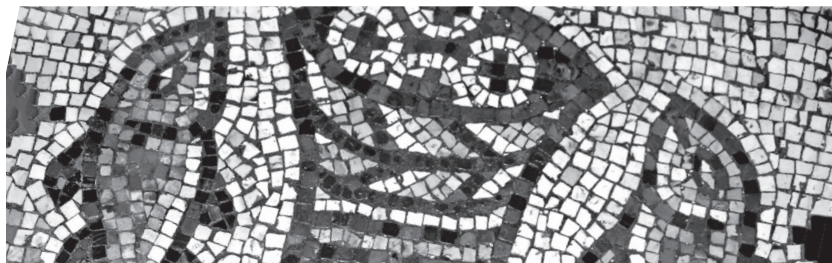


THE GOSPELS

Matthew · Mark · Luke · John



Mark L. Strauss



introduction

The Gospels

Matthew • Mark • Luke • John

What's the best news you've ever heard? Maybe it was the letter that arrived saying that you had gotten a scholarship to the college you'd always dreamed of attending. Or perhaps you got a call from your son or daughter announcing the joyful birth of a grandchild. That was great news! Or maybe the note from

the doctor saying that after treatment the cancer was gone. Good news indeed.

The first four books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are known as “Gospels,” an English word that means “good news.” These books are called Gospels because they tell the greatest news ever—that God has entered human history in the person of Jesus to bring salvation to the world!

Mark Strauss

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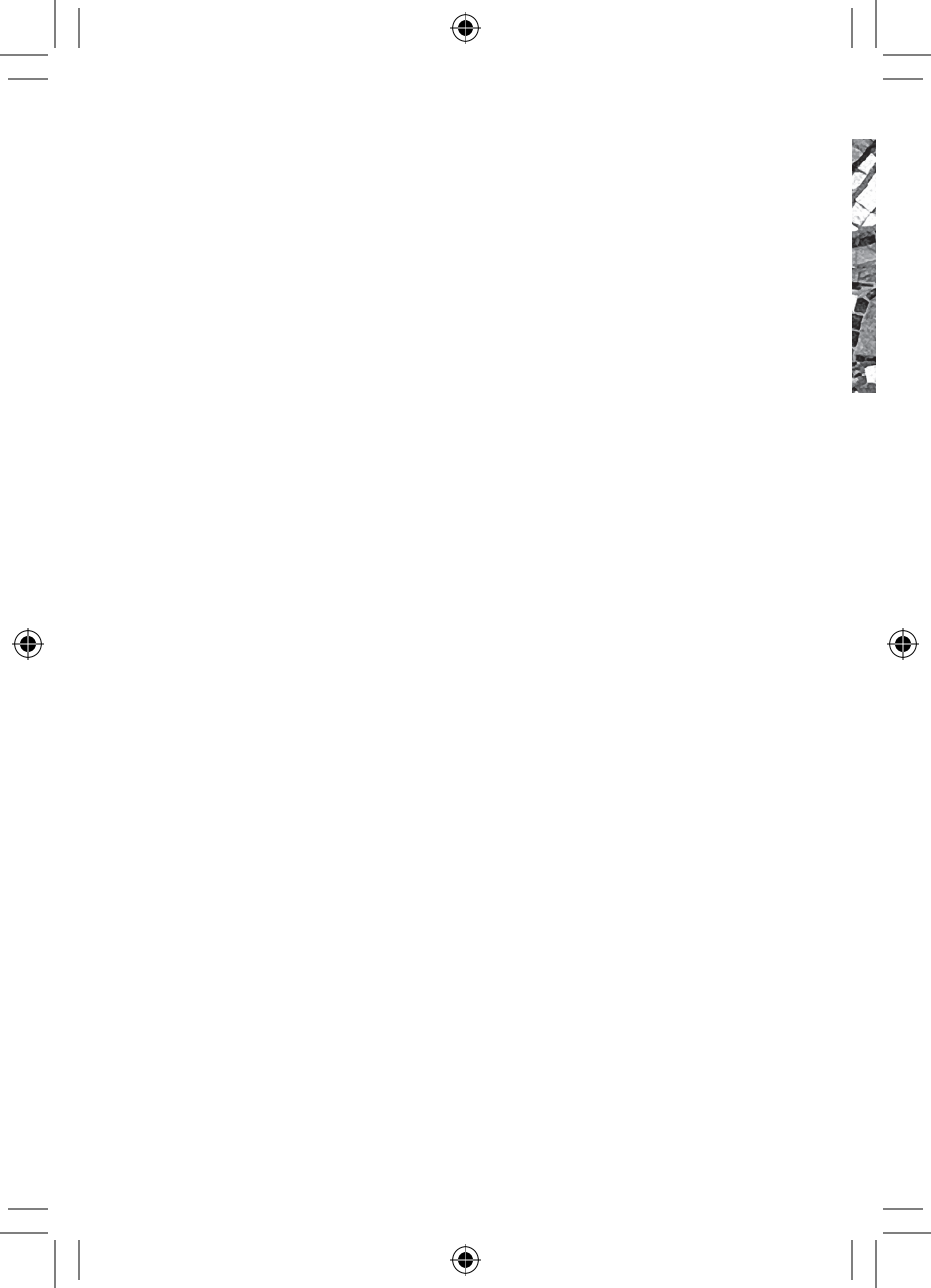
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one

