

The Gospels

LESSON ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS



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The Gospels

Lesson One

Introduction to the Gospels

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how important news is in our lives? The important information we receive about the world around us influences our opinions, our values, our plans, and many other aspects of our lives. At times news events are so significant that they change our entire worldview.

Well, when we stop to think about it, the Bible itself is sort of like an archive of news stories. It records all sorts of good and bad news related to God's people throughout history. And as we study these stories, they influence and change us in many ways.

But without a doubt, the best news Scripture has to tell us is a collection of reports that we refer to simply as "the good news" or "the Gospels." They are the life-changing accounts of the person and work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is the first lesson in our series *The Gospels*. In this series we will explore the books written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In this lesson, which we have entitled "Introduction to the Gospels," we will gain an orientation toward these books that will help us to understand them more clearly and to apply them more fully to our lives today.

In our Introduction to the Gospels, we will touch on four crucial matters. First, we will examine the Gospels in terms of their literary character. Second, we will look at their status in the church. Third, we'll consider the unity between the Gospels. And fourth, we'll explore the variety that distinguishes them from each other. Let's begin by looking at the literary character of these books.

LITERARY CHARACTER

Usually, when we read literature, we have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading, and that's what guides us as to how to read it and what we expect. So that, for example, if you read an historical novel, you're not expecting it to be factual history, and you're not mislead. Or if you were to read a volume of short stories and you know it's not a continuous novel, you don't read it in that way. So we really need to have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading and what kind of conventions of that literature are operating.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

We will explore the literary character of the Gospels from two perspectives. First, we will consider the genre of the Gospels — their overarching literary characteristics —

and second, we will discuss their historical reliability. Let's first turn to the genre of the four gospels.

GENRE

In general terms, a genre is a category or type of literature. Genres are typically distinguished from each other on the basis of their literary form and function, such as their style of narration, and their use of figurative language.

The Bible contains many different genres. For example, there is historical narrative, such as the stories about David in the Old Testament. Another genre is poetry, such as the Psalms. Letters or epistles are another genre, and so is prophecy, and so on. Each genre of literature has its own conventions, its own ways of communicating. This is why it is so important for us to understand the genre of the Gospels. It is easier to understand *what* they teach, if we first understand *how* they teach.

To understand how the Gospels communicate, we'll identify and describe their genre in three steps. First, we'll make some general statements identifying the Gospels as historical narrative. Second, we'll compare them to a specific type of historical narrative, namely Greco-Roman biography. And third, we'll compare the Gospels to biblical historical narrative, such as the histories in the Old Testament. Let's begin with the general category of historical narrative.

Historical Narrative

Historical narratives are stories about people who lived in the past and about the actions and events that took place in their day. At a basic level, the Gospels are historical narratives because they record the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The bulk of the Bible and the Gospels themselves are intentionally written in narrative form because we are story people. We are engaged naturally, not only mentally but even in our emotions and even physical sensations, when we are engaged in a great story. And stories also enable us to live vicariously through the experiences of others. This is a large part of the power of story. And so the Gospels coming to us in the form of literature, in the form of narrative, enable us to not only learn truths about Jesus, but to experience him first hand, to see the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven coming in action, to see Jesus' compassion, not just as a statement — Jesus loves humble people — but to see him tell stories and really live out stories where the humble are lifted up and the proud are brought low. And the stories and the form of literature that the Gospels are enable us also to follow the example of Jesus even as his disciples did. Giving us the stories in narrative form enables us to also follow Jesus in that way. To identify ourselves with those characters in their failures, and

in their successes, and to seek to live faithful in our own story, which is our lives.

— **Dr. Jonathan Pennington**

In the secular writings of the ancient world, historical narratives typically developed in three main parts. The beginning of the narrative introduces characters and establishes a goal for the characters to achieve. The middle often presents challenges or obstacles to the characters' success in accomplishing their goals. The end is the conclusion of the account of events. It usually shows how the characters either did or did not accomplish their goals.

The Gospels follow this same basic outline. Each begins by introducing Jesus as the main character in the story and describes his goal of bringing salvation through God's kingdom. Each continues by presenting challenges to Jesus' authority and work. And each concludes by describing the outcome of Jesus' earthly ministry. Because of these similarities, almost everyone agrees that historical narrative is the overarching genre of the Gospels.

Greco-Roman Biography

Within the larger category of historical narrative, some interpreters have suggested that the Gospels belong to a smaller group of narratives known as Greco-Roman biography.

We will consider these comparisons between the Gospels and Greco-Roman biography in two steps. First, we'll look at the similarities between them. And second, we'll look at some of their differences. Let's begin with their similarities.

Similarities. Ancient biographies recounted the lives of great leaders. Although they included many different characters and stories, Greco-Roman biographies described these characters and stories in ways that highlighted the featured leader. They defended the leader's ideas, and perpetuated awareness of his actions from one generation to another. And the Gospels were similar to ancient biographies in these ways.

We also see parallels to some ancient biographies in the fact that Matthew and Luke include birth narratives, and all four gospels detail Jesus' death. The Gospels also follow the conventions of ancient biography as they trace the events of Jesus' life. Like other ancient biographers, the gospel writers arranged the events between Jesus' birth and death in various ways. Sometimes they arranged things chronologically. Sometimes they grouped things according to topic. And sometimes they even arranged them around geography.

I think it's important to realize at first, initially, that — to recognize that — the Gospels are generally chronological. For example, they begin with the baptisms by John the Baptist, and then you see Jesus being baptized, then you have Jesus's ministry, followed by his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion and resurrection. And so, in an overall sense,

there is chronological order. At the same time, there are places, if you compare two gospels, there'll be sometimes events, or wording might be given, in a different order. I think that only causes a problem if we read the Gospels as intending or claiming to give precise, chronological order in every single respect. But most authors and most kinds of narrative actually allow for an author to organize his material by order that's other than chronological. For example, often we'll see logical order, or we'll see a topical grouping of subjects. Early Christians, for example Eusebius, an early fourth century Christian historian and bishop, he notes that the differences in the Gospels' order was already widely known, and early readers didn't have a problem with this because they didn't assume that the strict chronological intention was intended.

— Dr. David Redelings

Another important characteristic of Greco-Roman biographies is that they related past events as historical realities so that the past was distinct from the present. Biographies focused on recording the unique, unrepeatable lives and contributions of specific, historical individuals.

In general, ancient biographers tried to research and preserve accurate oral and written records. Consider the example provided by the respected biographer Plutarch, who lived from about A.D. 46 to 120. Plutarch was a secular Greek historian who wrote around A.D. 70, about the same time that the Gospels were written. He began his work *Life of Cicero* with background on Cicero's parents, but acknowledged the limitations of data regarding Cicero's father.

It is generally said, that Helvia, the mother of Cicero, was both well-born and lived a fair life; but of his father nothing is reported but in extremes. For whilst some would have him the son of a fuller, and educated in that trade, others carry back the origin of his family to Tullus Attius, an illustrious king of the Volscians, who waged war not without honour against the Romans.

Plutarch's caution in separating fact from speculation regarding Cicero's parents indicates that at least some ancient biographers paid attention to historical detail, and were interested in accuracy. The Gospels give evidence of being every bit as careful as Plutarch in their reporting.

Broadly speaking, it is fair to say that the Gospels are historical narratives written during a time when biographical literature was popular in the Greco-Roman world. This widespread openness to biographies probably encouraged the Gospel writers in their task, and inclined them to adopt some of the formal conventions of those biographies.

But despite the similarities between the Gospels and Greco-Roman biographies, there are also significant differences.

Differences. Although there are several differences we might mention, we'll focus on just three. First, the Gospels differ from Greco-Roman biographies in their intended audiences.

Ancient biographies were usually intended for broad audiences, while the Gospels were written for the relatively specific audience of the early Christian church. Although they exhibit certain traits of biographies, they are fundamentally intended for religious uses within the church. This specific design is confirmed by how quickly they became regularly used in the teaching and worship of the church.

Second, the Gospels differ from biographies in their emphases. Greco-Roman biographies typically emphasize the personal qualities of their main characters, encouraging others to imitate their life and personalities. Although there are many ways the life of Jesus is our example, the Gospels have a distinctly different focus. They emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus. They focus on him as the one who reveals God and redeems his people as no one else can. This is why so much of the narrative of the Gospels is spent on the last week of his life — the Passion week.

Third, the Gospels and ancient biographies represent different cultures. Biographies gave expression to Greco-Roman interests, values, and life-style. The Gospels are much more influenced by Jewish culture and especially by the Old Testament. This is true even of the Gospel of Luke, the gospel most influenced by Greek culture and thought.

In conclusion, there are notable similarities between the Gospels and Greco-Roman biographies. And these similarities can shed some light on the meaning of the Gospels. But in light of the significant differences between them, it's clear that the Gospels do not fit neatly into the genre of Greco-Roman biography.

Now that we've considered the gospel accounts in terms of general historical narrative and Greco-Roman biography, we're ready to compare them to the genre of biblical historical narrative.

Biblical Historical Narrative

As similar as the Gospels are to typical historical narratives and even to Greco-Roman biographies, they are most similar to the historical narratives in the Old Testament. And this should not surprise us. After all, the Old Testament narratives were a part of the Gospel writers' sacred Scriptures. From the many references each gospel writer made to the Old Testament, we can be confident that they knew the Old Testament well — probably far better than most Christians today. And their familiarity with the Old Testament influenced how they approached their task.

Moreover, the Gospel writers and the authors of the Old Testament historical narratives wrote for a similar purpose, namely, to explain and defend God's covenant with his people. For instance, historical narratives such as Exodus 1-19 provide the historical basis for the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 20-24.

This purpose is clear in passages such as Exodus 24:8, where we read this narrative account:

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you” (Exodus 24:8).

Other biblical narratives, such as Joshua 1–23, provide the basis for the covenant renewal in Joshua 24. And the narratives of the books of Judges and 1 Samuel are the historical basis of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7. And in a similar way, the Gospels provide the historical foundation for the New Covenant that Jesus established.

Listen to the way Luke’s narrative in Luke 22:20 echoes the account in Exodus 24:8 that we just read:

After the supper [Jesus] took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20).

In summary, when we compare the Gospels to other known genres of literature, they are most similar to biblical historical narratives. But this doesn’t mean that they are precisely like other biblical historical narratives in every way. After all, they do borrow some features from Greco-Roman biographies. In this sense, we might say that the Gospels are a new type of biblical historical narrative. So, as we read them, it will help to think of the Gospels primarily as biblical historical narratives. But we should also see their biographic emphasis on Jesus, and interpret their other characters in relation to him.

Having explored the genre of the Gospels, we are ready to turn to the question of the reliability of the Gospels as historical accounts about Jesus.

RELIABILITY

Throughout history, a distinction has consistently been drawn between reliable historians and unreliable historians, between reliable sources and unreliable sources. The question for us is: Did the authors of the four gospels write reliable or unreliable records of Jesus’ life? While the criteria of our day are not identical to the criteria they followed, there is plenty of evidence that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had the resources and motivation to write trustworthy accounts about Jesus.

Although there are countless ways that we might prove that the Gospels are trustworthy historical records of Jesus’ life, we’ll focus on just six pieces of evidence.

Access

First, the Gospel writers had access to records of the events they recorded. Just like today, the ancient world expected reliable historians to have access to many facts related to their subject.

Consider once again the Roman historian Plutarch. In his opening comments to the *Life of Demosthenes*, he laid out these common cultural expectations for how a historian should do his work:

If any man undertake to write a history ... it is in the first place and above all things most necessary to ... have plenty of all sorts of books, and ... to hear and inform himself of such particulars as, having escaped the pens of writers, are more faithfully preserved in the memories of men, lest his work be deficient in many things.

As we can see here, Plutarch strongly believed that a trustworthy historian needed to have access to reliable sources. And he placed a high value on carefully accounting for all available sources, including both written accounts, and those transmitted orally.

Each of the gospel writers was either an eyewitness to the life of Jesus or had direct contact with eyewitnesses to Jesus' life. Since Matthew and John were disciples of Jesus, they were present for many of the events they recorded. Mark was a close companion of Peter, and learned directly through him. And Luke traveled with Paul and sought out reliable eyewitnesses for his gospel. Listen to what Luke wrote in Luke 1:1-3:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account (Luke 1:1-3).

Candor

Second, we can also see the historical reliability of the Gospels in the high level of candor in their works. Ancient standards for good historiography required historians to be candid or honest in the way they reported history. They were expected to report a spectrum of details, including those that were not necessarily favorable to the message being portrayed.

In this respect, it is significant that the gospel writers so frequently described the failures of Jesus' disciples. And in the case of Matthew and John that meant describing their own personal failures. And if some interpreters are right that the young man running naked from the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14:51-52 is Mark himself, then Mark also described his own shortcomings. And without exception, all of the gospel writers exposed the failures of Jesus' disciples as a whole, admitting that the leaders of their infant church movement were far from perfect.

As just one example, Mark 6:51-52 records the disciples' failure to understand Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5,000:

They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened (Mark 6:51-52).

Time after time, the gospel writers reported the misunderstandings and moral failures of Jesus' disciples. But if mentioning these failures was likely to undercut the authority and respectability of the leaders of the church, why did the gospel writers do it?

Many readers are troubled by the fact that the disciples are presented as less than perfect, and less than perfectly understanding, in the Gospels. For one thing, it points to, if I may put it so, the reliability of the gospel tradition — that our evangelists were prepared, actually, to include things that made the earliest leaders of the church look, if not bad, at least not so good. So, in a sense that's a testimony to the reliability and accuracy of our gospels.

— Dr. David Bauer

Let me suggest to you that the very tendency of the disciples to make themselves look bad in their own stories is one of the strongest arguments for the authenticity of the Gospels. See, if you read ancient accounts of the kings of Babylon or Assyria, or the emperors of Rome, they just go from victory to victory, triumph to triumph: "Here are my glorious exploits!" And so now, of course, we look back and say, well, what really happened? We look at the disciples and they are just these, you know ... Just think of this: what fool would make up a religion in which their hero is crucified, which is proof of sedition and lawlessness to a Roman, and the Romans dominate, and a proof of being accursed to the Jews, and that's your primary audience. You would never make this up unless it happened.

— Dr. Dan Doriani

Corroboration

Third, our confidence in the reliability of the gospel writers is strengthened by the corroboration of other historical sources. Both Roman and Jewish historians confirmed a number of the claims of the gospel narratives, and even modern archaeology has found evidence that their records are true.

For instance, Greco-Roman historians such as Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Julius Africanus referred to some of the basic data of Jesus' life, death by crucifixion, and lasting influence.

So we have the Jewish historian Josephus writing a history of the Jews for the Roman government in the first century A.D. who mentions Jesus Christ as existing and having a band of followers. We have the Roman historian Tacitus in the first century A.D., same time period as Josephus, writing about Jesus Christ and having a band of followers. Even the Jewish Talmud mentions that Jesus existed.

— Dr. Steven Tsoukalas

I think there is one general way in which we are really very well placed to consider the reliability of the Gospels, better than we used to be, in the sense that we now know a great deal more about first century Jewish Palestine than we did, say, 50 years ago. And we know that through discovery of literature like the Dead Sea Scrolls, and through archeology. And, archeology in the Holy Land is continuing a pace — constantly new discoveries. So we know a great deal, as it were, the context in which Jesus' ministry took place. And there are all sorts of ways in which we can ask whether the sort of things the Gospels say fit credibly into that context. Does it make sense to see Jesus as a Jewish teacher within that particular sort of context? And I think that, on the whole, we can say that it fits very well. And when we remember that of course conditions in Jewish Palestine changed radically after the Jewish revolt in 66 to 70. So we have, as it were, a limited time period in which to test whether the Gospels fit into that time period, rather than had they been reflecting simply a situation after the Jewish revolt, we wouldn't expect all the material that correlates with the situation we know about in early first century Judaism.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

Training

A fourth reason to trust the gospel accounts is that the training Jesus' disciples received should have taught them how to preserve an accurate record of his words and deeds.

Within Jewish culture, discipleship was a well-established way of life. In fact, the Hebrew word for disciple is *talmid*, which means student or learner. Specifically, a disciple was the student of a particular sage or rabbi. Moreover, in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, one of the key exercises in learning from a rabbi was memorization. And one of the responsibilities of his disciples was to learn the words and wisdom of their teacher. Listen to Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke 6:40:

A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40).

Jesus meant that all who follow him were to study, learn, and shape their lives according to his teachings and actions.

The twelve disciples closest to Jesus had a great responsibility to learn Jesus' teachings, while many others who learned from Jesus likely committed much of his teaching to memory as well.

Theological Convictions

Fifth, we must never underestimate the fact that the gospel writers had strong theological convictions that emphasized the need for a true, reliable record. For example, in John 20:31, the apostle wrote these words:

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 20:31).

In this passage, John stated plainly that people could receive God's gift of life only if they knew and embraced the *truth* about Jesus.

In a similar way, Matthew recorded these words of Jesus in 28:19-20 of his gospel:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).

Here, Matthew stated that Jesus' disciples had the responsibility of teaching everything Jesus had commanded them. As genuine followers of Jesus, they could not ignore the need to give true accounts of what he had done and said.

The gospel writers did not record the events of Jesus' life simply for their historical value. On the contrary, they knew that faith in Jesus was more than simply knowing the historical facts about him. But they also knew that true faith could not be based on a false or fallible historical record. They expressed Jesus' words and deeds clearly and accurately because they wanted their readers to believe in the real Jesus, the Jesus of history.

Holy Spirit

Sixth, like all biblical writers, the gospel writers were not left on their own to write their records of Jesus' words and deeds. The Holy Spirit led them in this effort.

The inspiration of Scripture is such a vital doctrine because it gives all of Scripture one ultimate author. So, when we look at the Gospels and we see four different authors give four different perspectives on Jesus, we need to appreciate those perspectives but realize the Holy Spirit inspired all of them. And so they come with very different agendas, theologically, and audiences they're writing to, and backgrounds and experiences with Jesus. But we have a wonderful unity in them while we have a diversity based on the human authorship. The inspiration of the Spirit in Scripture doesn't remove the human element or the

human work in that, but what it means is that God gets exactly what he wants through these human efforts.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Listen to Jesus' words in John 14:25-26:

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:25-26).

No matter how good Jesus' disciples were at memorizing, they couldn't have mastered everything. That is why Jesus promised and sent the Holy Spirit to his apostles. And the Holy Spirit enabled them to recall what the church throughout the centuries needed to know about what Jesus had done and said. As John wrote in 21:25 of his gospel:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25).

