

GO DEEPER INTO THE GOSPELS
WEEK 01 - WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2020
Pastor Daniel Calcagno | Glad Tidings Church of God
SCRIPTURE: Mark 1:1; Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31

THE SCIENCE AND THE ART OF BIBLE STUDY

The Apostle Paul said: **“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NLT).** From this passage, we can say that the Bible, in some sense, comes from God and we can use it to learn what we should be doing in our lives and what we should not be doing in our lives. However, to be able to discern these things, we must do more than simply read the Bible; we must study the Bible.

There are two approaches to Bible study that I want us to consider and take.

The science of Bible study. The Bible is a translation of various ancient writings written by various ancient writers written in Hebrew and Greek (with some Aramaic), written in and for specific reasons and in specific circumstances.

- **Language** - understanding the original languages and how they are translated into English
- **Grammar** - understanding the nuances of grammar and how they affect the meaning of the text
- **Historical Context** - attempting to uncover who the author of the text was and the circumstances in which they wrote
- **Theological Purpose** - attempting to determine what theological purpose is behind the text

These are just some of the things we need to work at when studying the Bible and, for the most part, there is a science to these things. In other words, when it comes to these matters, we are in the realm of facts and logic.

The art of Bible study. The other aspect of Bible study is more subjective and dependent upon us and our experience: that is, we are attempting to absorb from the Bible the wisdom we need to live, as Paul said, **“...sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:12, NASB).** After doing the work of “scientifically” studying the Bible, we should engage in the “art” of Bible study and ask “how does this apply to us today?”

WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

The specific books of the Bible we are going to be studying are the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The word “gospel” is an Old English way of saying “good news.” Usually, when we say “gospel,” we are referring to the message of good news about Jesus and his kingdom. But when we are talking about “the gospels,” we are talking about the books of the Bible that present to us the life and teachings of Jesus.

There is no doubt that the purpose of the books we call “gospels” is to tell us about Jesus. Some say that the gospels are to be understood as being purely historical, even biographies of Jesus’ life.¹ However, our modern conception of that which is historical or biographical was not the same as that

¹ “Gospel: Genre” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

of ancient writers. While today we might want to read an account of history or of a person's life and simply get the "facts," the writers of the gospels were not concerned with only presenting facts. No, the gospel writers had a theological purpose behind each of their accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus (see below).

WHY ARE THERE FOUR GOSPELS?

We Christians believe that all of Scripture is inspired by God, but not all of Scripture has the same revelatory value. That is to say, every part of Scripture has something to teach us about God and our relationship to Him, but nothing is as important or as direct as the revelation of God given to us through Jesus. As J.B. Philips paraphrased: **"God, who gave our forefathers many different glimpses of the truth in the words of the prophets, has now, at the end of the present age, given us the truth in the Son."** (Hebrews 1:1-2, PHILLIPS). There is no better place to read the "truth given to us in the Son" than in the books which provide us with the account of his life and teachings: the gospels.

But why are there four gospels? One aspect of the nature of biblical inspiration is that God does not override human free will and the organic way that stories are told. Given this, how the life and teachings of Jesus were communicated evolved over the decades that followed his death and resurrection. According to scholars, stories about the life of Jesus and his various teachings were all originally transmitted orally.² We see evidence of this in the book of Acts. In Acts 10, we find Peter presenting the gospel message to Cornelius, and he does so in a way that is very similar to the core narrative of the gospel of Mark (see table below).³ And, in fact, many people believe that Mark was the gospel which was written first.⁴ The gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and seems to simply be a compilation of that early oral presentation of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Acts 10	Mark
"good news" (v. 36)	"the beginning of the good news" (1:1)
"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit" (v. 38)	the coming of the Spirit on Jesus (1:10)
"beginning in Galilee" (v. 37)	the Galilean ministry (1:16–8:26)
"He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil" (v. 38)	Jesus' ministry focuses on healings and exorcisms
"We are witnesses of everything he did . . . in Jerusalem" (v. 39)	the ministry in Jerusalem (chaps. 11–14)
"They killed him by hanging him on a cross" (v. 39)	focus on the death of Christ (chap. 15)
"God raised him from the dead on the third day" (v. 40)	"He has risen! He is not here" (16:6)

² "Orality and Oral Transmission" in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

³ D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, An Introduction to the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

⁴ "Mark, Gospel Of" in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

PURPOSE STATEMENTS

As mentioned above, it is very likely that each gospel writer was not interested in only presenting facts about the life and teachings of Jesus, but wrote with a theological purpose. That each writer had a different purpose in writing their gospel helps to explain why we sometimes see differences between the gospels, especially with the gospel of John being radically different from the other three. In fact, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because they are so similar to each other.

αρχη του ευαγγελιου ιησου χριστου υιου θεου

**“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”
(Mark 1:1, NASB)**

Firstly, there is the gospel of Mark. None of the gospel writers identify themselves, but there are early church traditions about the identity of each. In the second century AD, copies of this gospel ascribed the work to Mark, the companion of Paul and Peter (Acts 12:25; 1 Peter 5:13) whose Hebrew name was John.⁵ The first verse of Mark presents to us in a nutshell Mark’s purpose: to provide us with a presentation of what he believes is the essential story of the good news of Jesus, a story which begins with the ministry of John the Baptist (Mark 1:3-8).