Introducing the Gospels

We all love getting good news. Sometimes good news comes that only makes a good situation better. Sometimes we get good news that is what we have been hanging our hopes on, something that will fix a bad situation, bring hope where there seems to be none. That's what the gospel is. It's the good news that brings hope to a world desperate for it. The gospel is the news that God is saving his world.

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, human beings had been alienated from God, separated from their Creator. Yet God in his grace set in motion a plan to save them. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke of this plan and predicted the coming of a Savior—the Messiah[■]—who would bring salvation and restoration to the world. The word they often used to describe this salvation was

“good news” or “gospel.” The prophet Isaiah wrote:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who *bring good news*, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (ISAIAH 52:7, emphasis added)

➤ **Messiah** comes from a Hebrew term meaning “Anointed One” and is translated into Greek as *Christos* or “Christ.” In Judaism it refers to God’s chosen agent to bring deliverance to his people.

The good news was that God was coming to save his people and that he would provide a way to restore their broken relationship. When Jesus began to teach, he picked up this language from Isaiah. His message was, “The time has come . . . The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe *the good news!*” (MARK 1:15, emphasis added).

After dying for our sin and rising again, Jesus sent his disciples to announce to the world the salvation he had accomplished. The word they used to describe this message was, of course, “good news/gospel.” The apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonian church that “our gospel (*euangelion*) came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction” (1 THESSALONIANS 1:5).

The fact that the gospel was originally a spoken message of salvation teaches us something about the nature of these four books. The Gospels are not dusty histories about the beginning of Christianity. They aren’t even just biographies about Jesus. They

are written (and in Luke's gospel, researched) versions of the announcement of salvation. As John says in his gospel:

Jesus performed many other 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 Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (JOHN 20:30–31)

➤ Ancient societies, despite having written records, were largely dependent on **news and information** spreading mouth to mouth.

John isn't writing just so that people will know the facts about Jesus. He is calling them to faith—belief and response—in Jesus.

What Is a Gospel? When reading any book or piece of literature, the first question to ask is, “What am I reading?” The kind of literature, or “genre,” determines how you read it. Consider the kinds of things you might read on any particular day. In the morning you pick up a newspaper or go to an internet news site and read about the events of the day. You expect this material to be factual and historically accurate. Later that day you walk through a grocery store checkout line and see a tabloid newspaper with the headlines, “Aliens invade New York City!” You don't panic since you know this is sensationalistic entertainment meant to get your attention (and lure you to buy). You get home and open your mailbox. One letter inside says in big letters, “You have won a million dollars!” You don't take this seriously since

you recognize it as “junk” mail stretching the truth to try to sell you something. Another letter, however, is your electric bill, which you do take seriously, knowing that ignoring it could get your electricity shut off. Throughout the day we are constantly identifying literary genres and adjusting our reading habits accordingly.

So what type of literature are the Gospels? What should we look for when reading them? Three categories can help us to understand and read the Gospels well. They are *History*, *Narrative*, and *Theology*.

▶ Currently we have approximately 5,500 full or partial copies of **books of the New Testament**. One complete copy of the New Testament can be dated to within 225 years of the original writing. The earliest confirmed copies of the New Testament Scriptures date back to AD 114. This means that the historical distance between our earliest copies and the date of the original writing is, at most, 50 years. It is “at most” because Dr. Dan Wallace and a team of researchers from the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts believe they have located a text fragment from the gospel of Mark that dates back to the first century.

The Gospels[▶] are first of all *historical documents*. This means they are set in a real place and time and are intended to record actual historical events. The Gospel writers were not passing down legends, myths, or fables. They considered the events they were recording to have actually happened. Luke, in particular, makes this clear at the beginning of his Gospel. He says he has *carefully investigated* these events and obtained *eyewitness testimony* so that his readers might know *the certainty* of

the things they've been taught (LUKE 1:1–4). John, too, emphasizes the importance of eyewitness testimony: “This is the disciple who testifies to these things.... We know that his testimony is true” (JOHN 21:24).

This issue is important, since the truth of Christianity rises or falls on the historicity of these events. In the Gospels Jesus makes astonishing claims about himself. He says he is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. He identifies his coming death as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Most importantly, the Gospels climax with Jesus's resurrection, which serves as the confirmation of all of his claims. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is a sham. Or, as the apostle Paul puts it, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 CORINTHIANS 15:14). It is fundamental to the nature of the Gospels that they are historical, meant to record actual events.