It's interesting when you talk to people about who Jesus is and you ask them who Jesus is, some people might say he's a rabbi, he's a teacher, or some people might claim that if you look at different world religions and different groups, they claim many different things about him. But in the wisdom of God, God led, through his Holy Spirit, his eye witnesses to write the deposit of faith in four complimentary accounts so that we have in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — whether through the author himself or through his sources — we have a definitive eyewitness testimony, safeguarded by the Holy Spirit, which serves as a standard, so that if anyone says, "Well Jesus said this or Jesus would do this or Jesus wouldn't do that," we have written there the undeniable account we can go back to, and God has given us that touchstone for our faith.

— Dr. Robert Plummer

STATUS IN THE CHURCH

Now that we have spoken of the literary character of the Gospels, we are ready to turn to their status in the church as authoritative written texts. We will explore the Gospels' status in the church by considering their composition and their authenticity as the word of God. Let's turn first to their composition.

COMPOSITION

When we speak of the composition of the Gospels, we have in mind the way they came to be written. Who were their authors? Why did they write these books? How did they write these books? Questions like these are important for Christians to explore because countless interpreters have focused on the human processes of composition to diminish the divine authority of these books. But the good news is that careful exploration gives us every reason to be confident that the Gospels are not only the works of human beings, but also the Word of God.

We'll look at three matters related to the composition of the Gospels. First, we'll explore the similarities between the various gospel accounts. Second, we'll survey some theories of composition that have arisen to explain these similarities. And third, we'll offer some comments regarding the certainty with which we should commit to these theories. Let's begin by considering the similarities between the Gospels.

Similarities

While composed separately, the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke have often been grouped together and called the Synoptic Gospels. The term "synoptic" simply means, "seeing together," and has been applied to these gospels because they cover largely the same material. They include many of the same accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. And when they report the same sayings of Jesus, they often use exactly the same words.

For instance, consider Jesus' healing of a paralytic. In Matthew 9:6, we read this account of the Lord's words and actions:

"But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home" (Matthew 9:6).

Now listen to Mark 2:10-11:

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Mark 2:10-11).

And, again, In Luke 5:24, we read this:

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Luke 5:24).

In this example, we see that each of the Synoptic Gospels contains an almost word-for-word account of the same miracle story. Other parallel stories found in at least

two of the three Synoptic Gospels include: the healing of a leper, the exorcism of a demon in Capernaum, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the calming of a storm at sea, the raising of Jairus' dead daughter, the entrusting of authority to the Twelve, Jesus walking on water, the healing of a man's withered hand, the feeding of five thousand people with a few loaves and a few fish, and Jesus' transfiguration.

The three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are often known as the Synoptics because they actually look at things from, as it were, similar perspectives, similar glasses, if you like. And that can sometimes give the impression, why do we need three when one would be sufficient? It would be sad to lose any one of the three Synoptic Gospels because they do actually each contribute something slightly different, and it's worth just seeing some of the differences between them. Mark's gospel is the gospel, which has got far more color than some of the other gospels and actually tells some of the individual stories at greater length. Even though it's a shorter gospel, its individual stories are told at greater length. It's Matthew who's then squeezed those stories into a much shorter compass because he's trying to put so much more into his gospel. And in particular, Matthew is trying to put the teaching of Jesus, which Mark's gospel, strangely, omits most of Jesus' teaching. So Matthew's gospel gives us a very authoritative Jesus, a teaching Jesus, and if you want a kind of compact compendium of Jesus' teaching, Matthew's gospel is it. But what's Luke given us? Well, Luke's given us yet more teaching. Luke has given us the parables in particular — many more than Matthew — and he's also given us a far more sort of human portrait of Jesus making contact with all kinds of people, a very inclusive, loving, caring Jesus. Some people think that Luke was not just a medical doctor, but was also something of a psychologist; he's able to convey human emotion really well. And I think, therefore, in the three gospels, we've got three very precious, different texts, which we need to value each one of them.

— Dr. Peter Walker

I think that the fundamental reason why we have three gospels that account for the life of Jesus in basically the same way is the richness and beauty of who Jesus is cannot be captured by a single account. So when we think of what God intended, no single writer could exhaust for us the significance of what Jesus accomplished, what Jesus said, and what Jesus did. I also want to add to that, however, that we should be sensitive to the differences in the three gospels. Yes, they say essentially the same thing, but there are nuances and colors to each gospel. So, on the one hand they tell us the basic story of what Jesus did and what he accomplished, and at the same time, the gospels also

show us different facets of Jesus. So it's sort of like a kaleidoscope, everything is within the kaleidoscope, and yet you look at it from different angles and we see different pictures of who Jesus is. So we see the wisdom of God, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in giving us this multifaceted view of Jesus.

— Dr. Thomas Schreiner

In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, much of the material of John's gospel is unique. While John also recorded that Jesus walked on water and fed five thousand people, he included many events that are not recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, John reported Jesus' turning water into wine, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, and Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

But even though the stories of Jesus' ministry and life vary among the four gospels, all four witness to Jesus' baptism, Jesus' last meal with his disciples, Jesus' death on the cross, and Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

The similarities and differences among the Gospels have led to many competing explanations. So, now let's turn to the theories of the Gospels' composition.

Theories of Composition

Because of the many similarities between the Synoptic Gospels, scholars have developed many theories regarding their compositional history. These theories are often rather complex and they can be confusing when we first begin to study them. We might summarize the most popular theories in this way: Most interpreters believe that Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke used materials from Mark and perhaps from other sources. But other interpreters believe that Matthew was written first, and that Mark used materials from Matthew, and that Luke used materials from both Matthew and Mark. Still others believe that both Matthew and Luke were based on sources we no longer have, and that Mark used material from both of them. As you can see, even comparing the general characteristics of these theories can be a little confusing.

By contrast, the composition of John is fairly simple. Most interpreters agree that he wrote near the end of the first century, and was familiar with at least one and perhaps all of the synoptic accounts. It is sometimes suggested that he avoided repeating much of the material that he knew had already been mentioned in the Synoptics, and chose to provide additional information that was most relevant to the communities to which he ministered.

With these theories of composition in mind, let's talk about the certainty with which we should hold to them.

Certainty

At the outset, we should recognize that biblical authors often used oral and written traditions — and this didn't compromise their inspiration or authority. So, there is

nothing wrong in principle with believing that any of the gospel writers relied on prior source material. As Luke wrote in Luke 1:1-3:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us ... Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you (Luke 1:1-3).

All the other gospel writers seem to have had access to similar sources, although they didn't explicitly mention it the way Luke did. If we assume with the majority of interpreters that Mark wrote first, he didn't have access to any previously written gospel, but he almost certainly used oral traditions, at least from his close friend Peter. Luke and Matthew probably used Mark's gospel as a model. In addition to this, Matthew and John had their own recollection of Jesus' life and teachings. And all four writers were infallibly superintended by the Holy Spirit, as we have seen previously.

In summary, we can appreciate the theories regarding the relationship between the gospels. But we should not feel the need to understand all their intricacies or to commit firmly to any one of them. What these theories offer us is the confidence that the gospel writers each had the ability to draw information from multiple sources, and to construct reliable accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. When we see overlap in their accounts, we have the opportunity to consider the different perspectives of the evangelists, no matter which preceded the other. And when we read material that appears in only one of the Gospels, we can study it in light of that particular writer's purposes.

Having considered the composition of the four gospels, we are ready to address their authenticity.

AUTHENTICITY

In the early centuries of the church, there were some disagreements about which books from the apostolic age truly belonged in the New Testament. Some early church leaders did not acknowledge all the books we now have in the New Testament. Others believed that we should include additional books beyond the twenty-seven that we have now.

But these disputes did not involve the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four gospels — and no others — were always received as genuine and authoritative by the faithful churches of God.

For example, the third century church father Origen, who lived from A.D. 185 to 254, argued that only the four gospels we now possess in the New Testament were authentic.

Origen is quoted by the church historian Eusebius, who lived from about A.D. 263 to about 340. Listen to the words Eusebius attributed to Origen in his work *Ecclesiastical History*, book 6, chapter 25, section 4:

The four gospels ... are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven.

In addition, a century earlier the church father Irenaeus, who lived from A.D 130 to 202, had spoken collectively of a four-fold gospel in his work *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 11, section 8. Listen to what he wrote:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are... He who was manifested to men that is, Jesus, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit.

Irenaeus said he knew of no time when any of the four was disputed or when any other gospel than these four was used in worship in the church.

Trustworthy Authors

There were at least three reasons for the early church's bold confidence in these four gospels. First, the church received the Gospels as authentic because they were written by the trustworthy authors named in their titles.

It is highly likely that the Gospels were originally anonymous. But it is also likely that when they were first published, they were received by people who knew the authors, or perhaps even distributed with letters identifying the authors. And from the earliest times, Christian writings associated the Gospels with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — four men known from the New Testament as church leaders with good reputations.

Apostolic Approval

Second, early Christians were also confident in the Gospels' place in the canon from the fact that these books had apostolic approval.

Matthew and John were apostles, eyewitnesses to the words and works of Jesus. Mark was thought to have received much of his material from Peter, who spoke affectionately of Mark as "My son" in 1 Peter 5:13. And as we have already seen, in Luke 1:1-4, Luke explained that he based his work on eyewitness accounts.

Moreover, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius reported that the Apostle John personally approved all three other gospels before writing his own. Listen to what Eusebius wrote about the apostle John in book 3, chapter 24, section 7 of his work:

The three gospels already mentioned Matthew, Mark and Luke having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness.

Witness of the Church

And third, all four gospels are supported by the witness of the church in the first century. All four books are old enough that living eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and ministry would have been able to reject or confirm their accounts. And as it happened, the eyewitnesses did confirm them by receiving the Gospels into the churches at a very early date.

God testifies to his own voice in his Word. But for our help, we can look at historical events that are mentioned in Scripture, and we can see that they do correlate with what we know of history from other sources. On a more general plane, we can see that the social conditions, the political conditions, the geography, and all these other kinds of general things mentioned in the Bible, they are consistent with what we know about the historical period in which they were written, including first century Palestine when the Gospels were written. However, when we look at the specific historical things in the Bible and the historical conditions and circumstances they describe, it provides us a reasonable basis for knowing that they come from the time in which they say they come, and that with the Spirit's testimony, we gain real confidence that they are the Word of God. So in the first century and second century of the early church, the Gospels as we know them, the four canonical Gospels, were received universally as from apostles or from apostolic sources, and were regarded as faithful and reliable eyewitness testimony of what Jesus did and who he was and the things he taught.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

There are a lot of reasons for believing that the Gospels are reliable, inspired, and have the facts, we might say, straight. But maybe the most important thing I can say is this: that the eyewitnesses sealed their testimony with their lives. You would think that before one of them was flogged, beaten, tossed into jail, crucified, just one of them would have said, "Oh by the way, you know, it's really just a story." They died for what they said. Now, of course we all know that people are willing to die... people die for lies all too often. The vast majority of all people who die for lies don't know they are lies. A tiny number of people will die for a lie that they know to be a lie if it gained them immense power or wealth or prestige during their lifetime. They got none of that. They were nobodies in this world, they were constantly on the run, they were impoverished, they sacrificed, they were beaten,

and then they died. And not one of them recanted their testimony. So we can be pretty sure that it happened.

— Dr. Dan Doriani

UNITY

Now that we have examined the literary character of the Gospels and looked at their place in the church, we are ready to look at the unity between all four New Testament gospels.

We will consider the unity among the Gospels first by affirming that each book tells the same story of the kingdom of God, and second by exploring their emphasis on Jesus as the one who brings the kingdom of God. Let's begin with the affirmation that the same over-arching story is related by each of the New Testament gospels.

SAME STORY

In a general sense, we can say that the story that is told in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is the gospel. In fact, this is why the books themselves are referred to as "the Gospels." They are the books that tell the gospel story. But what exactly is the gospel story?

The word "gospel" translates the Greek word *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον) which simply means "good news." So, when the Bible talks about the gospel of Jesus, it's referring to the good news about Jesus. But what exactly is this good news? Who is Jesus? And what story do the Gospels tell about him?

To answer these questions, we need to understand that the word "gospel" sometimes referred to a very specific type of news in the ancient world. Specifically, when warrior kings or emperors conquered new territories, they sometimes made imperial proclamations of their victories in announcements called "good news." In this use of the term "gospel," the "good news" was an announcement of a king's victory and that his reign would bring blessings to his people. In fact, this is also how the term was sometimes used in the Old Testament.

For instance, listen to words of Isaiah 52:7:

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).

In this passage, Isaiah envisioned the wondrous approach of messengers on the mountains surrounding Jerusalem announcing the good news that Israel's time of exile was over. They announced peace and salvation because of the reign of God over all.

In the context of Isaiah's prophecy, the reign of God — the building of his kingdom on earth — was the good news that the people of Israel and Judah needed to hear. It was the news that under God's kingship, they would have rest from their enemies and live in God's worldwide kingdom forever.

But in Isaiah's day, God had not done this yet. Isaiah's prophecy looked forward to a day in the future when God would come in power as king over the whole earth. And the good news that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John told was that this day had finally been realized in Jesus. The gospel writers all told the same story, pointing back to Jesus as the one who had brought the kingdom of God, and who was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. They were messengers with beautiful feet who announced the good news that the kingdom of God had come to earth through its final king: Jesus. This one story of the coming of the kingdom provides the overarching unity that all four gospels share.

In light of this fact, it should not be surprising to learn that the New Testament gospels use terms like "gospel" and "evangelize" far less frequently than language referring to God's kingdom. Various forms of the word "gospel" appear in only 23 verses across Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In contrast to this, phrases like "king," "kingdom of God," and Matthew's special term "kingdom of heaven" are used around 150 times.

Now that we understand that all the Gospels tell the same story of the kingdom of God, let's look at their emphasis on Jesus as the king who brings the kingdom of God.

JESUS

Our discussion of Jesus and the kingdom will divide into three parts. First, we'll consider some proofs that the Gospels offer to demonstrate that Jesus brought the kingdom. Second, we'll describe the vocabulary the Bible uses to talk about Jesus and the kingdom. And third, we'll see that Jesus brings the kingdom in stages. Let's begin with some proofs that Jesus brought the kingdom.

Proofs

There are many different ways that the Gospels assert the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus. But for our purposes in this lesson, we'll focus on just three. The first proof of the kingdom of God we will mention is Jesus' power over demons. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 12:28:

If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Matthew 12:28).

In this passage, Jesus had just exorcised a demon. And his ability to cast out demons proved that he had brought the kingdom of God.

A second way the Gospels demonstrate that God's kingdom had come was through Jesus' power to heal the sick and resurrect the dead.

The Gospels regularly indicate that Jesus' power to heal — as well as the same power that he gave to his disciples — was proof that he had brought the kingdom of God. We see this theme in Matthew 4:23-24, 8:5-13, and 10:7-8. We also see it in Luke 9:1-11, and 10:9 — and in many other places. The coming of the kingdom was also seen in Jesus' authority to forgive sins.

Listen to what Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah in Isaiah 33:22-24:

The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is he who will save us... No one living in Zion will say, "I am ill"; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven (Isaiah 33:22-24).

Isaiah indicated that it was God's royal prerogative to heal and to forgive. And he prophesied that healing and forgiveness would eventually come through the Messiah when the Messiah restored God's kingdom on earth.

And this is precisely what Jesus did. He called people to enter God's kingdom. He offered them life instead of death. It was a message of salvation, a message of deliverance from sin. Listen to Jesus' discussion in Mark 2:9-11:

"Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Mark 2:9-11).

Jesus amazed everyone when he announced that, as the Son of Man in whom the kingdom was present, he had the authority on earth to forgive sin.

In Jesus, God's rule had come. God's reign, God's *kingdom*, was here on the earth. That meant blessings for God's people. It meant that God's peace, which Isaiah had prophesied so many years before, had finally come.

With these proofs in mind, let's talk about the vocabulary the Gospels use to talk about Jesus and the kingdom.

Vocabulary

One reason Christians sometimes don't immediately see the Gospels' emphasis on the kingdom of God is that the gospel writers used so many different words to talk about it. Obviously, they used words like "king" and "kingdom." But they also used words like "reign," "rule," "authority," "throne," "Son of David," and many other words that pointed to God's sovereignty and control.

New Testament authors use a variety of vocabulary to talk about the kingdom of God, and not only explicit words, but they also use related concepts. So we can see, for example, that a title for Jesus like *Christos*, which means "the Messiah," "the Anointed One," that

speaks in Old Testament language about the king, the son of David. Or we can see in a word like *kurios*, or Lord, a title again for Jesus, which again speaks of him as a king, as someone like Caesar. Caesar had that title as well. And so, within the context and time of the New Testament writers, people would understand the authority that's conveyed by a word like "Lord." Of course, the most important phrase that we have is the phrase "kingdom of God," or in Matthew's case, "kingdom of Heaven" in particular. And so that phrase would talk in two ways. One about a certain domain of Christ's rule over his people, but also it's more of a verbal idea, sort of the reign of God, the authority of God ruling over his people. So, related concepts, like the concept of obedience for example, it isn't explicit in terms of the kingdom of God, but it's certainly implied in terms of the king's authority and the kind of obedience and even worship that is called for in relation to Jesus.

— Dr. Greg Perry

As just one example, the story of Jesus healing the paralyzed man in Mark 2:1-12 doesn't use the words "king" or "kingdom." Verse 10, however, forces us to see the kingdom meaning of the whole story when Jesus says, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." The kingdom of God had come to earth in Jesus' powerful acts of healing and words of forgiveness. In fact, against the backdrop of Old Testament prophecies describing the glorious, blessed nature of the kingdom of God, every good thing that Jesus did was a taste of God's kingdom in one way or another.

From the Old Testament expectation and hope for the kingdom of God, especially from the Book of Isaiah, the hope of God coming to rule and reign to establish His kingdom was the hope of a time of restoration, when all would be made right. And so one of the things that we see worked out in Jesus' ministry and in the Gospels themselves is that Jesus' healing ministry and his restoring of people, raising of dead sons, and stopping of hemorrhaging, of hemorrhaging of blood from people, and straightening broken limbs, and healing blind eyes. These are not only attestations to Jesus' power and authority in an apologetic way, they certainly are that, they are not only manifestations of the power of God, they are in fact a witness to the hope that God's reign, his restorative kingship, his restorative kingdom, is coming and has now come in Jesus. So this is one of the many ways in which we see the Kingdom of God worked out, even apart from the language of the kingdom of God itself.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Now that we have looked at some proofs that Jesus brought the kingdom of God, and considered the vocabulary the Gospels use to talk about Jesus' kingdom, let's briefly describe the stages in which Jesus brings the kingdom.

