’re all about Jesus. But why are they different? Four documents were written about the same individual, and yet we find different events included and even different descriptions of the same events. For instance, the Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew 5–7 and in Luke 6. Matthew’s version is much longer. This is only one of many differences we find as we compare the gospel records. So we ask, “Why are the four gospels different?”

A. Four Different Writers Have Four Different Perspectives

First of all, the four gospels were written by four different people and each writer had his own perspective. Suppose you are writing

about an automobile accident. If you asked a policeman what happened, he would probably tell you about how fast the cars were traveling, about missed traffic lights, and other details about driving conditions. If you then asked a physician what happened, he might tell you one driver broke his leg and a passenger in the other car fractured her jaw. These two people are talking about the same event, but each focused on what was of interest. So you have four different writers writing about the same events, but they are still four individuals who noticed things that the others didn't or may have seen in a different way.

B. Four Different Audiences

The second reason the Gospels are different is that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each had different readers in mind. If a new college student wrote a letter to her parents about her college experience, she would tell them how hard she's studying and how much she's learning. If she wrote to her friends, she might tell them about the new friends she's making and the parties she's attending. If we read her two letters, we wouldn't accuse her of being inaccurate or dishonest. In fact, because we read both letters we have a better understanding of her college experience. Neither letter is more or less true or accurate even though they are different.

C. Four Different Purposes

And third, each writer had a different purpose. We would use one set of credentials when applying for a job and an entirely different set when applying for membership on a bowling team. Each gospel writer presented Jesus in a particular way that was of interest to his particular audience. So when we put the four gospels together, we see different writers with their own perspectives, writing to different people, and addressing their readers' interests.

We read all four gospels to get a more complete picture of this man named Jesus. If we limit ourselves to one gospel, we miss the broader, more sophisticated picture of His person and His mission.

VI. The Gospel Writers

A. Matthew was a publican—a tax collector. He would be one of the last people you would expect Jesus to include among His

disciples. He was a turncoat Jew working for the Romans. But Matthew had a unique perspective among Jesus' disciples. He was a businessman. He was recently adopted back into the fold of Judaism, and he zealously followed Jesus. He had a perspective of Jesus that God obviously thought we needed. And so Matthew wrote his gospel.

B. Mark was a missionary who traveled with Paul and Barnabas. He eventually was adopted by Peter as one of his disciples. At the end of his life, Paul wanted Mark to join him in Rome because he was a valuable fellow worker in the ministry. He was probably a young man when Jesus was on earth and may have been one of His followers. He was discipled by Barnabas for a time, but it was under Peter's tutelage that Mark wrote his gospel.

C. Luke was a physician. He may have examined Jesus' healing miracles from that perspective. As a physical scientist, he focused on the evidence and on natural laws. And he was a Gentile and didn't have the same feel for the Jewish culture as the other gospel writers. As one of Paul's traveling companions, he had been exposed to evangelism among the Gentiles and had seen God's power to change lives.

D. John was a fisherman, a working man. Like Peter he made his living outside on the sea and understood and was close to nature. Something about him especially attracted Jesus and, along with his brother James and Peter, was one of Jesus' closest disciples. He was known as the beloved disciple (John 13:23) and so had a special affection for the Master. He had been one of John the Baptist's disciples before meeting Jesus so he had a deep religious commitment.

E. Conclusion. These four individuals each understood Jesus in their own particular way, just like we do today. The Bible tells us that God created us in His image. But isn't it also true that most of us have a tendency to create God in our image? God looks like me; God looks like you. As each of these men wrote their gospel, there was no way they could or should keep their own personality, perspective, and interests out of their story.

The Gospel Writers' Audiences

It's important to realize that although the Bible books were written for us, they were not written to us. God's messages are timeless, and we legitimately apply their teachings today. But

each writer—in both the Old and New Testament—wrote, initially, to an audience in his own time. So the Gospels are also different because of whom they were written to.

A. Matthew's Readers. Matthew was primarily addressed to Jews. In his gospel he frequently refers to Jesus as the "Son of David" and the "Son of Abraham" to emphasize His messianic lineage. Over and over again Matthew shows his Jewish readers how Jesus fulfills the prophets' references to the coming Messiah. Gentiles wouldn't resonate with those themes, but Jews would have to see these as evidence that Jesus was the King He claimed to be. So Matthew emphasized Jesus' Jewish heritage.