Yet the gospels are a particular kind of history. They are historical *narrative*, meaning history told as *story*. All stories have particular features, such as plot, characters, and settings. A story makes sense because of its *plot*, which is the progress of the story—how it develops. Plots generally revolve around conflict. A problem arises that must be solved. Stories tend to reach a high point in a climax and then find resolution. This is true of the Gospels. Jesus comes on the scene and makes claims about himself. Conflict arises as he is challenged by Satan, by demons, by the religious leaders, and ultimately by the Roman authorities. The plots of all four Gospels have Jesus as the protagonist and Satan and the religious leaders as the antagonists. All four have their narrative climax in

the crucifixion and a resolution in the resurrection.

Yet while all four Gospels tell the same basic story of Jesus, each author tells it in their own unique way, developing their plot in unique directions, describing characters in certain ways, and emphasizing particular settings and themes. Consider how each Gospel begins. Matthew starts with a genealogy, confirming Jesus's legitimate royal ancestry; Mark hits the ground running with the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus's ministry; Luke starts with a formal literary introduction describing his credentials as a historian; John has a highly theological prologue describing Jesus as the pre-existent "Word" (*Logos*) of God who became a human being in order to make us children of God. Each introduction picks up themes important to that Gospel writer.

▶ **The Holy Spirit** is the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the one Jesus promised to be with his followers (see John 14:16). He is the one responsible for inspiring the writers of Scripture (See 1 TIMOTHY 3:16, 2 PETER 1:21).

This is a particularly important point. The Holy Spirit[▶] gave us four Gospels, not just one. Each of the Gospel writers has a unique story to tell, similar but also different from the other three. There has been an unfortunate tendency in the history of the church to "harmonize" the Gospels, bringing them together into a single story. These attempts have noble motives—to tell "the whole story." The danger is that by cutting and pasting the four Gospels into one we risk missing and even distorting each Gospel's unique perspective. We take four Spirit-inspired masterpieces and merge

them into a new story, which might miss the Spirit's unique message to the Church from each Gospel. It is important to respect each Gospel's literary and historical integrity and uniqueness.

This brings us to a third key term to describe the Gospels. They are not just history and narrative; they are also *theology*. By this we mean that the Gospels are faith-inspired documents, written by those who passionately believed that Jesus was the Savior of the world. As noted above, John brings this out most clearly when he states his purpose in writing: "*that you may believe . . .*" (JOHN 20:30–31, emphasis added). And Luke wants his reader to "know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (LUKE 1:4). Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John passionately believe in the truth of their message and want everyone to experience the salvation that Jesus came to bring.

Four Portraits of the One Jesus. What we have said about the uniqueness of each Gospel helps to explain why we have four instead of one. The Holy Spirit wanted to give the church a multifaceted perspective of who Jesus was.

One of the most amazing cinematic experiences is the IMAX movie. Multiple cameras create a 360° view for the audience. It can be breathtaking to experience a sweeping panorama while passing over a city, a mountain, or the ocean. Having four Gospels gives us a breathtaking 360° view of Jesus, a more complete understanding of who he is and what he came to accomplish. In the next four chapters, we will examine each Gospel's unique portrait of Jesus.



two

Reading Matthew:

The Gospel of the Messianic
King of the Jews

When I was growing up, the most anticipated day of the year was ... Christmas! I loved everything about Christmas: decorating the tree, hanging up lights, roasted turkey and cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie! And of course, there was the anticipation of the toys underneath the tree on Christmas morning. The Sears mail order catalog would show up sometime around Thanksgiving and my brothers and I would scramble to get it first, eagerly paging through the toy section to pick out our favorites. Every day for the next month was spent eagerly longing for Christmas to come.

The Gospel of Matthew is all about the eager anticipation for Christmas ... the first Christmas! For



centuries the Jews had struggled under the rule of foreign powers—the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. Israel longed for the day when God would send his Messiah who would free them from this oppression and make them great and prosperous in the Land again. Matthew begins with the announcement that this day has arrived! “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (MATTHEW 1:1).

Though probably not the first Gospel to be written (Mark likely has that distinction), Matthew has traditionally been placed first in the New Testament. This is appropriate since Matthew has the deepest roots in the Old Testament and Judaism. It is as though Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, is reaching across the centuries and passing the prophetic baton to Matthew, who announces that the time has finally come.

Matthew’s central theme is *promise and fulfillment*. God’s promises to bring a Savior to Israel and to the world have come to fulfillment through Jesus the Messiah. This fulfillment theme is developed in a variety of ways in Matthew’s Gospel. Let’s look at three of these: the genealogy, fulfillment formulas, and typology.