Stages

Jesus taught that the present experience of the kingdom he offered was not the whole picture. Another stage of the kingdom was yet to come. At some point in the future, the kingdom of God would come in all of its fullness. Jesus described this future day in Luke 21:27-28:

At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:27-28).

Many Jewish theologians had interpreted the Old Testament to teach that when the Messiah came, he would do away with the old age of sin and death all at once, and replace it with the new age of the kingdom of God.

But Jesus indicated that he was bringing the kingdom in stages. He inaugurated the kingdom during his earthly ministry. The kingdom continues now as he reigns from heaven. And it will be consummated or completed in the future when he returns.

In apocalyptic Judaism, all of reality was divided into two periods: the present evil age and the age to come. And the expectation there is that when God ushered in his end-time kingdom, the age to come, it would happen cataclysmically, suddenly, and absolutely. You move immediately from the period before the kingdom to the period of the kingdom — the age of the kingdom. But in the New Testament, you have what I’ve called the elongation of New Testament eschatology, so that the age of the kingdom, as was envisaged in apocalyptic Judaism, is subdivided now into two periods: the present, or the “already” of the kingdom of heaven, and the “not yet” of the kingdom of heaven.

— Dr. David Bauer

When we speak about the kingdom of God, we often talk about it as “having come,” but actually, we still anticipate the kingdom coming in the future. In fact, Jesus taught us to pray like that: “Your kingdom come now as it is in heaven.” And there is a sense in which, because the King has come, he’s inaugurated and set up his kingdom here on earth. But we wait for his return. The second coming of Christ will be the day in which all the full benefits of what Jesus did when he first came will — the implications will — be finally worked out. And there is the sense in which every believer has the job of announcing the King’s future coming as they go out into this world with the gospel. So we call people to get ready for the day when Christ will return. But yet, as believers, we do enjoy the privilege of having Christ as our Lord now, so we live under his reign now but wait for the day when

we will fully have that realized, not only for us, but actually for the whole of creation too.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Not surprisingly, most Jews in the first century turned away from Jesus because the kingdom he described didn't look like the kingdom they expected and wanted. They expected a king and a kingdom that would overthrow Rome and free the Jews from Roman oppression. When Jesus showed no interest in being that kind of king, many turned their backs and walked away, just as we see in Luke 17:20-25 and John 6:60-69.

And of course, this rejection ultimately led to Jesus' execution. The great irony of the Gospels is that Jesus' death by crucifixion was at the same moment both the climax of the hostility against his kingship, and the victory of his kingship and kingdom. His resurrection and ascension were his path to his royal throne at the right hand of God the Father. This is why Jesus used the forty days between his resurrection and ascension to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God, as Luke reported in Acts 1:3.

In Matthew 28:18, Jesus put it this way just before he ascended into heaven:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).

The kingdom of God is the theme of good news that binds together the events of Jesus' life in the Gospels. The Gospels proclaim the good news that God has kept his promise; that his kingdom has come in Jesus. And Jesus' victorious life assures us that one day he will return to consummate his kingdom, bringing us all its blessings in all their fullness.

VARIETY

So far in this lesson, we have examined the Gospels in terms of their literary character, looked at their status in the church, and considered their unity. At this point, we are ready to talk about the variety that distinguishes them from each other.

As we have seen, all four gospels present the same story of the coming of God's kingdom, but each does this in its own way. We will explore this variety in two main ways. First, we'll look at some apparent difficulties in the reconciling of the gospel accounts. And second, we'll look at the distinctive emphases of each gospel. Let's begin with the apparent difficulties.

APPARENT DIFFICULTIES

When we read the Gospels, the overwhelming impression is how similar they are to each other. There are, however, a number of places where the gospel records appear to

say different things. Of course most of these differences are so minor that they cannot with any degree of seriousness be called contradictions. A few, however, do trouble some readers. That is why it's important for us to look at a few of the most significant kinds of apparent difficulties.

Chronology

Some of the most common differences relate to chronology, the order in which events are described in the various gospels.

As biographical narratives, each of the Gospels follows the same basic timeline. Each begins with Jesus' birth, then moves to his death, and finally to his resurrection. But they often list other events in Jesus' life in different orders. The reason is that the Gospels sometimes group events according to priorities that were quite acceptable in the first century but might not meet our modern expectations. Rather than following strictly chronological priorities, the Gospels sometimes order their episodes according to theme or geography. For example, Mark told the story of Jesus being rejected in his hometown in Mark 6:1-6. But Luke placed it sooner in the narrative, in Luke 4:14-30, so that it was the first story in Jesus' public ministry. Luke's gospel gives the story more prominence than Mark's does. And it even tells a longer version of the story to emphasize the theme of rejection.

The gospel writers were far less interested in preserving a precise chronological itinerary for Jesus' ministry than they were with clearly communicating the coming of the kingdom in his teachings and actions.

Omission

A second type of difference is the omission of material in one or more of the gospels. For example, John does not mention the institution of the Lord's Supper in his gospel. Omissions like this can be explained in a number of ways. They may result simply from different writers' emphases. Or they may also result from later gospel writers not feeling the need to repeat portions of what appeared in the books of earlier gospel writers. Whatever the case, omissions do not imply disagreements or contradictions between the gospel writers.

Think about a conversation you've had that involved multiple people. Each person who speaks does not feel the need to repeat everything the others have said already. Instead, each person focuses on adding his own particular perspective, perhaps with some new details, and maybe with a different emphasis.

Scripture does this explicitly from time to time. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 9:29, the Chronicler explicitly said that he was omitting details that had already been recorded by other writers. This also happens at least three other times in 2 Chronicles, and often in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. So, it should not be surprising to find that one gospel writer omitted important materials that had already been mentioned by another.

Different Events

A third common type of apparent difficulty results from similarities between different events that occurred in Jesus' ministry. That is to say, at times two gospels seem to describe the same event in different ways, but they may actually be describing two similar but different events.

It's important to remember that Jesus was an itinerate preacher. That is, he moved around from place to place. He also performed many of the same types of miracles in different places, healing many who were blind or lame. And of course, Jesus answered many of the same questions and challenges over and over again.

In addition to this, people responded to Jesus in similar ways on different occasions. Consider the accounts of Jesus being anointed in Luke 7:36-50 and Mark 14:3-9. In Luke, Jesus is in the house of a Pharisee, but in Mark, he's in the house of Simon the Leper. These are not two contradictory reports of the same event. Rather, they are reports of two different events.

Different Speeches

A fourth type of apparent difficulty is confusion caused by different speeches that had similar content.

One of the best known examples of this is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1-7:29 of his gospel, and Luke's similar set of teachings in Luke 6:17-49. In Matthew 5:1, we are told that it took place on a mountainside. But in Luke 6:17, we are told that it took place on a level place.

There are at least three ways to approach this problem. First, both Matthew and Luke may be talking about the same sermon given at the same time and place. The Southwestern side of the Sea of Galilee is not a rugged mountainside, but rolling hillsides rising from the sea. This elevated area also has many smaller areas that are relatively flat, so the same geography could be called a mountainside as in Matthew and a level place as in Luke. In the second place this may be an example of the ancient practice of creating a composite speech, putting together into one sermon things that Jesus spoke on different occasions. This is a technique used by ancient historians and raises no questions about integrity or reliability. In the third place, it's also possible that Jesus preached two very similar sermons on two different days, in two different settings: one on a mountainside and one on a plain. Because of the style of Jesus' ministry it's certainly reasonable to assume that Jesus would repeat many of his teachings to new audiences who were unfamiliar with them.

By observing the variety of ways the differences in the Gospels can be harmonized, we can be assured that their united witness to Jesus' life and ministry is true. Yes, there are seeming discrepancies in details. But there are also reasonable explanations for each of these kinds of differences. And when we discover that Jesus taught the same thing on different occasions, we can see the consistency of his ministry and message, and find a variety of ways to apply his teachings to our lives.

We began looking at the variety among the four gospels by asking about apparent difficulties in the texts. So, at this point, we're ready to continue looking at the variety of the four gospels by exploring their distinctive emphases.

DISTINCTIVE EMPHASES

Because each of the Gospels was written by a unique author who brought his own perspective and concerns to his account of Jesus' life and ministry, there are differences among the four gospels. Knowing that each of the four gospels has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are confident that each account is free from error and therefore does not contradict the others. But that doesn't mean that there are no differences. The Holy Spirit used the personalities, interests, and ministry situations of the human authors to shape those differences. So, if we want to be blessed in all the ways the Holy Spirit wants to bless us, we must take the gospel's unique approaches into account when we read them.

In many circumstances in life, we find that different people talk about the same truth in different ways. Anyone who has watched small children play knows that one event can have multiple, compatible interpretations. Each child has his or her own perspective on the games they played. Only by listening to each of them talk about the games can we piece together a picture of what really happened. One might be enthusiastic about the colors of the toys. Another might be more interested in describing the sounds they made. Another might excitedly report running around. These different perspectives do not contradict each other. But they do indicate that each child found some parts of the games more interesting than others.

In a similar way, each gospel writer's own interests and concerns are reflected in his account of the gospel story. No two accounts look exactly the same. All the New Testament gospel stories describe the same Jesus, but they often speak about him in different ways and highlight different aspects of his ministry.

We have four gospels, but one Jesus. What should we make of that? Well, first of all, it's the intelligence of the earliest Christians to recognize that Jesus was far too complex a historical figure to be subsumed under one portrait. The Gospels are like portraits, and so it's recognizably Jesus in all four of the Canonical Gospels, but at the same time they are taking different angles of incidents into the character of Jesus in various ways. I'll give you an example. In the Gospel of John, we have basically no parables and no exorcisms. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is characterized by parables, and the most frequent miracle in the early part of the Gospel of Mark is exorcisms. Well, these are different portraits and yet manifestly the same Jesus. And, each gospel writer has a slightly different point of view about Jesus. Not in the sense that one thinks he's the Christ and another thinks he's not, but that they have different emphases about how to reveal that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and at the same time the Savior of the world. And so, they felt free, and they had the freedom

under inspiration to emphasize different aspects and different portions of the ministry of Jesus, and different ways of framing the question and giving answers.

— Dr. Ben Witherington

There are many distinctive characteristics and themes of the Gospels. But in this introductory lesson, we will focus on the way each gospel answers two questions: “Who is Jesus?” and “How do we follow Jesus?” Let’s begin by looking at how Matthew answers these important questions.

Who is Jesus in Matthew?

Of all the gospel writers, Matthew is the one who is most concerned to communicate that Jesus is the messianic king of Israel that was foretold in the Old Testament.

A small sampling of the places Matthew mentions Jesus’ kingship includes: 2:2 in which the Magi asked where they could find the “one who has been born king of the Jews”; 7:21-23 in which, as Lord, Jesus said he would not admit all who call him “Lord” to the kingdom of heaven; 20:20-28 when the mother of the apostles James and John requested that her sons be given a privileged place alongside Jesus in the kingdom; 25:31-46 where Jesus told a parable about his judgment as King at the final day; and 27:37 in which Matthew ironically noted that the Roman soldiers put a sign above Jesus’ head at the cross that read, “This is Jesus, The King of the Jews.”

It was expected that God’s messianic king would bring to earth God’s messianic kingdom. He would deliver Israel from exile and her enemies. He would rule with righteousness, establishing peace and prosperity. Jesus did all this, but he did not do it in the way the Jews expected.

Listen to Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:17:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus understood that many Jews who witnessed his ministry would think that he was destroying the law of God and failing to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. That’s why he said with emphatic clarity that he was fulfilling the Law and the prophets even if it didn’t look that way.

Not only in this passage, but time after time, Matthew reported that Jesus fulfilled one aspect or another of the Old Testament Scriptures, demonstrating that he was truly the messianic king of Israel.

So, according to Matthew, how do we follow Jesus? Jesus perfectly kept the law of God, but that isn’t all he did. He said that keeping the outward demands of the law wasn’t enough. God has always required the citizens of his kingdom to obey him from the heart. The good news of the gospel is that the kingdom has come, bringing forgiveness and salvation to God’s people, and giving us new, obedient hearts. And our

changed hearts give us both the power and the motivation to follow Jesus with a loving, thankful, joyful obedience.

When we talk about obeying God from the heart, the heart's really an all-encompassing term. I teach my people it's from head to heart to hand. It's how we need to obey him and how we need to love him. Head would be the seat of the imagination, the seat of the mind, and we're supposed to love God with all of our mind. We're supposed to love God with all of our affections. And we're supposed to love God with all of our hands and feet. So, heart doesn't mean just something in your chest that's thumping away. It's an all-encompassing term. So, do we love God outwardly? Well, indeed we do. But it's also with our affections that we love God. We love God with everything, and I believe that word "heart" points right to that everything.

— Dr. Matt Friedeman

Now that we have seen how Matthew's gospel answers our two questions, let's explore what Mark has to say.

Who is Jesus in Mark?

First, according to Mark, who is Jesus? Throughout his account, Mark emphasized that Jesus was the suffering Son of God who conquered the enemies of God's people. Mark recorded many instances of Jesus' miracles showing his power over the forces of evil. Even though Mark is far shorter than Matthew and Luke's gospels, it records almost as many miracles — eighteen in all.

From the very start of Mark's gospel we see that Jesus was the conquering and suffering Son of God. In the first chapter alone, John the Baptist prophesied Jesus' coming, and then Jesus began his public ministry. He was baptized, was tempted in the desert, called his first disciples, drove out evil spirits, and healed many people from various sicknesses. Even a superficial reading of this action-packed, rapid-fire narrative shows that Jesus was powerfully conquering the enemies of God's kingdom. A closer reading also shows that Mark portrayed him as the suffering Son of God right from the beginning of his ministry.

For instance, in Mark 1:12-13 we read this account following Jesus' baptism:

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him (Mark 1:12-13).

Jesus suffered the onslaught of Satan's attacks from the first moment of his public ministry. And this picture of Jesus as suffering servant continued to grow throughout Mark's gospel as Jesus endured persecutions and rejection.

So, how does Mark say that we should follow Jesus, the suffering conqueror? On one hand, Mark's gospel does not sugar-coat the Christian life. Mark described discipleship as a difficult and often frustrating process in which we not only suffer, but also make mistakes and fail. In fact, a distinctive trait of Mark's gospel is how often Jesus' disciples failed to understand him or to respond in faith. In Mark 4:40 Jesus wondered if his disciples had faith at all; in 6:52, the disciples' "hearts were hardened"; in 7:18, Jesus accused his disciples of being "dull" because they failed to understand his teachings; in 9:18 the disciples were unable to drive out an evil spirit; in 9:38-41 the disciples mistakenly attempted to hinder an exorcist because they didn't know him; and in the course of chapter 14, one disciple betrayed Jesus to the authorities, one denied all association with Jesus, and the rest abandoned him.

This emphasis in Mark's gospel teaches us at least two things about following Jesus. First, just like the disciples, we won't always understand Jesus. In fact, we're likely to misunderstand many things in the Bible. So, we need to be humble enough to recognize that we all have much to learn. As part of this, we need to receive the Bible's teaching by faith, knowing that God's word is true even if it seems strange or wrong to us.

And second, difficulties and suffering are inevitable for Christians. There are many dangers, many temptations to turn away from following him. Listen to what Jesus said in Mark 8:34-35:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

Jesus taught that we need to be faithful in our commitment to him. We have to be willing to suffer as Jesus suffered, to stand against temptation and spiritual attacks. But notice something else in this passage: Jesus is not only the *suffering* Son of God; he is also the *conquering* Son of God. In fact, he conquers through his suffering death. And if we follow him faithfully in suffering for the kingdom, we will be rewarded with eternal life.

Suffering has the effect of focusing our awareness on what is truly important, of getting us — because of pain — getting us to realize, this is not all that there is. There's something more that I'm living for, and I still trust God in the midst of it because I know that the reality of what I have in Christ is greater than my comfort, my safety, and my happiness and those that I care about.

— Dr. John McKinley

Jesus came as a suffering servant. And anyone who would follow Christ needs to have a place in their lives for significant suffering. This is so much a part of who Jesus is that when we come to this world that is so filled with suffering, if we are to be part of Christ's

ministry, we need to have a place for suffering in our own lives. Not only our own suffering, but the suffering of other people, that we actually grieve with those who grieve, and invite their suffering into our lives as well, and become part of that and ministers in that context. And when we enter into this world with a category for suffering and recognition that it's one of the main ways that God wants us to minister as we follow Christ, we're starting to understand the heart of God. And then, God refines us. This suffering produces character, it produces hope, it produces perseverance. And so we are able to see God working in refining ways in our lives, in the midst of suffering as much, if not more, than any way else.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

With Matthew and Mark in mind, let's consider how Luke answers our questions about Jesus and his followers.

Who is Jesus in Luke?

Luke's gospel answers the question "Who is Jesus?" by proclaiming that he is the compassionate Savior of the world. Jesus brought God's salvation to the rich and the poor alike, to the religious leaders and to the social outcasts. Jesus' good news was for everyone — even for the unnoticed and the despised. Luke emphasized this in many ways. Jesus honored the sisters Mary and Martha in a time when many men considered women inferior. Luke recorded parables and narratives that presented women, the sick and the crippled, and even non-Jews, as worthy of praise and imitation. Jesus praised the widow who gave her small life's savings at the temple. Luke told the story of the despised tax collector Zacchaeus, whose response to Jesus was a model for all Luke's readers. Time after time, Luke recorded Jesus' concerns for those that society rejected or overlooked.

As just one example, listen to this account from Luke 7:12-16:

As [Jesus] approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow... When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people" (Luke 7:12-16).

In the first-century Roman world, a widow who had lost her son would have had little means of provision, and little opportunity to find work. By emphasizing Jesus'

compassion for her, Luke pointed out that the Lord's work as a savior was intended even for the poor and helpless. As the people at the end of this account commented, Jesus' ministry to the needy and powerless was proof that God had come to help his people.

So, how does Luke's gospel answer the second question: How do we follow Jesus? Well, in keeping with Luke's concern for the poor, one thing we can do is have compassion on others. We should care for the poor, and strive to meet their needs. We should be willing to give our possessions, food, money and time to sustain them. In fact, God often sends charitable Christians in answer to the prayers of the needy. As Jesus said in Luke 12:33:

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys (Luke 12:33).

When we follow Jesus faithfully by caring for his people, he rewards us with an eternal inheritance.

Another way we can follow Jesus is by resting confidently in the fact that God will meet our needs too.