B. Mark's Readers. Mark wrote primarily to the Romans. He and Peter were in Rome, and the Roman citizens were their primary focus. Mark interprets Aramaic words for his readers because, unlike Matthew's Jewish audience, the Romans wouldn't know what they mean. There are very few references in Mark to the Jewish law. Romans would have said there is no Jewish law; there is only the Roman law. So you find signals in Mark that it's not as much a Jewish gospel; it's more focused toward the Romans.

C. Luke's Readers. Luke addressed his gospel to a man named Theophilus, but it was obviously shared with other readers and appears to be written to a Greek audience. Luke explains Jewish customs and places and terms. He emphasized Jesus' role as an honored teacher. The Greeks held the classic Greek philosophers in high esteem and honored great teachers. More than in any other gospel, we see Jesus as the superb Teacher. His ability to use parables to clarify truths and to persuade His challengers presents Jesus' genius as a brilliant thinker and teacher.

D. John's Readers. John's gospel was addressed to a more universal audience. He wrote later (probably between AD 90 and AD 100), and by that time the church had spread pretty much over the Roman Empire and around the Mediterranean world. The church was now more Gentile than Jewish as it was in its earlier days. So because John wrote to a universal audience, his gospel doesn't have the evidences of ethnicity like we see in the Synoptic Gospels.

VIII. The Gospel Writer's Purposes

A third reason the Gospels are different is that each writer emphasized a different aspect of Jesus' person and ministry.

A. Matthew's Presentation of Jesus. Because he was writing to Jews, Matthew focused on Jesus' role as the Jewish Messiah, the great King of Israel promised to David and prophesied by Israel's prophets. Matthew's genealogy introduced him as, "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1 NKJV). Abraham lived before David, but Matthew named David first in order to focus on Jesus as the son of David, Israel's great king. It was through David's lineage that Israel's Messiah would be born. In addition, Matthew tells us in 2:2 that the wise men came seeking "He who has been born King of the Jews" (NASB). Those are only a few of the signs Matthew used to emphasize Jesus' role as Israel's Messiah.

B. Mark's Picture of Jesus. Mark presented Jesus as God's servant. And as God's servant, He also served God's people. Jesus Christ "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 NASB). Jesus is very busy serving in Mark. He used the word immediately forty times in this gospel. Jesus went quickly from one event to another. He was here to serve; He was here to fulfill His mission as God's servant and as a servant of God's people. Mark also places emphasis on Jesus' serving as the Great Teacher with thirty-seven references to His teaching role.

C. Luke's Presentation of Jesus. As a Gentile, Luke emphasized Jesus as the Savior of all people—Gentiles as well as Jews. While Matthew's genealogy only goes back to Abraham, the father of the Jews, Luke's genealogy goes all the way back to Adam, the father of all humanity. Luke often presents Jesus in relationships and in conversations with Gentiles. So the gospel of Luke presents Jesus as the universal Savior of all humanity.

D. John's Focus on Jesus. John presents Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In John 20:31, John stated his purpose for writing, "These [things] have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (NASB). John's gospel is built around seven of Jesus' miracles, but he presented them as "signs," a word used in the law courts to indicate evidence that was used to defend a client. John presented Jesus as God and built a case to prove his assertion.

Conclusion

Four gospels. They are very much alike but in some significant ways quite different. John said it's impossible to capture Jesus' life in a book: "If everything Jesus did were written down, the whole world couldn't contain the books" (see John 21:25). While you read the Gospels, don't lose sight of the fact that each of these four men had a relationship with Jesus. He was their Savior. He was their Messiah. He was their King. For Matthew and John, He was also their Teacher and their Friend. Each knew without doubt that He came to serve them by dying for them. He was God, and He added humanity to His person, because only as the God-man could He accomplish His mission. Only as God's Son could He save us from our sin. If you've not received Him as your Savior, don't read these Gospels without being struck by the fact that God Himself came to earth, and He died and rose again so that you and I could have a personal relationship with Him. Don't miss that.