The Genealogy (1:1–17). In the West, people tend to view genealogies as rather tedious and boring. The *Reader’s Digest* condensation of the Bible even deleted most of them! But for Matthew, this genealogy is unbelievably exciting, the key to who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish. Matthew introduces the





genealogy by identifying Jesus as “the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” All of these terms are enormously significant. *Messiah* comes from a Hebrew term meaning “Anointed One” and is translated into Greek as *Christos* or “Christ.” Anointing with oil was a way of dedicating a leader (especially the king) to a special task assigned by God. Within Judaism the term “Messiah” came to be used of the end-time King chosen by God to accomplish his salvation.

The title *Son of David* reminds the reader that almost 1,000 years before Matthew, God had promised King David that God would one day raise up one of David’s descendant, who would reign on his throne forever with justice and righteousness (2 SAMUEL 7:11–16). This “messianic hope” was picked up again and again by the prophets when Israel was downtrodden and oppressed (ISAIAH. 9:6–7; 11:1–5; JEREMIAH 23:5–6; 33:15–16; EZEKIEL 37:24–25).

“*Son of Abraham*” similarly recalls the covenant God made with Abraham another thousand years before David’s time (GENESIS 12; 15; 17). God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation (Israel) and that all nations would be blessed through his descendant. As the Messiah, Jesus will bring salvation blessings not only to Israel, but to the whole world.

Together these titles and the genealogy as a whole are intended to show us that Jesus is the climax of human history, the Savior of the world.

Fulfillment Formulas. In addition to providing a genealogy legitimizing Jesus’s claim to be the Messiah, Matthew repeatedly points out that what is



happening is the fulfillment of Scripture—Jesus is bringing the history and story of Israel to fullness of meaning. Ten times he uses a formula something like, “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet.”

Matthew	Event	Fulfills
1:22–23	Jesus’s virgin birth	Isaiah 7:14
2:15	Escape to and return from Egypt	Hosea 11:1
2:17–18	Infants of Bethlehem murdered	Jeremiah 31:15
2:23	Jesus’s childhood in Nazareth	unrecorded prophecy
4:14–16	Jesus’s ministry established in Galilee	Isaiah 9:2
8:17	Jesus heals disease	Isaiah 53:4
12:17–21	Jesus fulfills the Servant role of...	Isaiah 42:2
13:35	Jesus speaks in parables	Psalms 78:2 2 Chron. 29:30
21:4–5	Jesus enters Jerusalem as humble king	Zech. 9:9
27:9–10	Jesus betrayed for 30 pieces of silver	Zech. 11:12–13

In addition to these, a dozen or more times Matthew speaks of an Old Testament passage as fulfilled in Christ, although without an explicit fulfillment formula. While many of these passages are uniquely fulfilled by Jesus, others are “typological” fulfillments. By this we mean they

are describing something that happened in the past but that foreshadows or points forward to its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. The persons or events described are anticipations of the coming Messiah (see the example of Hosea 11:1 below).

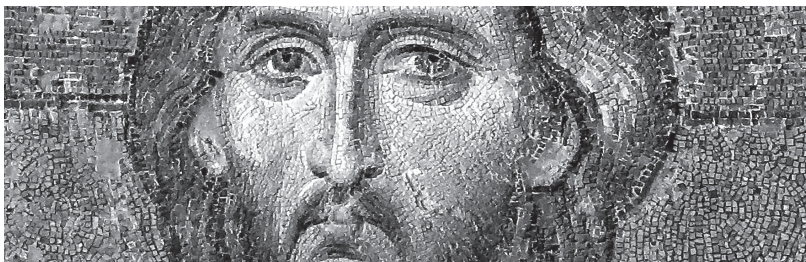
Typology. Matthew uses typology to show that all of Israel's history is coming to its climax in Christ. Moses, for example, is a type of Christ. Just as Moses went up a mountain (Mount Sinai) to receive God's covenant on tablets of stone, so Jesus delivers his famous Sermon on *the Mount* (MATTHEW 5-7) to inaugurate the new covenant and illustrate the true meaning of the law. Just as Moses wrote the five books of the Pentateuch (GENESIS—DEUTERONOMY), so Jesus gives five major discourses in Matthew (CHS. 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). Similarly, just as Moses's face shone when he came down from the mountain (EXODUS 34:29-33), so Jesus's face shines like the sun at the transfiguration (MATTHEW 17:2). In these and other ways Jesus is presented as a new and greater Moses, bringing in the new and greater covenant promised by God (see JEREMIAH 31:31-34).

Matthew also develops a "new Israel" typology. Just as God brought his "son" Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus (HOSEA 11:1), so he now brings Jesus up out of Egypt after King Herod tries to kill him (MATTHEW 2:15). Just as Israel was tested forty years in the wilderness and repeatedly failed to trust God, so Jesus is tested for forty days in the wilderness but succeeds by trusting God (MATTHEW 4:1-10). Israel is a (negative) "type" of Christ. Though the nation

was unfaithful and failed to be God's light to the Gentiles (ISAIAH 49:6), Jesus remained faithful and so fulfilled Israel's true role.