Listen to Jesus' words in Luke 12:22-31:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear... And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it... But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well (Luke 12:22-31).

As members of God's kingdom, we can be confident that our great king Jesus Christ will care for us and meet our needs.

And this emphasis on trusting the Savior is closely related to two other themes in Luke's gospel: peace and joy. For instance, near the beginning of Luke's gospel, in Luke 2:10-14, we read this angelic announcement:

I bring you good news of great joy ... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace (Luke 2:10-14).

And twenty-two chapters later, Luke ended his gospel the same way he began it. At the end of his story, the disciples were following Jesus and experiencing the joy that the angels had prophesied back in chapter 2.

Three times in that conversation, in John 20, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." And I don't think he was saying hello. I think he was saying this is the foundation of reality. Even though you've just been through agony, you've lost the one you love, and you never knew I was going to come back, you're going to soon be under the Romans' dictatorship, you've lived under oppression, it's going to get much worse, I want you to know that I'm here, and when I'm here, I bring a

fundamental peace. I am your joy. So that no matter what happens, no matter what happens in your outward life, no matter what's inside your life, if you know me, there's a foundation of real peace. The biblical word is "shalom," this holistic righteous reign and rule of God no matter what comes down the pike. And, I bring joy. I'm not just here to mollify you. I'm here to bring you real joy, joy that is more than emotion. Joy that is a positive understanding that I am in control of all the world, and that I will let nothing happen to you that doesn't come through me first, Jesus says. I love the way Paul says it when he talks about the fruit of the Spirit. He says when the Holy Spirit comes to fill up Christians' lives, all of you will love; the next word is, you'll have joy. And I think that those are inseparable. Of course, he adds six other things, but the major thing is that when the love of God is shed or brought in my heart, the response is, I don't then live by my own understanding of reality, which would be probably pretty cynical, pretty pessimistic, pretty negative. But when Jesus is present, the only response is, I'm at peace. He has brought his resurrection power to my life, and I have joy, I have hope, because in Jesus, there is no defeat. There is no "things coming apart." He brings all things together, holistically, completely.

— Dr. Bill Ury

Listen to Luke's final words in 24:52-53:

Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24:52-53).

In Luke's gospel, following Jesus means rejoicing in our salvation and all of God's blessings, peacefully resting in him, trusting in him to meet all our needs, and being willing to be used by him to bring these same blessings to others.

Having seen how Matthew, Mark, and Luke answer the questions, "Who is Jesus?" and "How do we follow him?", we're ready to consider how John uniquely answered these questions.

Who is Jesus in John?

In his gospel, John portrayed Jesus as the Son of God who accomplishes the eternal plan of salvation. In emphasizing Jesus' identity as the Son of God, John spoke of Jesus' unique relationship with his Father. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of his Father and the only one able to make eternal life available to all those who put their faith in him. For instance, whereas the other three gospel writers began their accounts with the birth of Jesus or his earthly ministry, John began his gospel by saying that the Son of God had

been involved with the Father in creation, and now the Father was being revealed through his one and only Son.

Another way John communicated this glorious message was in the “I am” sayings made by Jesus. In these statements, Jesus alluded to God’s covenant name “Yahweh,” sometimes translated “Jehovah.” In Exodus 3:14, God himself explained that the name “Yahweh” essentially means “I am.” Jesus alluded to this name in John 6:35, where he said, “I am the bread of life.” We also find it in 8:12 and 9:5 in the phrase “I am the light of the world.” And in 10:7, 9 we read “I am the gate.” In 11:25, it’s “I am the resurrection and the life.” In 14:6, it’s “I am the way and the truth and the life.” In 15:1, we find “I am the true vine.” And in 8:58, Jesus made the climactic announcement, “I am.” In each of these instances, Jesus declared himself to be the bearer of the sacred Old Testament name of God, and revealed God in his own person.

Jesus’ place at the center of God’s eternal plan of salvation is particularly evident in Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17. Listen to what Jesus prayed in John 17:24:

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world (John 17:24).

Jesus related the salvation of his followers to the love that the Father had for the Son before creation. His point was that our salvation is an outpouring of the Father’s love for Jesus.

So, if John portrayed Jesus as the Son of God who accomplished the eternal plan of salvation, how does John’s gospel answer our second question? How do we follow Jesus?

In John’s gospel, the primary way we follow Jesus is by being loved by God, and by showing that same love to each other. Jesus established this model for us to follow in many ways. For instance, we see it in John 17:23-26, where Jesus spoke of the Father’s love for his Son. It was this eternal love of the Father for the Son that was behind the eternal plan of salvation that Jesus accomplished. So, it makes sense that in John’s gospel discipleship is characterized by love. As Jesus said to his followers in John 13:34-35:

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

According to John, we follow Jesus by loving each other with his kind of love.

In this way, discipleship is both initiated and conducted in love. God’s love for us initiates our discipleship. And God’s love through us to each other is the expression of our discipleship. This helps us understand why John referred to himself throughout his gospel as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and not “the disciple that loved.” He knew that whatever ability he had to love others came from the depth of Jesus’ love for him. Jesus’ followers are first loved, and then they are called to love one another.

One might wonder if the differences in the distinctives in the four gospels somehow indicates that they are incompatible, that they are

telling contradictory stories, but I don't think that's the case at all. I think that what we have in the four gospels are four compatible perspectives on the story of Jesus. All four gospels are unified in the idea that they are telling us the history of this man who is the incarnation of God who comes into the world to save sinners from sin and death. And each gospel does look at that Jesus from different perspectives and emphasize different details of his life, but those messages and perspectives are not contradictory, but they are compatible.

— Dr. Steve Cowan

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have been introduced to the study of the Gospels. We have seen their literary character, noting that the Gospels are reliable historical narratives. We have also considered their status in the church, seeing that they are an authentic part of the New Testament Scriptures. And we have looked at them in comparison to one another, finding that they all tell the same story of the kingdom of God, even though each portrays Jesus and discipleship in its own distinctive way.

Understanding the Gospels is critical for every Christian. We place all our confidence in this life and the next in the hands of Jesus, whom we have never seen face-to-face. Everything we know about him, we know through his Word — especially the Gospels. Hopefully, the things we have learned in this introductory lesson have prepared us to explore each of the four gospels in much more depth, in order to understand how each evangelist's message impacts our faith and life.

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The Gospels

LESSON
ONE

Introduction to the Gospels Faculty Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson One: Introduction to the Gospels

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Jeffrey Lowman
Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

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Dr. Steven Tsoukalas
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

Why did the gospel writers think it was important to record these facts in such careful literary accounts?

Everyone who's familiar with the New Testament Gospels should agree that they provide written — even literary — portraits of Jesus. They come to us mainly in the form of narrative stories about his life and ministry, and culminate in the events surrounding his death and resurrection. But why did the gospel writers think it was important to record these facts in such careful literary accounts?

Dr. Greg Perry

It's important that the Gospel record comes to us in the form of literature for several reasons. One is because as the time of the eye witnesses of the events of Jesus were beginning to die, those traditions were being passed along orally, and being formed into coherent traditions, but it's important to set that tradition and to fix it in terms of their accounts. And so, by setting it in literature it's able to sort of solidify and authorize the apostolic witness to the life of Jesus.

Question 2:

Are the Gospels only valuable because they contain facts about Jesus, or is it also important to consider their literary aspects?

Students and teachers of the Gospels should all be able to recognize that the Gospels are carefully written literature. But modern readers aren't always sure how our interpretations should be influenced by the literary qualities of the Gospels. Are the Gospels only valuable because they contain facts about Jesus, or is it also important to consider their literary aspects?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Literature is obviously the way that we understand God because God has given us a Bible to read. We couldn't have been on the scene when Jesus walked the earth. He

couldn't come back in every generation, so God appointed those who were eyewitnesses of what he did to write down what they saw and heard. And the other thing that's quite significant about the way in which the Gospels are structured is that they tell stories. They tell the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection which fits into God's great big story for the world and our future. And people love stories; people still respond well to the gospel accounts and they are stories that continue to engage people's thinking and there is a sense in which we're invited into the narrative so that we can hear from Jesus for ourselves and respond to him accordingly by looking at the literature that God has given us.

Question 3:

Why is it important to identify and consider the genre of the Gospels?

Realizing the importance of the literary aspects of the Gospels sets us on the road toward more responsible interpretation. But we won't get very far down that road until we identify the type or genre of literature we find in the Gospels. Why is it important to identify and consider the genre of the Gospels?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

Usually, when we read literature, we have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading, and that's what guides us as to how to read it and what we expect so that, for example, if you read an historical novel, you're not expecting it to be factual history, and you're not misled. Or if you were to read a volume of short stories and you know it's not a continuous novel, you don't read it in that way. So we really need to have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading and what kind of conventions of that literature are operating. And, of course, in the case of ancient literature, we may not be dealing with forms of literature that we're familiar with in daily life, and usually the literature we read from the contemporary world, we sort of instinctively know how to read it. We may have to think about that in the case of ancient literature. Say, for example, the Gospels. Most scholars now agree that the Gospels are a form of ancient biography. But they are a form of ancient biography and we mustn't necessarily assume that we're going to learn from them what we would learn from a typical modern biography. For example, they don't dwell on the development of Jesus' personality or features of his character like his sense of humor and things that often modern biographies are interested in. So, we need to understand the sort of literature they are.

Readers of the Gospels are often rather concerned, or sometimes rather concerned, when they find that events are in different orders in the different gospels. And if we know that this wasn't necessarily required in ancient biographies, you wouldn't necessarily arrange material chronologically. You may group material by subject rather than chronology. And we can see that, you know, this really isn't a problem in the Gospels. They're simply not necessarily following a strict chronological outline and would not be expected to.

Question 4:**Can we be certain that Jesus was a real, historical person?**

Just as it's important to understand what the Gospels intend to communicate, it's also important to believe what they intend to communicate. Evangelical Christians are committed to the idea that the Gospels are factual — that they are trustworthy records of the historical ministry of the very real person, Jesus Christ. But other modern scholars have questioned the historical reliability of the Gospels. A few have gone so far as to suggest that Jesus never even existed. Can we be certain that Jesus was a real, historical person?

Dr. Steven Cowan

The question sometimes gets asked whether Jesus was a real historical person. And yet, there are very, very few scholars who would doubt that Jesus was a real historical person. The vast majority of Bible scholars, even the most liberal of scholars, will grant that there really was a person named Jesus of Nazareth who lived and taught in and around Galilee and Jerusalem in the 1st century A.D. and who was crucified by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. And the reason why the vast majority of scholars are convinced of this is that the evidence for it is very, very strong. First of all, we have the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all of which tell the story of Jesus and which are at least semi-independent of each other. The Synoptics are interesting in that they have important relationship to each other — Matthew and Luke probably borrowed from Mark some of their material — but the Synoptic Gospels tell the story about Jesus. Luke himself begins his gospel by telling us that he wants to describe the history of what really happened about Jesus and what happened to him and through him. Then we have John's gospel, which everyone admits is independent. Paul talks about Jesus as a historical figure. So we have all of these divergent voices in the New Testament itself telling us about Jesus as a historical person.

But beyond that, we even have extra-biblical sources that mention Jesus as a historical person. We have, for example, the Roman historian Tacitus who speaks of Jesus as a person who lived in Galilee and was crucified by Pontius Pilate and who had a large following that believed he was raised from the dead. Tacitus doesn't believe that, but he definitely believes Jesus was a real person who had a following that believed that. We have Josephus, the Jewish historian, who lived in the first century and would have been a late contemporary of Jesus and his apostles, maybe a young man during that time anyway. And Josephus talks about this person called Jesus of Nazareth who preached that he was the Messiah who had a following that believed he was the Messiah, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and who his disciples believed had risen from the dead. So we have all of these divergent voices testifying to the fact that Jesus was a real historical person. And even beyond that, we can say that it's impossible to explain the origin of Christianity as a movement if there really never was any such person as Jesus.

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The basis of any historical inquiry is evidence — in this case, ancient evidence. We have canonical evidence. We have extracanonical evidence. We have evidence from Josephus. We have evidence from other early Christian sources that are not in the New Testament. We have evidence from the Roman historian Tacitus. We have evidence from Suetonius, and other Roman historians, so we have both biblical and extra biblical evidence that Jesus existed. In addition to that, we have epigraphic evidence; we have archeological evidence. For example, the James ossuary, the burial box of Jesus' brother, James, mentions Jesus. So there is both evidence direct and indirect, both literary and archeological.

Question 5:**How does the Holy Spirit's inspiration impact the Gospel's historical reliability?**

Most scholars across the theological spectrum teach that a real, historical Jesus existed. But Evangelical Christians also insist that the Gospels are fully and historically reliable, not just with regard to Jesus' existence, but with regard to everything they teach. And a central way we prove this is by pointing out that the Gospels were inspired by the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit's inspiration impact the Gospels' historical reliability?

Dr. Steven Tsoukalas

Assuming that the Bible is reliable, to use the old British term the “reliability” of the Bible, assuming that — and I don't merely assume that, I'll assume it right now, but there's lots that can be said for evidence that the Gospels, for example, are reliable — but assuming the reliability of the text, we are told that the Holy Spirit is God, and we are told that Scripture is God-breathed. We are told that prophets of old were moved by the Holy Spirit. We are told by Christ who tells his apostles that the Holy Spirit will recall things that I have said to you, bring them to your mind. The Holy Spirit's job, or part of his job, is to point us to Jesus, to point the apostles to Jesus, and to inspire them, therefore, in their writings, as if the Holy Spirit is using their life circumstances in real space and real time, using their personality that he created as God the Spirit, third person of the Trinity, and using all of that, and in his providence over events of the world, particularly in the ancient Near East at this time, to inspire them in their everyday circumstances to write to us about Christ and about the things he has done. So, there's a movement today known as — it's a philosophical hermeneutic movement — known as postmodernism, that basically states we cannot get at the intent of an ancient author. And a fruit of that can be what's called “reader response” — I read the text and I respond to it, and I create the meaning of the text. But if the Holy Spirit has inspired the Bible and he is God, he of course can insure that he will work through his community in interpreting the Bible as well. And this is one reason that I call the postmodernist movement, if it's adopted by Christian theologians, as implicitly atheistic or implicitly agnostic, and implicitly getting at in a negative way the character of God. If we can't get at the intent of the author, then that

means — let's push it back one more step — we can't get at the intent of God because God the Holy Spirit inspired the authors to write to us. He certainly can inspire us to learn the intent and to understand the intent of the text.

Question 6:

How should Evangelicals respond to the charge that the Gospels are based on faulty oral traditions?

Sadly, many modern scholars deny that the Gospels were inspired in a way that made them historically reliable. And much of this criticism stems from the belief that the Gospel authors weren't eyewitnesses, and that they relied on faulty oral traditions about the person and work of Jesus. How should Evangelicals respond to the charge that the Gospels are based on faulty oral traditions?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

Most twentieth century study of the Gospels was indebted to people who were the form critics who were working at the beginning of the twentieth century and who had certain very definite ideas about how the traditions of Jesus, the traditions of Jesus' teaching, the stories about Jesus, were transmitted orally until they reached the writers of the Gospels. And basically what they did was to imagine a period of oral transmission between the original eyewitnesses, who must have originated traditions about Jesus, and the writers of the Gospels — a period of oral transmission in which the sayings and the stories were transmitted from person to person within the early Christian communities. And they saw this as a potentially very creative process in which all kinds of developments of the tradition could have taken place, in which many of the contents of the Gospels were created by the early communities. And they also saw it as a sort of process in which the traditions were passed on anonymously. They weren't attributed to Peter or James or one of the eyewitnesses, but simply the communities kind of owned these traditions and passed them on. So there was a period, as it were, in which all sorts of things could have happened to the transmission. Many gospel scholars took that basic picture but argued that the transmission was fairly conservative, that the traditions were preserved fairly accurately, but others allowed all sorts of creative developments in that period of oral transmission.

Now I would say perhaps two main critical points about that picture of how the traditions were transmitted. One is, it seems to me, that the form critics ignored the very simple fact that the eyewitnesses who were there at the beginning of the transmission of the traditions were still there throughout the period when the traditions were circulating orally. So it wasn't as though, you know, these things happened independently. The eyewitnesses were there. They themselves continued to tell their stories and report the teachings of Jesus. They were the sort of authoritative guarantors to which one would go, really, if one wanted to know authoritatively the traditions about Jesus. And I think by the time that Mark, for example, is writing probably the first of the Gospels, it would be natural for a gospel writer to turn to the eyewitnesses who were still around to get his material for the gospel. So I think the

continuing role of the eyewitnesses who weren't simply superseded by this anonymous tradition is a very important fact.

The other thing that is well worth considering is that the form critics at the beginning of the twentieth century were working with probably the best models of all tradition that were around at the time. But we now know a great deal more about oral tradition. They were reliant mostly on the way that folk tales were transmitted in European history. And of course, these are the kind of thing that were passed down over centuries. It's a very different process, really, from the transmission of gospel traditions over a few decades in the New Testament period. Folk tales were also by definition fictional material, and people who passed on fictional material were often interested in creative development of it. They didn't feel bound to transmit material accurately. But we now know far more about oral tradition. We have studies of oral tradition from all societies all over the world, Africa and parts of Asia, and so forth — lots of data about how oral traditions work — and one of things we can say is...

Actually, there is very little we can say about oral tradition in general. The way oral traditions are preserved and passed on and treated, there is very much from society to society. And we have to know something about the particular society. But what we do know is that if an oral society wants to preserve its traditions faithfully because it regards them as historical — and many oral societies do have a distinction between historical traditions and stories and will treat them differently — but if they have historical traditions that they want to preserve accurately, then they have ways of doing so. For example, they may have techniques of memorization so that sometimes things are memorized very closely and in detail. But also they would have people to whose care the preservation of traditions was committed. So traditions aren't necessarily, you know, at the mercy of how anybody might pass them on. There are people who are kind of authorized to preserve them. And we might — I think in terms of the Gospels in the early Christian communities — I mean we might well think of the eyewitnesses themselves as being the natural people who were entrusted with the preservation of the traditions. So, I think the form critics worked with a rather inappropriate and also very rigid model of oral tradition that we can't really now justify. We know a lot more about oral tradition, and there's no reason to think that it worked in the way the form critics proposed.

Question 7:

Are the opinions of modern historians more reliable than the gospel accounts?