Mark refers to Jesus as “Christ” and as “the Son of God.” Both terms must be understood in their first century AD Jewish context in order to be properly understood. We’ll explore both terms in the coming weeks, but here’s what they mean in a nutshell. The term “Christ” is simply the Greek way of referring to the Hebrew word and concept of a Messiah; the ultimate king of Israel. Similarly, “son of God” is a title for the king, the one who represents God to His people. To be “son of God” is to be in some way generated from Him; and while Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was literally generated from God, Mark likely has in mind the fact that Jesus derives his mission and authority from God.

βιβλος γενεσεως ιησου χριστου υιου δαυιδ υιου αβρααμ

**“The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham”
(Matthew 1:1, NASB)**

The gospel of Matthew is thus ascribed due to an early church tradition from the second century AD that states that the Apostle Matthew (who was also named Levi and was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples) was the one who wrote this gospel.⁶ Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus, specifically noting in this first verse that Jesus is a Son of David and a son of Abraham, two very important figures in the history of the people of Israel. In the narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures, God made covenant promises to both Abraham, Israel’s forefather, and David, Israel’s greatest king. Embedded within the covenant promises made to both is a promise of a special descendant of theirs that will...

- a) be the one through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 18:18)
- b) be the one who will inherit David’s dynasty and have an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-13)

Granted, the context of those passages do not necessarily warrant a Messianic interpretation, but that is part of Matthew’s theological purpose: he wants to establish that Jesus is the long-awaited

⁵ “Mark, Gospel Of” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

⁶ “Matthew, Gospel Of” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

Messiah. In fact, the word translated as “genealogy” is the Greek word from which we get the English transliteration “genesis.” According to Matthew, one need not look back further than David and Abraham to understand Jesus’ significance (though the gospel of John will do so). As we’ll see in the coming weeks, Matthew’s goal was to connect the story of Jesus to the story of Israel; and, in fact, to show that the story of Jesus is the culmination of the story of Israel.

επειδηπερ πολλοι επεχειρησαν αναταξασθαι διηγησιν περι των πεπληροφορημενων εν ημιν πραγματος καθως παρεδοσαν ημιν οι απ αρχης αυτοπται και υπηρεται γενομενοι του λογου εδοξεν καμοι παρηκολουθηκοτι ανωθεν πασιν ακριβως καθεξης σοι γραψαι κρατιστε θεοφιλε ινα επιγνως περι των κατηχηθης λογων την ασφαλειαν

**“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 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; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.”
(Luke 1:1-4, NASB)**

Again, like the other gospels, the author is not identified in the text but, according to early church tradition, it was Paul’s traveling companion Luke (Colossians 4:14), who is also considered to be the author of the book of Acts.⁷ If indeed the author is this Luke, then it appears he was an educated man, a doctor. Not surprisingly then, Luke chose to write his gospel “...in consecutive order...” after “...having investigated everything carefully from the beginning...” Luke tells us that his job was to create a new account of life and teachings Jesus, even though others had already done so. Many scholars contend that, in fact, Luke used the gospel of Mark as the foundation of his gospel and added to it other stories and teachings from a source scholars call “Q.”⁸ Furthermore, Luke states the purpose of his gospel: to present story of Jesus in such a way that the reader (someone named Theophilus) could “...know the exact truth...” We should be careful, however, to not read our modern understanding of “truth” into Luke’s use of this word. To ancient people, truth was not the same as what we would understand as “scientific” truth. Instead, Luke is likely referring to having a proper understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus so one could truly trust and imitate him.

πολλα μεν ουν και αλλα σημεια εποιησεν ο ιησους ενωπιον των μαθητων α ουκ εστιν γεγραμμενα εν τω βιβλιω τουτω ταυτα δε γεγραπται ινα οτι ιησους εστιν ο χριστος ο υιος του θεου και ινα πιστευοντες ζωην εχητε εν τω ονοματι αυτου

**“Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name.”
(John 20:30-31, NASB)**

The writer of what is often called “the fourth gospel” does not identify himself, but many scholars contend that he is the one referred to in this gospel as the “disciple whom Jesus loved;” that is, the Apostle John.⁹ The gospel of John is vastly different from the synoptic gospels, including stories and teachings not found anywhere in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In fact, John admits that he did not include all of the “signs” that Jesus performed. What are these signs? The things that would indicate

⁷ “Luke, Gospel Of” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

⁸ D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, An Introduction to the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

⁹ D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, An Introduction to the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

to a person that Jesus is the promised Messiah and that he is worthy of our trust. The word translated as “believe” comes from the Greek word “*pistis*” and, in its Jewish context, does not refer to simply affirming knowledge, but to a trust-based relationship.¹⁰ The Apostle John wrote his gospel so that we would be convinced to embrace Jesus as Messiah but not by intellectually acknowledging that fact, but by becoming one of his disciples and faithfully trusting in him, that devotion to him meant relationship with God and eternal life. As Jesus said: **“He who believes [*“pisteuo”* (πιστευων)] in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life...”** (John 3:36, NASB). If the purpose of the gospels is to convey to us the stories and teachings of Jesus, so that we would trust in and be faithful to Jesus, then the best thing we can do is take these words to heart and be open to God moving by His Spirit to draw us closer to Himself through Jesus.

¹⁰ “Faith” in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).