The Messianic King of the Jews . . . and Lord of All Nations. With his strong Jewish focus and emphasis on prophetic fulfillment, Matthew is likely writing to a predominantly Jewish-Christian community. In the face of opposition from unbelieving Jews, Matthew seeks to prove that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, who fulfills the promises made to Israel.

Yet Matthew also makes clear that these promises are not for Israel alone. During his public ministry, Jesus tells his Twelve disciples to go only to the "lost sheep of Israel" (MATTHEW 10:5-6; "twelve" symbolizes Israel). This is because Israel was God's chosen people. They had the first opportunity to respond so that they could then be a light to the other nations (see ROMANS 1:16). Yet once salvation has been accomplished through Jesus's life, death and resurrection, Jesus gives his disciples the "Great Commission" to make disciples of *all nations* (MATTHEW 28:18-20). The salvation prepared for Israel is now to go to all nations everywhere.



three

Reading Mark:

The Gospel of the Suffering Son of God

Sometimes the best stories have surprising twists in their plots. In Agatha Christie's classic murder mystery, *And Then There Were None*, the killer turns out to be someone you would never suspect (I won't spoil it for you). In Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, the selfish and self-loathing Sydney Carton shockingly sacrifices his own life for a man he claims to hate (Charles Darnay), by taking his place at the gallows. In *Star Wars*, Darth Vader turns out to be *spoiler alert* Luke's father! The plot of Mark's Gospel is similarly built around a shocking twist in the story. Unpacking this surprising turn will help us understand Mark's central theme and purpose for writing.

The Mighty Messiah and Son of God (Mark 1:1–8:29).

Mark's Gospel begins with astonishing speed and



energy. Unlike the other Gospels, Mark wastes no time with lengthy prologues, genealogies, or birth stories. Within a few short paragraphs, Jesus bursts onto the scene and begins his public ministry. In one short chapter, he is baptized by John, tested by Satan, announces the kingdom of God, calls disciples, heals the sick, and casts out demons. Mark is fond of the Greek word *euthus*, often translated “immediately,” which he uses 42 times. Though the word doesn’t always mean “just then,” it serves to carry the narrative forward at breakneck speed as one event tumbles after another. This is a Gospel amped up on caffeine!

The key idea here is “authority.” Jesus teaches with extraordinary authority. With authority he announces the kingdom of God. With authority he calls fishermen to be his disciples, and they drop everything and follow him. He orders demons to depart and they must obey (1:1–26). He heals the sick with a word (1:40–42). The people are amazed at his power. As the narrative progresses Jesus’s power and authority go into overdrive. Jesus not only heals the sick, he raises the dead (5:21–43). He commands nature by ordering a storm to stop, and it does! (4:35–39). He now casts out not just one demon, but a “legion” of them (5:1–20). He feeds five thousand people (6:30–44), and then four thousand, with a few loaves and fishes (8:1–10).

The purpose of these demonstrations of power and authority is to solve the mystery of Jesus, to confirm his identity. One of the most frequent questions in the Gospel of Mark is “*Who does he think he is/Who is this?*” The first line of the Gospel reads, “The beginning of the good news about *Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*”



(1:1, emphasis added). Everything Jesus is doing confirms that he is indeed the mighty Messiah and Son of God.

Jesus's identity is confirmed for his disciples at the center point of the story (8:27–38). The event occurs when Jesus takes the disciples on a spiritual retreat to Caesarea Philippi north of Galilee. On the way he asks them, “Who do people say that I am?” and they give the popular answers: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” But then he asks what *they* think. Peter responds for the rest: “You are the Messiah.”

This is the correct answer! Jesus's authoritative words and deeds have confirmed for Peter that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. Yet Peter is only half right. From his perspective, the Messiah is here to conquer the Roman legions and establish a physical kingdom in Jerusalem. Yet Jesus has a different plan and is facing much greater enemies. He has come to conquer not the Romans, but *Satan, sin, and death*. In a shocking twist, Jesus announces the Messiah's role:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. (MARK 8:31)

The Twist: *The Suffering Servant of the Lord* (Mark 8:31–16:8). In response to Peter's confession, Jesus predicts that he is going to suffer and die! Peter is dismayed at this negative attitude and rebukes Jesus. Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter right back and accuses him of speaking for Satan (8:32–33). The Messiah's role

is to suffer and die as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world. If Jesus does not go to Jerusalem to die, the world will remain enslaved to Satan, sin and death.