The Gospels relied heavily on eyewitness testimony, and Matthew and John personally witnessed much of what they recorded. Even so, some critical scholars have tried to distinguish between the authentic teachings of Jesus contained in the Gospels, and supposed modifications and additions made by Christian oral tradition. These attempts are often referred to as part of the “quest for the historical Jesus.” But are these quests responsible? Are the opinions of modern historians more reliable than the gospel accounts?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

The question of the historical Jesus is, of course, what many gospel scholars have been doing since the early 19th century. And it really consists in an attempt to go back behind the four gospels. It presumes, I think, that the four gospels are not entirely reliable sources, or at least that they are heavily interpreted sources. In a sense, this is true, of course. The writers of the four gospels have their own views about who Jesus was and the significance of Jesus and so forth, and they are not writing simply a chronicle of facts. They are interpreting as all historians do. The idea behind the quest, I think, has often been that people want to, as it were, strip away all that interpretation and get back to the sort of bare facts of what happened in the history of Jesus. But the result, I think, of course, is what you get is a modern historian's interpretation of Jesus. We can never have bare facts, or the bare facts that we could have are simply not interesting. It's only when we think about the significance of the facts that they make history and make something interesting.

What I think we should be doing is not to try and strip away the interpretations of Jesus that we have in the four gospels, but rather, to recognize that there is a level of interpretation of Jesus that actually goes back to the eyewitnesses themselves who witnessed the events of Jesus' history, who were themselves involved participants in the events. And where is it modern people often suppose that if we get the testimony of some disinterested bystander, we'll have something much more reliable than if we have the testimony of people who were participants and involved and affected by the events. Ancient historians usually thought quite the opposite — and I think their point of view was better — that it's insiders who can really tell us most and give us the most interesting and reliable evidence. For one thing, if you are deeply affected by something, you will remember it much better than if you were simply a bystander who wasn't particularly involved. But also, you will have a sense of the significance of these events, which has come to you as you experience them. So I think what we have in the Gospels is the Jesus of testimony, by which I mean Jesus as these early eyewitnesses of Jesus told their stories. And we do have a blend of fact and interpretation, but we have a blend of fact and interpretation, which goes back to these involved participants.

So I think, actually, that is much more trustworthy than the views of some modern historian who has gone back behind the Gospels and really imposed his own interpretation. We never have facts without interpretation. If we don't have Mark's interpretation, if we don't have Peter's interpretation — that I think lies behind the Gospel of Mark — then we have some modern historian's interpretation. The idea that we can sort of, as it were, get outside interpretation is a mistake. So I think our approach should be not to try to get back behind the Gospels, but to study the accounts we have in the Gospels. And there are various reasons, of course. There are kinds of evidence that we can bring for relying on the Gospels, for supposing that they come from trustworthy sources. But in the end, we have the way these early companions of Jesus, people whose lives were transformed by Jesus, people who

were deeply influenced by the events and, therefore, wanted to tell everybody about them. What we have is those people's testimony to the events.

Question 8:

Why should the failures and shortcomings of the disciples increase our confidence in the gospel accounts?

There are many reasons to believe that the gospel accounts are historically reliable, and some of these reasons have to do with the actual content of the Gospels. One reason scholars sometimes highlight is that the Gospels often present the twelve disciples in an unfavorable light. But why should the failures and shortcomings of the disciples increase our confidence in the gospel accounts?

Dr. Dan Doriani

The Gospels do talk about the failures of the disciples to a remarkable degree, and it's really painful to watch how short they fall, and it could lead us to ask, "If these people are such failures, how can we trust what they wrote later on?" Let's first talk about why they failed. Reason number one, they're human. They are finite; they don't know everything they should know; they hear things; they don't remember them. Jesus tells them over and over again; they don't listen because it doesn't fit their grids. I don't know if you've ever tried to explain an American football play to somebody from anywhere else in the world; they just don't get it. And the idea that Jesus keeps telling them he's the Messiah who's going to the cross, well that fits none of their expectations. And they just don't know what to do with it. So they are "run of the mill" sinners, they don't like things that Jesus says, and so they ignore it or don't want to do it. But Jesus also was upsetting paradigms and expectations nonstop, and so they are also finite. We should have some compassion on them.

We can say that a very different way and say the disciples' failure represents the failure of all of us. We all fail, that's why Jesus had to come in the first place. They're like us; we're like them. And that actually gives us an interesting insight that, in the sense that, the failures of the disciples gives us a way into the Gospels. And you know when you read a book, when you watch a movie, therefore when you read the narrative of the Gospels you're looking for a hero. Who can I, with whom can I identify? Well, I want to identify with Jesus, but gee, he can raise the dead, I can't do that, I can't identify with him. Well, how about the adversaries, the Pharisees, the scribes? No, no one wants to be like that. How about the crowds, those fickle knuckleheads following Jesus at one minute, seeming to drift away for no particular reason; no we're not like that. Who's left? Well, the disciples. And, "hey, that's me," we can say. "I'm trying to follow Jesus, but it's difficult." "I'm trying to follow Jesus but I'm in the dark." "I'm trying to follow Jesus but I get frightened." Maybe the most important thing is to ask the question not, "Do the disciples fail?" but "What happens after they fail?" And to draw the distinction which is maybe sharpest in the case of Judas and Peter. You could say, although we don't like to say it, that Judas and Peter betrayed Jesus almost identically at the end. Now Peter didn't get any

money out of it. Judas betrayed Jesus for money. Peter betrayed Jesus to save his skin. Because a *paidiske*, a servant girl, twelve or thirteen, maybe eleven years old said, “You aren’t one of his disciples, are you?” And somehow, maybe he was ready to die for Jesus an hour or two earlier, but now this little servant girl walks up and says, “You aren’t one of them?” Somebody here presses a little further and he melts under the pressure of this, you know, girl asking him questions. Boy, can we identify with that. We’re so strong one moment, so weak the next. We’ll either die for Jesus today, telling a petty lie to cover up some mistake we made the next day. The question then is, “What’s next?” Well, Judas despaired, and hung himself. He felt remorse, but he didn’t turn to God for healing. Peter repented. And when Jesus came to Peter to restore him — “Do you love me, will you feed my sheep?” “Yes, you know that I love you” — took the charge, was forgiven, and on he goes. That’s what counts. Not the question, “Did they fail?” We all fail. Question is, “What happens after you fail?”

Dr. Mark Strauss

Students are often disturbed by the fact that the disciples seem to come off so bad in the Gospels, and particularly in the Gospel of Mark, I think they probably look the worst in the Gospel of Mark. And I think there’s two key points that we can draw from that. The first is that we have to realize these gospels were written at a time when the disciples, when the apostles were heroes, were viewed as heroes of the faith. So if they present them poorly, it’s because they are recording actual historical events. This is the way it happened and the apostles are not glossing over what actually happened. They are acknowledging that they failed in a lot of ways. We would expect them to be glorified, to be great heroes, if this was something the early church was creating instead of what actually happened. So that’s one thing, I think we have an accurate historical portrayal of the disciples. The other thing, however, is we have to realize for the gospel writers the real hero of the gospel story is Jesus and Jesus alone. Take Mark’s gospel, much of Mark’s gospel is about discipleship. It really is, “what is the role of a disciple of Jesus Christ?” But in Mark’s gospel there really is only one true disciple. There’s only one person, in other words, who follows God’s purpose and plan, and perseveres to the end and succeeds, if you will, and that is Jesus Christ. He says, “If you want to follow me,” he says to his disciples, “You have to take up your cross and follow me.” There’s only one person who take up the cross in the Gospel of Mark and that is Jesus himself. So, we look to Christ. We don’t look to human examples because he is our ultimate model. He is the ultimate disciple, the one who wholly did the will of the Father.

Question 9:

How can extra-biblical accounts confirm the reliability of the Gospels?

The historical reliability of the gospel accounts is corroborated by extra-biblical sources, such as the writings of other ancient historians. Of course, not all extra-biblical ancient historians were trustworthy, and none of them were inspired by the

Holy Spirit like the writers of Scripture. So, how can extra-biblical accounts confirm the reliability of the Gospels?**Dr. David Redelings**

I think when we think of confirming sources as reliable, we — from a historical perspective — we need to confirm them in terms of sources, first of all, which we do already trust. And so, for example, that works, it ends up working out that we usually want to work backwards in time, from the present. If we go back, for example, to the 4th century, it's pretty much acknowledged on all hands, that, by everyone, that there was a Christian church at the time of Constantine. And we know also that in the same period we have Christians, for example Eusebius or Augustine, and we have their writings. And in their writings we have, and many others as well — I mean, we have just volumes of Christian writers from the 4th century — and in their writings we have reference to other earlier authors. So, for example, Eusebius, who was a church historian in the early 4th century, he claims to have access to libraries, Christian libraries in Palestine, and he, in his work, in his Church History for example, he quotes directly, word for word, from many earlier Christian authors. So, we know that there are other earlier Christian authors, and we, we actually even have their writings, and we can actually cross-check them with Eusebius's excerpts. So, we have authors such as Clement and Ignatius and Polycarp and Justin Martyr and Irenaeus among Christian writers. And beyond that we have even secular writers who make mention of early Christians, such as Pliny. And we have the Jewish historian Josephus who gives, for example, some very interesting information about John the Baptist. As well as, I think, James, a follower of Jesus who is executed in Jerusalem shortly before the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. And so, we have a lot of sources outside of the Bible.

But one of the things that's often forgotten when we look at the reliability of the Gospels, or look for corroboration outside of them, is that the New Testament is actually not a single book but is a collection of books. In fact, the New Testament was really not collected in the form we have it for several hundred years. You didn't normally see New Testaments being the collection of books we have, but you would see the books circulated independently. They were written by independent authors at different times and only later collected. And so, all of the books after the Gospels, the letters of Paul and so on, are themselves independent corroboration of the Christian faith as it began. They, of course, don't say everything that happened in the Gospels, but they do tell some of the outlines, faith in Christ, and they tell us things about the early Christians.

And I think the other thing that's important to say about this question is there's often an assumption that we can't take the Gospels themselves at all seriously as testimony of what happened. And I think there's a, it's a problem of historical method to assume that we could take any work, modern or ancient, which has, say, a controversial character whether that's religious or whether it's political, and simply discount that entire source as a genre. So, for example, in modern times we wouldn't discount reports from a certain political party on some convention that they had, simply because they were the source of their own convention. And this is the same sort of

attitude that courts would take. Courts don't assume witnesses are correct, but they sort of give them the benefit of the doubt, saying, they deserve to be heard, and they deserve to have the evidence which they offer considered and evaluated critically — evaluated critically, but evaluated — and to be accepted if the testimony is reasonable. And so, I think that it's important to recognize that the Gospels are asking for the same thing from us, to accept them as testimony, to consider their claims, because of course you can never really have any testimony entirely duplicated by somebody else, and that's the nature of testimony, is that it asks to be considered. And I think that's what the evangelists are asking for from their readers.

Question 10:

How can we discuss the historical reliability of the Gospels with skeptics and unbelievers?

Christians have many reasons to affirm the historical reliability of the Bible including things like its inspiration by the Holy Spirit, its eyewitness testimony, its honest treatment of its subjects and characters and extra-biblical corroboration. But what about people who don't believe in inspiration and think the Bible resembles every other ancient religious writing? How can we discuss the historical reliability of the Gospels with skeptics and unbelievers?

Dr. Dan Doriani

There are a lot of reasons for believing that the Gospels are reliable, inspired, and have the facts, we might say, straight. And I like to say it in a fashion, if possible, that would appeal to a person who might be a skeptic or an agnostic, someone who might not be inclined to believe that God exists necessarily, or that, "maybe there's a God, but, who can be sure how he would work in the lives of these particular men?" So I'm going to give you a few reasons, maybe even ten reasons for believing that the Gospels are authentic. Number one: in the ancient world people learned by memorizing. A disciple of a rabbi memorized the key statements that they made. That's why you have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but especially Matthew, Mark and Luke, showing immense diversity in wording when they're in a narrative, but suddenly the wording gets much more similar, in fact, often identical when we're recording the words of Jesus. They memorized it. That was their job; they had that skill. They weren't made lazy by reference works. They worked hard at memorizing.

It's also true that at that time the disciples weren't just ignoramuses writing. If you look at their Greek, especially in the case of Luke, it's pretty sophisticated. John has some very sophisticated methodology, although maybe his vocabulary and sentence structure is pretty simple. And Mark is fiendishly clever in the way he puts some things together and so forth. They're sophisticated. They're educated, maybe not educated in the sense of university education, but they're educated men. And people knew there were standards about the way you wrote things up. You had to give the epitome of events, you might be giving a very shortened version of what a general said or what happened on the battlefield, but you couldn't make it up. And if you did

you were discredited. You were discredited in part by the fact, maybe this is number three, that there were eye witnesses around. I mean, imagine if you would that the gospel of Luke is traveling around or the Gospel of Mark is traveling around and they say, “Well in this city so and so was healed,” then they name Jairus’ daughter in the Transjordan. And then the gospel gets there and they say, “Well, there was never anybody named Jairus who had a daughter who was raised from the dead. There were never blind beggars outside of Jericho. You know, there were never crippled people here and there; there was never a guy named Zacchaeus who came and climbed into a tree. “I’ve lived in Jericho my whole life; I never remember that.” I mean, if the Gospels got to these places — and Richard Bauckham wrote a wonderful book about this: *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* — and you know, names are named and places are specified. If those things didn’t happen in those places they would be instantly discredited. So, we can be sure that they are reliable.

It’s also true that people kept written records at that time. When paper was rare and expensive people still jotted down what their rabbis said. It’s also true that Jesus spoke, for example, in ways that make things very memorable. He used a lot of poetry, a lot of graphic sayings. How hard do you have to work at memorizing this: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away?” See, anybody can say that right back, because it’s so gripping, it’s so horrifying, and the truth of the matter is that probably over half of Jesus’ teachings have something in them that would make them easily memorable, that would make them stick in your mind. Of course, beyond that, the disciples were often teaching in each other’s presence. I don’t know about you but maybe you’ve, maybe you’ve talked, told a story — let’s do it this way — you’ve told a story with four or five people around who were also there. And you say, “Well, as I recall...” and then somebody says, “No, no it wasn’t that way. Don’t you remember? He came five minutes after.” “Oh, of course, you’re right.” The fact that God inspires the Scripture does not mean that we can’t have means like one apostle helping the other apostle remember. And then of course there are some things that you couldn’t forget if you tried. I like to tell my students that I was once in police custody for murder. I did not do it. But it was memorable. In fact, I can remember pretty much every detail of those ten or twelve minutes in police custody with guns drawn, demanding my ID, which I couldn’t find, and who was with me, and what they said. Do you think you could forget if you saw Lazarus coming out of the tomb? If you tried, could you forget?

Maybe the most important thing that I can say, and there are many more reasons to believe the Gospels are reliable, there was a teaching center in Jerusalem. There were — this is an odd one, but I’ll say it anyway — there were topics that might have been very useful for Jesus to have addressed. Boy, would it have been useful if he had just uttered some clear Trinitarian formula. But you know, it was never put into his mouth. Boy, wouldn’t it have been useful if he had said something about whether a Gentile who’s married to another Gentile and marries living in Corinth or Rome should stay married to that person or not? Oh, it would have been so useful, would have headed off controversies. But you know what? They didn’t put words in Jesus’

mouth. It's remarkable how later controversies are not inserted, solutions to later controversies are not inserted into Jesus' mouth.

But maybe the most important things I can say is this: that the eyewitnesses sealed their testimony with their lives. You would think that before one of them was flogged, beaten, tossed into jail, crucified, just one of them would have said, "Oh by the way, you know, it's really just a story." They died for what they said. Now, of course, we all know that people die for lies all too often. The vast majority of all people who die for lies don't know they are lies. A tiny number of people will die for a lie that they know to be a lie if it gained them immense power or wealth or prestige during their lifetime. They got none of that. They were nobodies in this world, they were constantly on the run, they were impoverished, they sacrificed, they were beaten, and then they died. And not one of them recanted their testimony. So we can be pretty sure that it happened.

Question 11:

Why are the similarities and differences between the Synoptic Gospels considered problematic?

Each of the Gospels presents the historical facts of Jesus' life and ministry in different ways. The Gospel of John is normally set apart as being the most distinct. The other three — Matthew, Mark and Luke — are referred to as "synoptic," meaning that they "look alike." But even the Synoptic Gospels differ in a wide variety of ways. Scholars often refer to the fact that there are similarities and differences between the Synoptics as "the Synoptic problem." And this terminology raises an obvious question: Why are the similarities and differences between the Synoptic Gospels considered problematic?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

The synoptic problem is language that we've developed as scholars to address the issue that actually goes way back into an earlier time of the church of recognizing that the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, both at the same time look very, very similar to each other, yet still have differences between them. The fourth gospel, the Gospel of John clearly has some differences of events that are told and even chronology of events, but it's, especially, the Synoptic problem concerns, the fact that there are both differences and similarities. And particularly what that raises is the question if one gospel writer is using one of the other evangelists, which is completely fine — in fact, Luke even references in the beginning of his gospel that he took account of other gospels that have been written — if that's happening, and they're using each other, why are there also differences? You see, the problem is not just that they are similar to each other, that would stand to reason based on whether the events are historical and even using each other, but why some similarities and why some differences? The answers within modern scholarship have been quite varied. Some people, in fact the majority of people, would probably say that Mark was the first gospel, and that the other evangelists, Matthew and Luke, used Mark,

and maybe some other source that they shared and then other unique sources that they add to their own. Those are the common kind of ways to explain the difference between the Gospels. But what's most interesting is that this issue of the Synoptic problem is really not just a modern issue. At least back to the time of Augustine, St. Augustine and Eusebius, both of them wrote whole books to explain why the Gospels were both similar to each other and different from each other, mostly in the context of defending them against attacks on Christianity in their own day. And this is indeed what we do as scholars today and lay people as well. We read the Gospels, recognizing their similarities and differences, yet we still believe that God has inspired them. And they've been inspired to write what is a true record, using other sources and also giving us their own theological interpretation of the events that occurred.

Question 12:

What's the value in having multiple gospels that say essentially the same thing?

Because the Synoptic Gospels are so similar in many ways, some Christians wonder why we need three of them. And for that matter, is John really that different from the Synoptics? What's the value in having multiple gospels that say essentially the same thing?

Dr. David Redelings

I think the importance of the three gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke typically is what people are thinking of — saying very similar things, is actually sometimes overlooked and is quite significant. One of the reasons it's important is that it actually authenticates in an important way that there was a widespread agreement among early Christians as to some of the basic teachings of Jesus, his identity and so on. Not only does it authenticate it, but — that this was actually a widespread, these were widespread beliefs of the Christian community — but also it gives us a little bit of focus on the importance of these particular elements. For example, if we look at the Gospel of John, at the end John says there are many other things could have been written about Jesus, and the whole world could be filled with the books. And we know that Luke says that he has looked at other sources, or he's aware of other sources; he talks about that in the introduction to his gospel. So, we know that there was a great deal of selectivity, and it's significant that three of the evangelists in particular would have had so much overlap in the material that they have chosen. This shows also the regard they had for that particular material, and it's also interesting that the actual words of Jesus in the text of the Gospels often varies less than the surrounding narrative, showing the respect that early Christians had given to the words of Christ.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

One of the beautiful things that God has given us in the fourfold witness of the Gospels is that in fact even though they overlap very much in their accounts,

especially the first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke, but John as well, the general story of Jesus overlaps so much, why do we need four or three in the case of Matthew, Mark and Luke? One of the beautiful things about that is that God has chosen to give us a very rich and diverse and full portrait, really a fourfold portrait, of who Jesus is. One analogy that's often used for this which is very helpful, is that if we were to make a painting or a picture of some sort of the New York City skyline and we did some in a medium of watercolor and another as a photograph and maybe do those at different times of day from different angles onto the city, having those four different ones might for some people initially cause confusion that there's four different accounts, or four different pictures, but quickly it becomes apparent that they are all representing the one same reality of the New York City skyline, but we are enriched to have different perspectives, different media, as it were, different vantage points and different representations of the one reality of the New York skyline. How much more for the Gospels? Any biography of a person deserves more than one — any great person deserves more than one perspective. When we are talking about the incarnate Son of God, God himself, who lived and walked and spoke the wisdom of God and performed the miracles of God, just one account would never do justice to all that he said and did. In fact the book of John ends with a similar comment doesn't it? John points out that even if the whole world were made of parchment and ink we could not ever account in full detail nor in full richness of all that Jesus said and did. And so we are blessed, we are blessed in the church to have this threefold witness of the Synoptic Gospels and the fourfold witness of the Gospels together rather than just having one jumbo gospel as it were.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

The four gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are not just accidentally bound together. We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired each one of those gospels, the gospel writers, and indeed the Holy Spirit superintended the process of the New Testament coming together, so we have these four, authoritative, inerrant, infallible, absolutely trustworthy guides to who Jesus is, what Jesus said, and why it matters. You know, what's really interesting is that the Holy Spirit knew we needed four, and the four are not identical. But they are complimentary. They are presenting to us the same truths concerning Christ. They are not in any way in conflict. They are in every way in harmony, but it's like having a conversation about Jesus by the people who knew him best, and are authoritatively inspired to tell us who he is, what he said, and what he did. We need Matthew to tell us how exactly this fits within the context of the Old Testament. We need Luke, the historian, to come along and tell us, "this is how it happened" in sequential order. We need Mark to tell us, "here's what's most important — immediately, immediately, immediately this took place." And then we need John, this giant, majestic theological gospel to go, not just back to the virgin birth, not just back to Bethlehem, but back to the creation of the cosmos — "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What we have in these four gospels is all that we need. And all that we could hope for in terms of knowing who Jesus is. And we need all four. Not just one, not just two, not just three, all four.

Question 13:**Why is John's gospel so different from the Synoptic Gospels?**

Although we find many differences between the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John is by far the most distinct of the four New Testament gospels. It never contradicts the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But much of its material is very different from the Synoptics. Why is John's gospel so different from the Synoptic Gospels?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Anyone reading through the four gospels is immediately struck by the fact that you have three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that look very similar to each other — many of the same stories, same basic structure in terms of the ministry of Jesus. Then you've got the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John that is radically different. In fact, ninety percent of John's gospel is unique to John. Contrast that with Mark's gospel. Ninety percent of Mark's gospel is included in either Matthew or Luke and so those three are very similar; John's gospel is very different. The simplest answer is, we don't really know why for certain John's gospel is different. Certainly it has something to do with the time at which John's gospel is written and also the purpose for which John's gospel is written. All four gospels have a unique purpose. John's gospel appears to be written fairly late in the 1st century, when the church was facing new challenges from the outside world, from their Jewish opponents, from their secular opponents as well. And those challenges were certainly related in one sense to the person of Jesus, who he was. The deity of Jesus was clearly under fire because John's gospel so strongly stresses that Jesus is, in fact, divine. The Synoptic Gospels, that's not a big issue because evidently it wasn't being challenged. The other thing is there is false teaching arising in the church, and so John's gospel seems to address that issue of false teaching. The other thing, the third thing, is that Jewish opponents, there really clearly has been a clear break by that time between the Christians and the Jews, a break we don't yet see really fully in the Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And so those three factors would help to explain why John's gospel is written with its particular emphases. John draws on different stories. He's obviously using traditions that Synoptic Gospels did not use to prove who Jesus is and what he accomplished.

Question 14:**Should the lack of rigorous chronology in the Gospels pose a problem for modern readers?**

One feature that distinguishes the various gospels from each other is the fact that they don't always present the same events in the same order. This is largely because the gospel writers weren't always interested in maintaining a strict chronology. Should the lack of rigorous chronology in the Gospels pose a problem for modern readers?

Dr. David Bauer

The fact that our gospels are not all chronological, or consistently chronological, can create problems for modern readers. This has to do really with the genre of the gospel, what kind of book the Gospels are. There's been a good bit of scholarly debate about that over the past century or century and a half. But there is a general consensus, which I think is quite true, that our Gospels are in the form of ancient biographies. And one of the differences between ancient biographies and modern biographies is that ancient biographies were written with a much more explicit point of view that is reflected in the way the books are put together. So, whereas modern biographies are characterized by very consistent chronological sequence, there was the possibility available to ancient writers, when they composed their biographies, to work more topically in order to communicate the deeper significance of the person and the work that they were describing. We certainly have that in our Gospels. So, even in the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we find in that there are some chronological differences. This is especially the case between Matthew and Mark on the one hand and Luke on the other, but even if one compares Matthew and Mark, we see that some events are placed at different points in the story. Certainly some statements of Jesus are placed at different points in the story.

Dr. Peter Walker

The fact that the Gospels aren't straightforwardly chronological in their order can sometimes cause problems for people. I suppose especially if they're expecting a kind of video camera approach to Jesus' life and they expect the tape to be running, and we want to know exactly what happened, one thing after another. I think once we're more relaxed about that and realize that that would have been impossible, anyway, to convey, we're set free to be grateful for the gospel writers being selective; actually unedited footage of a video camera is very difficult for us to process. So instead, they have done the selection process, and they've gathered Jesus' life around certain themes. And that actually makes it much easier for us to access. So, I think we ought to be fairly relaxed about that, and we see this for example, when in Mark's gospel, for example, Mark will just convey vivid snapshots of all that Jesus did in one day in Mark 1, or in Mark 2–4 how he is... conquers disease and death and other enemies of God's people. So we know that they're being thematic to some extent, and I think we ought to be very relaxed about that and not be too bothered.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The Gospels are not meant to be chronological because really the gospel writers weren't intending to write biographies of Jesus. Their goal is not to give us a news report of the events of Jesus' life. They're far more interested in the significance of Jesus, the spiritual significance of Jesus, the role Jesus plays in bringing God's ultimate salvation, and so they will organize events topically. They'll organize events around certain key themes. They'll focus on what Jesus came to accomplish, rather than setting out this happened next, this happened next, this happened next, because as far as they're concerned, they are proclaiming good news. They are proclaiming the message of salvation and so the significance of who Jesus was is far more

important than what he had for breakfast and what he did after that. And so chronology is of much less significance for them than the significance of who Jesus was and what he accomplished.

Dr. Steven Cowan

In the four gospels we often encounter a phenomenon that the story seems to be told in a non-chronological fashion. For example, it is pretty clear that in Luke's gospel, Luke portrays Jesus traveling to Jerusalem in what is almost certainly not a chronological fashion because we're told at one point in Luke's gospel that Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem — he is determined to get there. Very soon after that, he is in Bethany, just a stone's throw away from Jerusalem, but the next chapter he's back in Galilee. So it is fairly evident that Luke's gospel is not portraying Jesus' story in a purely chronological fashion. But I don't think this should be of any real concern regarding the historicity of the text because historians both then and now often tell stories in a non-chronological fashion. I remember not too long ago reading a historical work about the founding fathers of America, and the author of the book starts out talking about John Adams and his life, but begins at the end of John Adams' life and tells a story about the events leading up to his death, but then goes back and tells the rest of John Adams' story in flashback — by doing various flashbacks. And historians do that kind of thing all the time. The fact that a story is not told chronologically is no indication that it is not historical. It's just a way of telling a story in an interesting way or focusing on certain themes and isolating certain events to pick out certain things the author thinks is important and putting an emphasis on those things.

Question 15:

Do the differences between the Gospels indicate that their authors disagreed with each other?

Because of the differences between the New Testament Gospels, many critical interpreters claim that the gospel writers actually disagreed with each other. Is this a valid objection? Do the differences between the Gospels indicate that their authors disagreed with each other?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The issue here is, among other things, the limitations of a papyrus scroll. You can only get so many words and so many deeds into a small piece of papyrus and so we needed multiple gospels because there was much more to be said about Jesus. Indeed the end of the Gospel of John says, "There's not enough papyrus scrolls in the world to fill up all the words and deeds of Jesus." So, one of the things has to do with the volume of the material that would have been available. But the other thing has to do with the point of view, and each gospel writer has a slightly different point of view about Jesus — not in the sense that one thinks he's the Christ and another thinks he's not, but that they have different emphases about how to reveal that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and at the same time the Savior of the world. And so, they felt free

and they had the freedom under inspiration to emphasize different aspects and different portions of the ministry of Jesus, and different ways of framing the question and giving answers.

Question 16:

What did the Jews in Jesus' day expect the Messiah to do, and how did Jesus compare to those expectations?

Each gospel is trustworthy a portrait of Jesus representing the apostolic testimony about him. And one theme that is central to each of them is that Jesus was and continues to be the Christ, or Messiah. But in the 1st century, the claim that Jesus was the Christ was very complex, because there were several different conceptions of who the Christ would be and what he would do. So, in order for us to understand what the Gospels mean when they call Jesus the Christ, it's helpful to ask: What did the Jews in Jesus' day expect the Messiah to do, and how did Jesus compare to those expectations?

Dr. David Bauer

The question as to how Jesus' performance of his, and understanding of his, messiahship relates to Jewish expectations is a complicated one. For one thing, the Jews did not have a single expectation regarding the Messiah. They had various Jewish groups. Some scholars have actually talked about various Judaisms over against just Judaism, pure and simple. So, certainly there were various Jewish groups. One might even say, go so far as to say, various Judaisms, and each one had its own end-time or eschatological expectation, messianic expectation. Most of them did have some messianic expectation. For example, we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community expected two messiahs: one from the line of David, a Davidic or royal messiah, and a priestly, or Aaronic messiah. But most Jewish groups of the time anticipated a Messiah in the line of David.

The first clear and unambiguous reference to Messiah as an end-time deliverer in Jewish material is in the Psalms of Solomon, a pharisaic work produced around 50 B.C. Particularly in Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18, we have a picture of at least what was a view of the Messiah in that group, the group represented by that book, where the Messiah is actually presented as a human being, not a heavenly figure, but a human being, in the line of David, who exercises rule over Israel but especially gives military victory to Israel over its opponents and oppressors, especially, of course, over imperial Rome. Really, riding roughshod, acting very violently toward the nations of the world, and so that Israel would exercise political and military hegemony over the nations of the world, this was messianic expectation in that work, and one that was clearly rather popular at the time that Jesus walked in Palestine. Jesus clearly, of course, repudiates that understanding of Messiah.

Dr. Peter Walker

Jewish people have been expecting for some five- or six-hundred years someone to restore the kingdom to Israel. They haven't had a king and they haven't had their own independence, so there's a lot of tension in 1st century Palestine. When Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom and hinting that he is the Messiah, they are really on tenterhooks to hear what he is saying. What were they expecting? Well, they were expecting someone perhaps who was going to restore the temple. There were doubts about whether the temple was really — now that it had been rebuilt by pagan King Herod the Great — whether that was really the temple that God intended. But more than that, they were longing for God to redeem Israel, to fulfill his promises that he'd made in the Old Testament. Where is God going to fulfill his promises? So, that's what they were particularly looking for. But by that they probably meant, "Well here we are, under Roman occupation. Surely if God is going to fulfill his promises, he's going to get rid of the Romans." And probably they were expecting political independence. What we have in the New Testament, then, is Jesus claiming that he is the Messiah, that he is the one who's going to restore the temple — but that actually he is going to be the true Temple — and also he is going to be the one who's going to bring in the kingdom, but actually it's not going to be a politically independent Jewish kingdom. Actually, it's going to be the news that Jesus Christ the King is Lord over the whole world. So, it's slightly different to what they expect, but it's a deeper fulfillment of what was promised.

Question 17:

Why did the gospel writers find it so remarkable that Peter specifically confessed Jesus to be the Christ?

As modern Christians reading the New Testament, it seems obvious to most of us that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ. And we tend to think that Jesus' disciples should have been able to recognize this too. After all, they lived with and studied under him for years. So, why did the gospel writers find it so remarkable that Peter specifically confessed Jesus to be the Christ?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Peter's confession plays a pivotal role in the Gospels really, because it appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the three Synoptic Gospels. And the first half of all three gospels really focuses on Jesus' divine authority, the demonstration of his authority through his miracles, through his exorcisms, through his healings, through his nature miracles and through his teaching. And so Peter gets it and recognized that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, and then from that point on it really launches into the role of the Messiah, which is the suffering role. Having said that, Mark and Luke seem to place a slightly different emphasis on Peter's confession than Matthew does. In Mark and Luke all those miracles leading up to that point, apparently demonstrate for Peter, confirm for Peter, that Jesus is in fact the Christ; is in fact the Messiah. So he acknowledges that God has been at work through Jesus and recognizes, kind of in his humanity he recognizes, that Jesus is the Christ. Matthew, in what follows the

confession, the first thing Jesus says is, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.” So Matthew has a greater emphasis on the fact that this is a divine revelation through Jesus’ work, no doubt, through his signs of authority, but that Peter is only really getting it because God has revealed it to him. So that sense of divine revelation is more important it seems in Matthew’s gospel.

Question 18:

Why did the Messiah have to descend from David?

One major aspect of Jesus’s messianic role in each of the Gospels is that he came to be Israel’s king. Of course, Jesus didn’t fulfill all the expectations his contemporaries had for the messianic king. But each gospel writer assured his readers that Jesus really was the rightful heir to David’s throne in Jerusalem. For some modern readers, this is a little confusing. Why did the Messiah have to descend from David?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Why did the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah have to be a descendant of David? The answer to that is rooted in God’s plan in terms of what he has promised. Ultimately, he has to be human — the last Adam. The New Testament picks that up. But in the plan of God, that humanity comes through a specific family, a specific nation, a specific tribe. Particularly, what I’m thinking of, there is Abraham’s family, the nation of Israel, the tribe of Judah, and particularly David’s line. That is where we have in terms of the Davidic covenant. 2 Samuel 7 makes promises to David as the representative of Israel, that it’s through his offspring, through his lineage, that God’s rule will come to this world. The Davidic king is presented as the one who will fulfill ultimately the Adamic role of ruling over the nations, carrying out the creation mandate that was given to each one of us. So, the Messiah in order to fulfill God’s plan has to be a descendant of David, has to fulfill God’s promises through the Davidic covenant to the nation of Israel, ultimately, in terms of God’s promise, all the way back to Genesis 3:15.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Normally when we think about the kingship of Christ, we think of that as something very exalted, high, up there because Jesus is now at the right hand of God the Father, and he is the King. But we must remember that Jesus was exalted in his kingship in his human nature. That’s to say, in his divine nature Jesus was always the King. He was always ruling as the sovereign over all things. But Jesus was given authority in heaven and earth in his human nature, and Jesus is the Son of David and therefore the one who represents the nation of Israel and the people of God. And the Son of David, like David himself, was a vassal king. He was a servant of the greater king, God the Father in heaven.

Question 19:**How can we reconcile Jesus' kingship with his commitment to suffering and dying?**

One fact that troubled many followers of Jesus was that he pursued his role as Christ in ways that seemed contrary to the behavior of an earthly king. He didn't claim political power. He didn't raise an army. He didn't try to overthrow the existing political power structures that ruled Israel. How can we reconcile Jesus' kingship with his commitment to suffering and dying?

Dr. Simon Vibert

With the benefit of hindsight, looking back at the predictions of the coming king, you can put together passages like Isaiah 53 which speak about a king who comes, but who also will suffer and who will die. And Jesus believed that he was doing that to pay the ransom price for human sin and that on the cross he would lay aside his majesty in order that he could atone for the sins of humankind. But of course, even that's not the end of the story because then Christ rose from the dead, and he was exalted to heaven, and now he occupies the place as King over all creation, and he will come back as judge of the living and the dead. And the Gospels explain to us that the King has indeed come, but actually he has chosen to lay aside some of that right and authority in order to pay the price of sin for humankind.

Question 20:**Do the Gospels teach that Jesus is fully God?**

Another fact that many of Jesus' contemporaries found troubling was his claim to divinity or deity. It's clear that the Gospels reveal Jesus' humanity. But do they also confirm his deity? Do the Gospels teach that Jesus is fully God?

Dr. Jeffrey Lowman

One question in New Testament studies is, "Do the Gospels teach that Christ is fully God?" That answer, of course, is "yes" and very clearly. For instance, in the Gospel of John, John begins his gospel unlike the other gospel writers. He begins with the person of Christ. John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God," and then very emphatically, "the Word was God." And of course we read in John 1:14, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory of the only begotten, full of grace and truth." And so, John begins his gospel by telling us that Jesus is God. We see that also on the lips of Christ in the gospel of John. You have in John 10 where Christ says, "I and the Father are one." And it's interesting that there, Christ places himself before the Father, emphasizing his equality with the Father. And you have the many "I am" passages, the *ego eimi* passages, where Christ says, "I am the true vine," "I am the light of the world," or even that stunning passage in John 8 where it says, "before Abraham was, I am."

Dr. Steven Cowan

It is quite evident that the New Testament Gospels portray Jesus as fully God. John's gospel is the most clear in this regard. John begins the very first verse of his gospel saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and then he skips down to verse 14, and he says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He is talking about Jesus, and he is telling us that Jesus is God. And throughout John's gospel, this theme is reiterated in numerous ways where Jesus claims to be one with the Father. He tells the Pharisees in 8:58 that "before Abraham was born, I am," where he is clearly indicating that he is the same one who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, when God in the Old Testament, in the book of Exodus, "I am that I am." And that's why the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders picked up stones to kill him because they knew he was claiming to be divine. John's gospel is very, very clear on this score.