The rest of the story develops this dramatic turn, as Jesus now sets out to fulfill the suffering role of the Messiah. On the way, Jesus three times predicts his death—the “passion predictions” (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). Each time the disciples fail to understand and each time Jesus teaches what it means to be a servant leader.

The third of these episodes represents a key climax to the Gospel. When the disciples vie for the best seats in the kingdom, Jesus responds by teaching what it means to be a servant leader (“whoever wants to be first must be slave of all”) and then points to himself as the model: *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (10:45, emphasis added). A “ransom” here means a payment for sin. In the ultimate act of servanthood, Jesus “the one” will die for the sins of “the many” so that they can be saved. This statement echoes the prophecy of Isaiah 53, where the LORD’s “Servant” (= the Messiah), “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.... by his knowledge *my righteous servant will justify many*, and he will bear their iniquities” (ISAIAH 53:5, 11, emphasis added).

Jesus is the “righteous servant” who “will justify many” by “bearing their iniquities”—removing the barrier that separated them from God.

Mark’s Purpose and Audience. Mark’s central

theme—Jesus the mighty Messiah and Son of God who suffers as the Servant of the LORD—fits well his purpose in writing. Early church tradition tells us that Mark wrote his gospel in Rome to the persecuted church there and that he was especially preserving Peter’s preaching of the good news.

Mark’s readers would have had two major concerns, which Mark addresses throughout his narrative. On the one hand, the Christians in Rome were trying to convince their neighbors that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and Savior, even though he suffered crucifixion, an excruciating and humiliating death, and one reserved only for the worst criminals. In response, Mark shows that Jesus’s remarkable *authority* proves beyond a shadow of doubt that he was the Messiah and Son of God. His death was not that of a criminal, nor was it a tragedy; it was all along part of God’s plan to save us from our sins.

Second, the church in Rome was suffering severe persecution and even martyrdom for their faith. Mark therefore points to Jesus as a model of perseverance to be followed. Just as Jesus remained faithful to God even through suffering and death, so all believers are called to be willing to suffer with him. As Jesus says after the first passion prediction: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34). A true follower of Jesus is one who follows him faithfully through suffering and even death. Mark’s Gospel is not only a defense of the crucified Messiah, it is also a call for cross-bearing discipleship.



four

Reading Luke:

The Gospel of the Savior for
Lost People Everywhere

Have you ever walked out of a movie or finished a book and said, “There has to be a sequel!” Something about the story just wasn’t quite finished; there were loose ends to tie up, more angles to explore, a conflict yet to be resolved.

One of the most important keys to understanding Luke’s Gospel is to realize that when we get to the end of the Gospel the story is not yet finished.

Luke-Acts, a Two-Volume Work. Luke was the only one of the four Gospel writers to include a second volume that answers the question, “What happened next?” While Luke’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus from his conception by the Holy Spirit to his ascension to

heaven, the book of Acts tells how his followers, in the power of the same Holy Spirit, took his message of salvation from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (ACTS 1:8). At the beginning of Acts, Luke refers to his previous book about “all that Jesus *began to do and to teach* until the day he was taken up to heaven” (ACTS 1:1, emphasis added). The book of Acts is therefore about what Jesus *continues to do and to teach* through his church by the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are therefore more than just two books by the same author. They are two parts of a single work. The story that begins in the Gospel does not reach its narrative conclusion until the end of Acts. Because of this theological and literary unity, scholars use the hyphenated designation “Luke-Acts” to describe the two books.

Two Great Movements: *From Jerusalem to Rome; from Jews to Gentiles.*

Two great movements guide the story of Luke-Acts. The first is a geographical movement, from Jerusalem to Rome. The Gospel begins in the temple in Jerusalem, at the very heart of Judaism (1:8). Jerusalem plays an important and two-sided role in Luke-Acts. On the one hand, it is a positive role, since Jerusalem is the place of God’s holy temple where his presence dwells. In the Old Testament it is prophesied that God’s word would go forth from Jerusalem to the world (ISAIAH 2:3). Israel was to be a light to the nations (ISAIAH 49:6) and Jerusalem symbolized that light. Sure enough, in Acts the church takes the message of salvation “from

Jerusalem . . . to the ends of the earth” (ACTS 1:8).

At the same time Jerusalem plays a more negative and sinister role, representing the stubborn and rebellious nation Israel. In the past Jerusalem has killed God’s prophets (LUKE 11:47–48; 13:33–34; 19:40–41) and will ultimately kill the Messiah (ACTS 7:52). For this reason the city will experience God’s judgment and destruction (LUKE 13:34; 19:43–44; 21:20, 24).