Even in the Synoptic Gospels, though, there are strong indications of Jesus' deity. For example, all three Synoptic Gospels tell us about Jesus' trial. And in Mark and Matthew in particular, we have Jesus appearing before Caiaphas the high priest, and Caiaphas asked him that question, "Are you the Messiah?" And Jesus says, "Yes, I am." And then he says, "and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." Caiaphas then tears his robes and says, "What else do we need? He has committed blasphemy!" Well, why has he committed blasphemy? Well, because Jesus is quoting there from Daniel 7, where we see in Daniel 7 this character called the Ancient of Days, which is clearly Yahweh, clearly God, and then someone called the Son of Man makes his appearance before the Ancient of Days, and that Son of Man is then given by the Ancient of Days a kingdom and power and authority that will last forever, and all the nations of the world bow down to worship this Son of Man. This Son of Man in Daniel 7 is not a man. He is something more than a man. He is an incarnation of God himself. That is clear in Daniel's context. And so when Jesus tells Caiaphas, "You will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven," he is telling Caiaphas, "I am that Son of Man in Daniel 7, I am God in the flesh." And that is why Caiaphas gets so upset.

Question 21:**What was the central focus of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed?**

The Gospels indicate that Jesus' full humanity as David's heir, and full divinity as the ruler of the universe, relate closely to his role as Christ and to the "good news" or "gospel" he announced. But how? What was the central focus of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. He announced the good news, and the gospel accounts speak about his coming to demonstrate the kingdom of God by acts and by calling together a band of faithful followers, but then they move on to the last seven days of his life which move towards Calvary and to the sacrifice that he made, so the

gospel accounts record Jesus as proclaiming the kingdom in both word and deed, the word being the announcement of the kingdom, and that his deeds actually being the ushering in of the kingdom through his saving death on the cross.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

When we open the Gospels and begin to read them there's one thing that may surprise us but is inevitably going to strike us and that is that what Jesus was preaching and teaching about and modeling was clearly the kingdom of God. There's no doubt from John the Baptist's preaching, which foreshadows Jesus to the very first words of Jesus — the kingdom of God is drawn near, or has drawn near, or the kingdom of heaven has drawn near — and then in all his teaching, “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” all the parables about the kingdom of heaven, all the teaching, all the ways in which he shows himself to be the true Davidic king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. All the manifest ways to make it very clear that the Gospels, the evangelists, the gospel writers, want us to clearly understand that Jesus' message, his whole life, was about the bringing, the restoration, of God's reign or God's kingdom.

The idea that Jesus preached primarily, or focused on in his preaching, on the Kingdom of God may at first strike us as a little odd, until we recognize that the major story of the Bible starting way back in creation itself, is to a message about the kingdom of God. Even though the language “kingdom of God” rarely if ever occurs in the Old Testament per se, the hope and the expectation and the vision that God is a ruling king, a good ruling king, from creation on, is clearly a major theme. And, in fact, in the prophets, becomes the major hope for a day coming when God will restore his reign through a Davidic Messiah, a Christ, an Anointed One. So when we get to the Gospels we really shouldn't be surprised that what Jesus is announcing and proclaiming is the kingdom of God. It's there. It's because it's a part of the whole message of the Bible, and it's in fact when you look beyond the Gospels into the Epistles, it's, in fact, what they are building upon and presupposing and teaching as well, and — I was going all the way to the book of Revelation — the hope is for the restoration of God's reign. So, we can see at the center point of history itself, in the center of the Bible, the Gospels which witness to Jesus' life and death and resurrection, we are not surprised to see that his message is the same message of the whole Bible. God's reign, God's kingdom is coming from heaven to earth, from creation to new creation.

Dr. Peter Walker

As we look back at Jesus' message, it's worth looking at his central proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. That's the first thing that Jesus said. And so, when we're asking, what was Jesus really on about, we must look there. It seems to me that that phrase, “the kingdom of God is at hand,” gives us a great clue. Jesus is claiming that with his arrival, God is now the coming King. So the first thing he's saying is, God is ruler, you need to bow to him, and you need to recognize his rule in your life, and you need to recognize his rule, through me, Jesus. But more than that, when we recognize that the kingdom of God was something, which in Old Testament hope they

were longing for God to bring in, we realize that Jesus is also saying, “I am the fulfillment of the Old Testament story.” So a very important part of Jesus’ teaching is, “I am the fulfillment, I am the expected answer to the problems that were there before.” And when we look back to find out what was that Old Testament story all about, well, some of their hopes were, yes, that God would bring a king, but they were also expecting God to redeem his people, so Jesus is saying, I’m the one who’s now going to redeem God’s people. When you think that in ancient Egypt the Israelites were rescued from Egypt and redeemed, what Jesus offering us is redemption, not from slavery in Egypt, but from what? Well, slavery to sin. When you look back into the Old Testament, you discover also a longing that God will fulfill his covenant, and this covenant is God’s plan to bless the entire world through Abraham’s descendants. And so, when Jesus comes and says, “I am the fulfillment of that,” then we’re getting the message that God is going to do through Jesus that which is going to overcome evil and is also going to bring all people everywhere into his kingdom. So that’s the central thing that Jesus is claiming. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Question 22:

What are some ways that Jesus taught implicitly about the kingdom of God?

Jesus spoke frequently about the kingdom of God. In fact, it’s the most common subject of his teachings. But sometimes it can be hard for us to recognize the kingdom in his teachings because he didn’t always use the word “kingdom.” What are some ways that Jesus taught implicitly about the kingdom of God?

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

In the Bible, the Gospels often refer to the kingdom of God by using the phrase “the kingdom of God.” In fact, the phrase “the kingdom of God” appears frequently, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, because the Gospels reflect the emphasis on the kingdom of God established in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the Gospels also use related keywords or other descriptive phrases to talk about the kingdom. For example, the Gospel of John uses language like “eternal life,” and “believing in Jesus” to receive eternal life, to describe the salvation that God’s kingdom brings to us. So, God can give us revelation about the kingdom of God without explicitly naming it.

Question 23:

How might we summarize Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God?

Over the course of church history, the idea of the kingdom of God has sometimes caused disagreements. And many of these disagreements have been over its timing. Is the kingdom already here? Or is it coming in the future? Generally speaking, biblical scholars now believe that Jesus taught both ideas — that the kingdom is

already here, and that it's coming in the future. But what's the relationship between these ideas? How might we summarize Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God?

Dr. David Bauer

The reason some theologians say that the kingdom of God has come, but hasn't come in its fullness is — short answer — because that is what Jesus himself said. You find this, for example, in Matthew 4:17 and parallels — also, a parallel especially in Mark 1, a close parallel there — “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That is a very ambiguous statement. And I think it's deliberately ambiguous. The Greek word, which happens to be *engiken*, is itself, in its root, ambiguous. It can mean “near,” in the sense of actually being here, or “near” in the sense of being very close and about to dawn. And then, the tense that is used, it's the perfect tense in Greek, actually intensifies the ambiguity of it, heightening the ambiguity between its being at hand in the sense of already here, or at hand in the sense of not yet here. This is played out in the Gospels where side by side in all the Synoptic Gospels you have statements by Jesus, which indicates that the kingdom of God has already come in his ministry. “If I, by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then you know the kingdom of God has come upon you,” Matthew 12. Luke has a very similar statement in his gospel. Luke says, “If I, by the finger of God cast out demons, then you know the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Jesus, of course, has been casting out demons all along, so that's a very clear statement, among many others in the Gospels, that the kingdom of God has in some sense come in the ministry of Jesus.

But then, alongside those statements in the Gospels are other ones that indicate the kingdom is isn't here yet at all. And so, the kingdom is described in those passages as yet to come. As a matter of fact, this is a point of the Lord's Prayer. Throughout this whole period, apparently, we are to pray “Thy kingdom come” — may thy kingdom come — “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” There is, then, this tension between the already and the not yet of the kingdom of God, which actually is a modification of Jewish expectations. In apocalyptic Judaism, all of reality was divided into two periods: the present evil age and the age to come. And the expectation there is that when God ushered in his end-time kingdom, the age to come, it would happen cataclysmically, suddenly, and absolutely. You move immediately from the period before the kingdom to the period of the kingdom, the age of the kingdom. But in the New Testament, you have what I've called the “elongation” of New Testament eschatology, so that the age of the kingdom, as was envisaged in apocalyptic Judaism, is subdivided now into two periods, the present, or the already of the kingdom of heaven and the not yet of the kingdom of heaven. I might mention too, though, that the fact that the kingdom of heaven, as Matthew calls it, or the kingdom of God, has already come in a sense is sure and certain indication, assurance really, that the kingdom will be consummated. Because once God has begun to usher in his kingdom there is no calling that back.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God is robust and complex. First of all, he will say different things about the presence of the kingdom; He will say the kingdom is near, the kingdom is at hand; sometimes he says the kingdom has arrived. It's near because it's about to burst into this world. Those are the first sort of statements. In a sense, when he even says it's near it's already come in part because of the signs here in the first proclamation has been made, but the miracles are going to come rolling out any day now and the crowds and the people repenting. So we're just on the cusp of the first manifestation of the kingdom. Later on he says the kingdom has arrived. He uses a word that means the journey's over. They didn't have trains in those days, but the train has pulled into the station, the plane has landed, the boat has pulled into the port, etc. It's arrived. It says that especially about casting out demons. "If I, by the finger of God cast out demons, then you know that the kingdom of heaven" — or the kingdom of God, it varies from gospel to gospel — "has come upon you" — or has arrived. It's here — "The fact that I'm casting out demons is the proof that I have the power over Satan, and I'm spoiling his realm." Of course it's also true that Jesus will also, will speak of the kingdom in the future tense as well. And so we're supposed to pray, "thy kingdom come." That is to say, "may it come." Well, if it's here, why should we pray that it would come more? And of course the answer is there are many things that are here and yet not here. When, for example, a couple is first beginning to feel they love each other we might say they have begun to love each other; their love has come in part and yet there is much more to come. It's going to grow deeper and richer. When you embark on a new job you say, well, I've arrived, I now am in this position that I was seeking. But you're just getting started, and you're going to grow so much deeper in wisdom and knowledge and training and experience and the fruit. So it's clearly possible, the Bible speaks both ways that the kingdom is here, and yet it is to come. We are going to drink again in the kingdom. We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the kingdom. So it's both here and not here.

Now it's very important to consider what that means for us, in what sense should we pursue or seek the kingdom? How do we live as members of the kingdom? And, as always, there are several answers. One answer is, we submit to the King. We hear the good laws of the King. We follow Jesus' words. We imitate his deeds as he, in various ways, encourages us to do. We also live mindful of the fact that the King has put us — we are humble, we should be humble when we say this — has left us in charge of his kingdom. "What is man that you are mindful of him? You have put all things under his feet." And we are responsible to govern the world for God. That means, of course, that we must distinguish between, say, the kingdom and the church. The church is the focal point of the kingdom, it's the concentration point of the kingdom, it's the vanguard of the kingdom, it's the nursery of the kingdom, but it isn't the whole of the kingdom. The kingdom is manifest when we start Christian schools of any kind, that's an easy one. The kingdom is also manifest in ever-increasing circles through our life. The kingdom is manifest when we husbands and wives love our spouses, when we care for our children, when we bring some savor of Christ to our neighborhood, when we help inculcate warmth and caring, and somebody's sick and I bring them a meal and they are touched, and then before long

— this is the way my wife operates — whatever neighborhood we live in, she starts bringing people food when they are sick, when they are needy, when they are down, and then you know what? Food, within two, three, four, five years, food is going back and forth, and people are caring for each other the way they should.

And maybe most importantly in our workplaces. You work in the music industry. Your job is to make money by writing hits. It's not as easy to write hits that build people up, that maybe don't preach, but somehow reflect biblical morality. When you make cars your job is to make a profit for your corporation. When you design anything, when you put up building, when you sell advertising, no matter what you do you can do it in a way that is strictly serving yourself or your company, and exploiting or maybe indifferent to the people that you could be serving, or you could be mindful of your responsibility to bring the kingdom. We could ask this test question. When you get up in the morning, when you work throughout the day, are you answering the legitimate prayers of God's people — "Give us this day our daily bread"? Are you giving anybody their daily bread, are you giving them food, clothing, shelter, love, protection? Are you treating others as you would be treated? Does the King smile at you? Does Lord Jesus smile at you? Oh, you didn't execute your plan perfectly. But are you striving to live in a manner that's faithful to the King? And when I say in our daily work I do not mean simply our employment, the work for which we get paid, you may be paid or unpaid, you may be a volunteer, you make work in the home. But we're responsible to serve the King, the Lord Jesus in every sphere of life, beginning in the heart, visibly first in the church, and then in every sphere of life.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are reliable accounts of Jesus' life and teaching. The Holy Spirit inspired the gospel writers to record these accounts, and both biblical and extra-biblical sources attest to their trustworthiness. Although there are differences among the Gospels, these only serve to enrich their value. The Gospels are the greatest "good news" ever. They teach us about Jesus Christ and the coming of his kingdom. And they assure us that Jesus, our King and Savior, the Anointed One from David's line, has come to save us from sin and death, and to bring us life. And we should live every day in the assurance of that salvation.

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The Gospels

LESSON TWO

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW



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The Gospels

Lesson Two

The Gospel According to Matthew

INTRODUCTION

In 1919 King Albert of Belgium was traveling across the United States by train. He was something of an authority on locomotives, so for a ten-mile stretch he dressed as an engineer and ran the train. At the next stop, the cheering crowd looked for King Albert but couldn't find him. They expected the king to look a certain way, and to act in a certain way. So, they didn't realize that the tall man dressed in a flannel shirt and a railroad cap was actually the king of Belgium.

From one perspective, the Gospel of Matthew tells a similar story. It's the story of a king — Jesus, the King of the Jews. But many in his day didn't recognize him because he didn't look the way people expected him to look, and he didn't act as they expected him to act. He was a different kind of king.

This is the second lesson in our series *The Gospels*. We have entitled this lesson "The Gospel According to Matthew," because we will focus our attention on the first gospel, the book of Matthew.

Our study of Matthew's gospel will divide into three parts. First, we'll consider the background of Matthew's book. Second, we'll explore its structure and content. And third, we'll look at some major themes in Matthew's gospel. Let's begin with the background of the Gospel According to Matthew.

BACKGROUND

A lot of people ask the question, "Why do I need to know all of this contextual stuff about the Bible? Can't I just read the Bible in a good English translation and figure out what it means?" I like to say a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean. The problem is that all ancient texts are given in certain kinds of historical, literary, rhetorical, archeological, religious context, and those contexts are all different from ours. One person once said, "The past is like a foreign country. They do things differently there." The past is very different from the present and the greatest hedge we have against anachronism, a reading back into the past all of our modern assumptions, is careful contextual study of the Bible.

— Dr. Ben Witherington

It's important to understand background issues such as who the author is and what the historical context is when we're interpreting books of the Bible precisely because when authors write books, they assume that their audience is operating in a shared culture, and they take for granted that their audience is going to know much of the broader context of the statements that they make. And so, our task, in many cases, is to discern who this author is and what his culture is so that we can get some more light from the broader culture and history so that we can fill in some of these assumptions and given realities.

— Dr. James Hamilton

We'll discuss the background of Matthew's gospel in three steps. First, we'll speak of Matthew as the author of the work. Second, we'll talk about Matthew's original audience. And third, we'll look at the occasion or circumstances in which Matthew wrote. Let's turn first to the question of the author of this gospel.

AUTHOR

Whenever we study a book, or a letter, or any other writing, it's helpful to know who wrote it. After all, the more we know about an author and his context, the better prepared we are to understand his perspectives and meaning. And the same is true when we study the Bible. The more we know about biblical authors, the better prepared we are to understand the lessons they are teaching us. So, as we approach the Gospel of Matthew, one of the first questions we want to ask is "Who wrote this book?"

We'll consider the author of the *Gospel According to Matthew* in two stages. First, we'll affirm the traditional view that this book was written by the apostle Matthew, who was one of Jesus' original twelve disciples. And second, we'll explore Matthew's personal history. Let's start with the traditional view that this gospel was written by Matthew.

Traditional View

I think we can have a lot of confidence that Matthew, the apostle Matthew, really is the author of the Gospel of Matthew, though some scholars today doubt that. For one thing, we know that the early church fathers were very skeptical — in fact, that's an understatement actually — that they were absolutely opposed to accepting forgeries as being authentic, canonical works, as belonging to the inspired collection of Scriptures. Secondly, there's absolutely no competing tradition regarding the authorship of Matthew. The only tradition we have is that Matthew wrote this book. Thirdly, if the early church were going to associate the name of someone with this

gospel for anything other than historical reasons, just make up a name, or just pick one of the apostles out of a hat, to attach to this book, they made a poor choice with Matthew. The reason is because Matthew was a tax collector. He followed a profession that was absolutely despised by the Jewish people. And yet Matthew's gospel is a gospel that is written to a Jewish audience, trying to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. So we have this gospel written to Jews to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah, and they're going to pick Matthew to be the writer of this gospel? That makes no sense at all. The only reason they would associate Matthew's name with the Gospel of Matthew is if they had good, strong reason to believe that Matthew actually wrote it.

— Dr. Steve Cowan

The traditional view that Matthew wrote the first gospel comes from the earliest centuries of the church. In every ancient manuscript of this gospel that contains a title, the title attributes the book to Matthew and only to Matthew. We have no evidence that this gospel ever circulated among the churches without Matthew's name attached to it.

One of the earliest people to attribute the first gospel to Matthew was Papias of Hierapolis. Papias lived from the end of the first century into the second century. He represents viewpoints from the earliest period of the church to which we have access.

The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote around A.D. 325, recorded Papias' testimony regarding the authorship of Matthew's gospel in his *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, 39, section 16. Listen to Papias' words:

Matthew put the logia in an ordered arrangement.

Here we see that early in the second century, Papias attributed the gospel to Matthew. It's also worth noting that Eusebius quoted Papias in order to corroborate his own view that Matthew wrote the first gospel.

Another early church father — Irenaeus of Lyons — who wrote around A.D. 180, also attributed the first gospel to Matthew. Listen to what he wrote in *Against Heresies*, book 3, 1, section 1:

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church.

Tertullian lived a little later, from AD 155 to 230. He affirmed Matthew's authorship in his work *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 2:

Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us ... Luke and Mark renew it afterwards.