The importance of Jerusalem is evident in Luke’s “travel narrative” (or, “journey to Jerusalem”) which is the most unique structural feature of Luke’s Gospel. In Mark’s Gospel, when Jesus first heads toward Jerusalem from Galilee, it takes him less than one chapter to get there (MARK 10:32–11:11). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus heads to Jerusalem in 9:51 but doesn’t get there for ten chapters (19:45). Jesus wanders from place to place, but always with an eye on Jerusalem (9:53; 13:22, 33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11). The destination clearly has theological significance, symbolizing both the rejection of Jesus by his own people and the salvation Jesus will accomplish through his death and resurrection.

Luke’s Gospel is all about the movement from Galilee to Jerusalem *to accomplish God’s salvation*, but the book of Acts is about the church’s movement outward from Jerusalem *to proclaim that salvation* to a lost world (ACTS 1:8). This geographical movement is also an ethnic one, from Jews to Gentiles. All along it was God’s plan that the salvation that began in Israel would go to the ends of the earth. The church, made up of *Jews and Gentiles*, represents the people of God in the present age of salvation.

This emphasis confirms one of Luke’s most

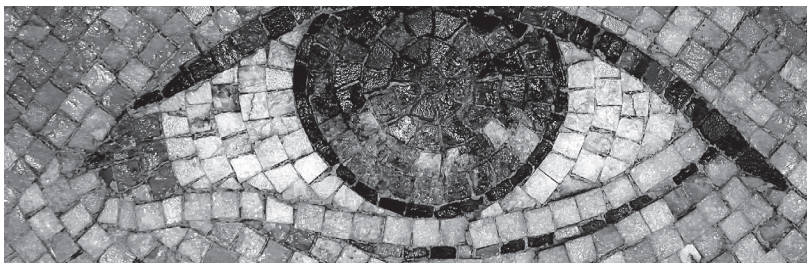
important themes: *continuity*. There is continuity between the Old Testament and the New; between God's promise and its fulfillment; between Israel, the people of the old covenant, and the church, the people of the new. The church of Jesus Christ is not a new religion; it is the continuation and fulfillment of God's purpose and plan through Israel to bring salvation to the world.

The theme of the gospel for all nations is central to Acts, but it already plays out in many ways in Luke's Gospel. Consider these examples: (1) Luke dates Jesus's career by events in world history, such as the reigns of Roman emperors (2:1; 3:1). (2) At the end of Matthew we learn that the gospel will go to "all nations" (MATTHEW 28:18–20); in Luke we know this by the second chapter (LUKE 2:32). (3) Each of the Gospels quote Isaiah 40:3 to describe John the Baptist as "a voice . . . in the wilderness," but Luke extends the quote to Isaiah 40:5 to show that "*all people* will see God's salvation" (LUKE 3:6. emphasis added). (4) Though Matthew's genealogy goes back to Abraham (1:1), the father of the Jewish nation, Luke's goes back to Adam (LUKE 3:38), the father of *all people*. (5) In Luke, the theme of Jesus's introductory sermon in Nazareth is that God wants to bless the Gentiles as well as the Jews (a message that almost gets him killed! 4:24–30). In these and many other ways, Luke shows that Jesus is *the Savior for all people everywhere*.

The Gospel for the Outsider: *Seeking and Saving the Lost*. Another way this theme plays out in the Gospel is with Luke's consistent emphasis on God's

love for those on the margins. Jesus shows special care for outsiders and those with low social status. This includes the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, people with leprosy, Samaritans, women, and children. Jesus offers forgiveness to the soldiers who are crucifying him (23:34) and to the criminal crucified beside him (23:43). Many of Jesus's most well-known parables appear in Luke's "travel narrative" (LUKE 9:51–19:27) and concern God's love for the lost and the outcast: the Samaritan (10:30–35), the Great Banquet (14:15–24), the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin, the Prodigal Son (15:1–32), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19–31), the Persistent Widow, and the Pharisee and Tax Collector (18:1–14).

The climax to these "outsider" stories is the account of Zacchaeus, which occurs shortly before Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem (19:1–10). Zacchaeus is not just a despised tax-collector, he is a *chief* tax-collector, the worst of the worst. Yet when he welcomes Jesus into his home and repents of his sin, Jesus announces that, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." The true people of God are those who repent and turn to him in faith. Jesus's next statement is not only a fitting climax to this story, but is also a theme verse for the whole Gospel: "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (19:10, emphasis added). From Luke's perspective, Jesus is the Savior for lost people everywhere.



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Reading John:

The Gospel of the Son Who Reveals the Father

John and the Synoptics

While each of the four Gospels is unique in many ways, the first three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—have a great deal in common. We call these three the “Synoptic” Gospels (synoptic means “viewed together”) because they have so much in common. Approximately 90% of the stories and teaching in Mark’s Gospel appear in either Matthew or Luke. By contrast, only 10% of John’s Gospel appears in any of the other three.

Why such similarities and differences? It seems likely that Matthew, Mark, and Luke used many of the same sources.

But why is John so different? The likely answer



is that John was writing somewhat later in the first century AD and under different circumstances. While the biggest challenge facing the Synoptic authors was whether Jesus was the promised Messiah who inaugurated God's kingdom, for John the most pressing question is whether Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Some false teachers had begun to claim that Jesus was merely human and not truly God. Others said Jesus may be divine, but he only appeared to be human. John writes to combat both false teachings. Only if Jesus is fully human and fully divine can he provide salvation for the sins of the world. The consistent theme throughout John's Gospel is that *Jesus is the self-revelation of God, who provides eternal life to all who believe* (see 3:16). We will trace this theme briefly through several passages and narrative features.

John's Prologue (1:1–18). John's prologue represents the most exalted picture of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus is introduced as God's eternal "Word" (1:1; Greek: *Logos*), his self-revelation and communication to humanity. Verses 1–2 are a remarkable description of the Son as both distinct from the Father (he was "with God [the Father]"), yet as fully divine (he "was God"). That the Son is truly God is further evident in that he is the Creator of all things (v. 3). Just as God brought light and life into existence at creation (GENESIS 1:3, 20–26), so Jesus is the light-giver and life-giver (JOHN 1:4)—bringing both physical life and eternal life. He brought this life by becoming a human being (vv. 10–11, 14), an event theologians call *the incarnation*. Though rejected by his own people



(vv. 10–11), Jesus’s death paid the penalty for our sins and brought us salvation. Those who receive Jesus are now restored to a right relationship with God as his spiritual children (vv. 12–13). Though the Old Testament law could only point out our sin, God’s grace through Jesus delivers us from it (vv. 16–17). The end of the prologue returns to the theme introduced at the beginning. Just as the “Word” of God communicates who God is (1:1), so Jesus the Son reveals the invisible God (1:18).

The Seven “Signs.” The Son coming to reveal the Father continues throughout John’s Gospel. The first major section (1:19–12:50) is sometimes called “The Book of Signs.” This is because it contains seven “signs,” or miracles, that are meant to reveal Jesus’s glory and to point people to faith in him. The number seven in Scripture often indicates completion or perfection. Interspersed with the seven signs is a series of dialogues and debates between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, who challenge Jesus’s identity and actions. The seven signs are:

1. *Turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana, 2:1–11*
2. *Healing a royal official’s son, 4:43–54*
3. *Healing a disabled man at the Pool of Bethesda, 5:1–15*
4. *Feeding 5,000 people with a few loaves and fishes, 6:1–14*
5. *Walking on water, 6:16–21*
6. *Healing a man born blind, 9:1–41*
7. *Raising Lazarus, 11:1–43*




At the conclusion of the first sign, turning water into wine, we get an explanation of the purpose of the

signs: “What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (JOHN 2:11). The signs reveal Jesus’s glory and provoke faith in him.


Yet for the stubborn and hard-hearted, the signs provoke opposition and resistance. The last and climactic of the seven signs is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. On the one hand, this miracle causes many to believe (11:45) and foreshadows the greatest of all signs, the resurrection of Jesus. On the other hand, it is the precipitating event that leads to Jesus’s crucifixion (11:47–53). Yet even here the negative is turned to God’s glory, as Christ achieves victory over death and accomplishes our salvation through his atoning death on the cross.

Seven “I am” Statements. Another important means of Jesus’s self-revelation in John’s Gospel are seven “I am” statements, metaphors that Jesus uses to describe himself. The seven, and their significance, are:


1. *The Bread of Life, meaning the source of spiritual life, 6:35, 41, 48, 50–51, 58*
2. *The Light of the World, meaning the source of life and guidance, 8:12; 9:5*
3. *The Door/Gate for the Sheep, meaning protection from danger, 10:7, 9*
4. *The Good Shepherd, meaning provider and protector, 10:11, 14*
5. *The Resurrection and the Life, meaning provider of eternal life, 11:25*

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6. *The Way, the Truth and the Life, meaning the one true way to know God, 14:6*
7. *The True Vine, meaning the source of life and spiritual health, 15:1*

In addition to these metaphors, Jesus sometimes speaks of himself in absolute terms as the “I AM” (8:58). This is an allusion to Exodus 3:14, where the Lord God identifies himself to Moses as the “I AM,” the self-existent one, without beginning or end. This again emphasizes Jesus as one who is truly divine—the self-revelation of God.



John's Theme and Purpose. John's primary theme is clearly *Christological*, confirming the identity of Christ. Yet while this is certainly the most theological of the four Gospels, even John is not writing theology for theology's sake. His purpose, like the other Gospels, is to call people to faith. The Gospel climaxes with an explicit statement of purpose: “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).



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The Gospels are theological and literary jewels, each a masterpiece in its own way. Yet from the perspective of their inspired authors—the four “Evangelists”—they are much more. They are “good news,” a call to respond in faith to the arrival of God's end-time salvation and an invitation to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. 🌿