As far as Irenaeus and Tertullian were concerned, Matthew wrote this gospel. And their conviction was shared by the early church. Matthew's authorship of the first gospel was accepted as a certainty.

It's also important to realize that these early claims of Matthew's authorship are strengthened by Matthew's relative obscurity. Presumably, if the church or someone else had wanted to give credibility to a gospel by attributing it to an apostle of their own choosing, they would probably have chosen one of the more prominent apostles. But Matthew is rarely mentioned in the Gospels. This makes it unlikely that his name was falsely attached to this gospel.

First of all, we have to recognize the importance of eyewitness testimony in the first century. Eyewitness testimony was very highly regarded, and no one claiming eyewitness testimony was taken lightly. It's almost, if you will, a sacred category of saying things about things that happened. We also know that in the early second century, a fellow named Papias wrote that the Gospel of Matthew was by the apostle Matthew. And Papias would have very likely known apostles firsthand because of his lifespan. The final reason I would say that we can be confident that the Gospel of Matthew is by the apostle Matthew is that even though Matthew's name is not mentioned in the text of the Gospel of Matthew, the fact is that the Gospel of Matthew from our earliest records never circulated without Matthew the apostle's name associated with it as its author and authority.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

Of course, some modern critical scholars have doubted that the apostle Matthew wrote the first gospel, just as they have questioned many other traditional views of biblical authorship. But the overall strength of the ancient attestation to Matthew as the author of this gospel, together with the complete absence of any ancient challenges, gives us strong reason to believe that he wrote this book.

Now that we have looked at the traditional view that Matthew wrote this first gospel, we should turn to Matthew's personal history.

Personal History

Scripture tells us a few important facts about Matthew's personal history. For instance, it mentions that he was both a Jew and a tax collector. We'll consider both of these details, beginning with the fact that Matthew was a Jew.

Matthew's Jewish heritage is revealed in a number of ways. For one thing, he was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, who were all Jewish. For another, Matthew had Jewish names. The name Matthew is itself a Jewish name, derived from the Hebrew Old Testament. And his other name, Levi, which we find in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:28, was the name of one of the tribes of Israel. So, both names demonstrate that Matthew was

Jewish. Matthew's Jewish ancestry may also be implied by ancient Christian reports that he wrote in Hebrew.

Matthew's Jewish heritage is important background for understanding his gospel because it helps us interpret his distinctly Jewish emphasis. We'll study the Jewish character of this gospel in greater detail later in this lesson. So for now, we'll mention only one example for the sake of illustration.

In Matthew 15:24, Matthew reported that Jesus made the following claim:

I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 15:24).

More than any other gospel, Matthew emphasized that Jesus had come particularly to the nation of Israel.

Besides Matthew's Jewish heritage, another detail of his life worth noting is that he was a tax collector.

In the first century, many Jews in Palestine collected taxes on behalf of the Roman Empire. Some of these tax collectors collected tariffs on goods that moved from one area to another. They were private entrepreneurs who paid the rulers for the authority to collect taxes. They made their profit by inflating the taxes they collected from the people. As a result, these tax collectors were seen as extortionists and thieves — and this reputation was often justified.

For this reason, Jewish tax collectors were doubly guilty in the eyes of their countrymen. First, they were the agents of the hated occupying forces of Rome. And second, they robbed their own people for the sake of personal gain. In fact, they were considered to be so evil and untrustworthy that early rabbinic writings prohibited them from testifying in a Jewish court. Moreover, lying to tax collectors was approved and even praised as an act of justified rebellion.

Listen to the way Matthew recorded his own call from Jesus in Matthew 9:9-10:

Jesus ... saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples (Matthew 9:9-10).

Matthew was very candid in his description of himself, and openly admitted that he and other tax collectors were associated with "sinners" in Jesus' day. By doing so, Matthew put himself, Jesus, and his written gospel at odds with the Jewish leadership. This division is often expressed in Matthew's gospel.

For example, listen to the way Jesus criticized the Jewish leadership in Matthew 21:31-32:

I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him (Matthew 21:31-32).

Matthew's willingness to speak openly about his sinful personal history may also be related to another emphasis of his gospel, which we will look at more closely later in this lesson. Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, stressed the fact that Jesus was a humble king who called for humility in his followers. By acknowledging his past, Matthew freely admitted his own need for grace, and proclaimed his willingness to follow the King that had called and changed him. Jesus had transformed him from a sinful servant of Herod into a humble servant of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven.

In our lives, humility should look like we are glad, we are satisfied when good things are happening for other people, for ourselves as well, but when other people are progressing, when other people are in some sense finding honor or their works are shown to be fruitful, we are glad in that. We are thankful to God for that, and we want to honor and thank God in the first place. We want to live for God's sake above all, not simply for our sake. So, humility is going to be that — not looking to my interests being fulfilled, but looking, in the first place, God's interests being fulfilled, whether that's through somebody else, or through me.

— Dr. John McKinley

Now that we've concluded that the traditional view that Matthew wrote the first gospel is correct, and become familiar with a little of his personal history, we'll explore the identity of the original audience for whom Matthew wrote.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

Matthew did not specifically identify his original audience. But he did give us a few clues about them. As we'll see, Matthew appears to have written primarily for Jewish Christians.

As we mentioned in a prior lesson, all the Gospels were written specifically for Christian audiences. But several emphases in Matthew's gospel make it particularly well-suited for a Christian audience from a Jewish background. For example, Matthew quoted the Old Testament more than any other gospel writer. He frequently pointed out the ways in which Jesus fulfilled Old Testament expectations. And he especially emphasized that Jesus was the messianic King the Jews had awaited for centuries. His emphasis on Jewish issues also appears in Jesus' conflicts with the unbelieving leaders of the Jews, which Matthew described in more detail than the other gospel writers did. And Matthew also put the greatest focus on Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament law, especially as its Lord.

Later in this lesson we'll look at some of these emphases in greater detail. So, at this point, we'll simply mention two examples that suggest Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience, beginning with Matthew's use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven."

Kingdom of Heaven

In a prior lesson, we noted that all four gospels are unified by the theme of the kingdom of God. But Matthew rarely used the phrase “kingdom of *God*.” Instead he generally used the phrase “kingdom of *heaven*.” The Gospel of Matthew is the only book in the Bible that uses this terminology. And as we have seen, both phrases mean the same thing.

Out of reverence for God, the Jews often avoided using the divine name — or anything close to it — so that they would not accidentally take God’s name in vain. One way that they did this was by replacing the word “God” with the word “heaven.” And this is precisely what Matthew did when he used the phrase “kingdom of heaven.” When we compare parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels, we see that where the other gospel writers used the term “kingdom of God,” Matthew used the phrase “kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew uses the phrase, “kingdom of heaven,” almost the whole time in his gospel for what we, in the other gospels, refer to as the “kingdom of God.” I think that there’s a couple of occasions where Matthew uses the phrase, “kingdom of God,” but it’s because Matthew is a Jewish writer, a Jewish believer in Christ, and for Jews, the name of God was something almost too holy to use. So, to use the phrase “heaven” is another way of referring to God. We read in another gospel, “I have sinned against heaven and against earth.” It means, “I have sinned against God.” And, the danger is that when we hear the phrase, “kingdom of heaven,” we mishear that and think, “Oh, it sounds rather ethereal and anemic... the kingdom of heaven — can’t see that.” But in fact, he was talking about the kingdom of God, with the idea that God really now is becoming King of this world through Jesus Christ. So, there’s a real danger of Christians later to mishear “kingdom of heaven.” Actually, Jesus is saying, God is King, and is becoming King through me.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Listen to Mark’s record of the parable of the mustard seed in Mark 4:30-31:

[Jesus] said: “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground” (Mark 4:30-31).

Here Mark used the normal form of the phrase: kingdom of God. But listen to Matthew’s version of the parable in Matthew 13:31:

[Jesus] told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field” (Matthew 13:31).

When Matthew recounted this same event, he used the term “kingdom of heaven” where Mark had used the term “kingdom of God.”

When you compare what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven with other places where Mark and Luke have the very same passage and call it the kingdom of God, that’s one of the definitive ways to see that they have the same reference, that they refer to the same thing. Well, when you read Matthew overall you’ll see that there’s a major theme of contrasting God in heaven with humanity on earth. God’s way of doing kingdom, which he calls the kingdom of heaven, and humanity’s way of ruling and reigning and acting and behaving towards each other, which we might call the kingdoms of this world. And for Matthew to talk about the kingdom of heaven is a very powerful way for him to feel the difference between merely the things of this world, and our Father in heaven who reigns and rules and promises to come again. So the point of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s language is to let us feel and taste the difference between God’s reign that is still yet to come, and all the reigns and ruling and behavior of this earth, there’s a contrast between those two realities, and Matthew using “kingdom of heaven,” helps us feel and taste and hope in that time coming for God’s kingdom of heaven.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Many scholars believe that Matthew preserved the way Jesus spoke to Jewish crowds, and that Mark and other New Testament writers used the phrase “kingdom of God” in order to make Jesus’ meaning more clear to broader audiences. But whether or not this is true, Matthew’s use of the phrase “kingdom of heaven” adds weight to the view that his original audience was Jewish.

Jewish Customs

Another aspect of Matthew’s gospel that points to a Jewish audience is the way Matthew assumed that his audience had substantial knowledge of Jewish customs. As just one example, in Matthew 15:1-2, Matthew recorded this event:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” (Matthew 15:1-2).

Mark included this same story in 7:1-5 of his gospel. But Mark added a three-verse explanation of the Jewish custom of hand washing so that his Roman audience would

understand the custom. Matthew felt no need to add that sort of explanation for his audience.

Now, assuming that Matthew did write for a Jewish audience, there is one characteristic of his gospel that seems to be out of place. In a few instances, Matthew quoted Jesus speaking in Aramaic, and then translated those Aramaic words into the language of his audience.

For example, listen to the words of Matthew 27:46:

Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” — which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

There are a variety of explanations for why Matthew might have written in this way, even if his audience were primarily Jewish. First, even though his audience was primarily Jewish, it was not exclusively Jewish. So, he may have included these translations for the non-Jews among his readers. Second, Matthew’s audience may have included people living outside Palestine that did not know Aramaic. And third, Matthew may simply have copied the information from another source. For example, the translation from Matthew 27:46 also appears in Mark 15:34, which Matthew may have used as a source.

In all events, the weight of evidence strongly suggests that Matthew wrote his gospel primarily for Jewish Christians, in order to strengthen their faith in Jesus by addressing many issues that were particularly important to them.

Now that we have investigated the author and audience of the first gospel, we’re ready to examine the occasion of its composition.

OCCASION

When we speak of the “occasion” of a book, we have in mind several things that are related to its historical context — things like its date of composition, its location of composition, the location of its intended audience, and the purpose for which it was written. Knowing when, where, to whom, and why a book was written gives us a lot of information about its context. It helps us understand its historical setting, its grammar and vocabulary, its religious and social assumptions, and its rhetorical strategies. And in turn, this information helps us understand and apply the book.

We’ll consider three aspects of the occasion for the writing of Matthew’s gospel: first, the date of the writing; second, the location of both the author and audience; and third, the purpose for which Matthew wrote. Let’s begin with the date of Matthew’s gospel.

Date

First, as the majority of scholars believe, Matthew probably used the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources. As we will see in a later lesson, it’s likely that Mark was

written around A.D. 64. If this is correct, the earliest date at which Matthew probably wrote was the mid-to-late 60s.

Second, Matthew was an apostle of Jesus. This means that he was already an adult by the time he engaged in ministry with Jesus, probably by the year A.D. 30. So, unless Matthew lived an extraordinarily long life, the latest date at which he could have written would be around the end of the first century.

This gives us a fairly wide range in which Matthew might have written. But we can narrow down the likely dates within this range by noticing a particular detail in Matthew's writing. Specifically, Matthew frequently referred to the temple, as well as to the Sadducees, who were closely associated with the temple. Some of these references are largely historical, but a few references suggest that both the temple and the Sadducees were still significant factors at the time that Matthew wrote. Since the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, these references make the most sense if Matthew wrote before then.

In light of all the evidence, it seems best to conclude that Matthew wrote his gospel in the late 60s, perhaps around A.D. 67 or 68. Certainty in this matter is not possible. But fortunately, while it is helpful to know the approximate time when Matthew wrote, the precise dating of his gospel is rarely if ever critical to the interpretation of his teachings.

Now that we've looked at the date of the writing of this gospel, let's turn to the question of the geographical location of the author and audience.

Location

We should start by noting that scholars have debated the location of this gospel, so we should not be dogmatic in our conclusions. Even so, there are a number of details worth noting.

To begin with, because Matthew wrote primarily to Jewish Christians, it's most likely that he addressed his gospel to a group that lived in an area with a significant Jewish population. Palestine is one obvious possibility, since this was the traditional homeland of the Jews, and since they were concentrated there.

But parts of Syria also had substantial Jewish populations. And Ignatius, who was the bishop of Antioch in Syria, is the earliest of the Church Fathers to demonstrate familiarity with Matthew's gospel. For this reason, a number of scholars have argued that Matthew wrote to believers in Syrian Antioch.

And of course, we can't rule out the possibility that Matthew had a wider audience in mind, writing to Jewish Christians in general, throughout the Mediterranean world.

Palestine, Syria, or any other area with a significant Jewish population within the Roman Empire would be a fitting destination for a gospel with the strong Jewish character of Matthew.

During the first century A.D., the Jewish people were spread around much of the Roman Empire, and indeed, to the further east as well. This goes back a long time. Ever since the time of the Babylonian exile there have been Jews living outside the land of Palestine. And they

continued to live over there in the Far East, as it were. That's in Mesopotamia, modern Iraq. Then they come to Syria, Damascus, and then the Diaspora — that's the name for the spreading or the dispersion of the Jewish people — well, it spreads further west into Asia Minor, modern Turkey, and as far as Rome — the Jewish population there by the River Tiber in Rome — and not forgetting North Africa as well. We read in the Gospels of Simon of Cyrene coming from... to Jerusalem from North Africa. So, imagine the whole of the eastern half of the Roman Empire and to the further east, that's where the Jews are living.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Now that we have spoken of both the date and location of Matthew's gospel, we can consider Matthew's purpose in writing his gospel.

Purpose

Broadly speaking, Matthew wrote because the true history of who Jesus was and what he had done was critically important. But he also had narrower, more immediate goals. Specifically, Matthew wrote to Jewish Christians in order to nurture their faith in Jesus as their messianic King.

At the time that Matthew wrote, Jewish converts to Christianity were strongly rejected by Jewish authorities, and often by former friends and family members. The book of Acts makes it clear that in the Mediterranean world of that day, persecution had become a way of life for Jewish Christians.

As we read in Acts 8:1:

Great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).

Because of persecution, Jews who followed Jesus as their Messiah certainly faced the temptation to return to their former lives and abandon Christianity. In response to this temptation, Matthew wrote to remind them that Jesus was the true Messiah who had brought the kingdom of heaven. His gospel was a story of encouragement, a story of comfort. But it was also a story of challenge because Jesus had not brought the kingdom in the way many of them had expected, and the demands of the kingdom were great.

In this context, Matthew reassured his readers that Jesus had begun to fulfill the Old Testament expectations for the messianic kingdom. At the same time, the kingdom of heaven was not yet complete. So, Matthew also wrote to encourage Jewish believers to remain faithful until the King himself returned to make everything right — until the time that Jesus destroyed the enemies of his kingdom, and welcomed his faithful people into the full experience of his kingdom blessings.

This is why Matthew so often mentioned the theme of the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he used the words “king” and “kingdom” over 75 times in his gospel. The other three gospel writers together used them fewer than 110 times. For Matthew, the best way to encourage and challenge his Jewish audience was to tell them the story of their messianic King and his kingdom.

In Matthew’s gospel we find a great emphasis on the kingdom of heaven. Matthew begins his gospel with the lineage of Jesus with the intent of showing that Jesus is the rightful heir, the Davidic king. This Davidic king is Jesus of Nazareth. His audience, his original audience, was primarily a Jewish audience, we believe, and this book is to say to the people, “Here’s your rightful king.” And he emphasizes the kingdom of heaven in its concrete manifestation as he demonstrates in this gospel that this term “kingdom of heaven” refers to Christ’s rule over all people and all spheres. It is a question of authority. The Pharisees and the Sadducees always asked Jesus, “By what authority do you do these things?” The gospel ends with the words Jesus said, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and in earth.” And this kingdom idea is much more than the nationalistic, Davidic king that the people had come to expect and to look for. This is the statement that Matthew makes that Christ is king over every square inch of creation.

— Rev. Jim Maples

Now that we have studied the background of Matthew’s gospel, let’s turn to the structure and content of the gospel.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

There is considerable agreement among scholars about some of the features of the structure of the Gospel of Matthew. And this agreement is due to the fact that Matthew has given us a very helpful key. At five different points, he uses a phrase such as, “When Jesus had finished saying these things...” to indicate major transitions in the gospel. Sometimes a statement like this appears as the last sentence of a division, and at other times it’s the first sentence of a new division. But it always indicates a major transition.

Following these structural markers, most scholars agree that the Gospel of Matthew divides into seven sections. There are five major sections set off by transitional statements in Matthew 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, and 26:1. And Matthew also included an introductory narrative, and a concluding narrative.

- The gospel begins with a narrative introduction that presents Jesus as the messianic King in Matthew 1:1–2:23.
- The first major division describes the gospel of the kingdom in Matthew 3:1–7:29.
- The second major division focuses on the spread of the kingdom in Matthew 8:1–11:1.
- The third major division records the signs and parables of the kingdom in Matthew 11:2–13:53.
- The fourth major division of Matthew’s account focuses on faith and greatness beginning in 13:54 and continuing through 18:35.
- The fifth and last major division is about the present opposition to the kingdom and the future victory of the kingdom in Matthew 19:1–25:46.
- Finally, there is a conclusion that narrates the King’s death and resurrection in Matthew 26:1–28:20.

Each of these sections of Matthew’s gospel furthers the story of Jesus, the messianic King that brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Let’s take a closer look at each of these sections, beginning with the introduction in Matthew 1:1–2:23.

INTRODUCTION: THE MESSIANIC KING

The Introduction to Matthew’s gospel introduces us to Jesus as the messianic King, and is made up of two sections: a genealogy and an infancy narrative.

Genealogy

The genealogy is found in Matthew 1:1-17. Technically, the first verse is actually an introduction or title, in which Matthew summarized his main point, namely, that Jesus is the messianic King of Israel.

Matthew 1:1 reads as follows:

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).

From the very beginning, Matthew placed special emphasis on David the King of Israel, and on Abraham the father of the Jewish people.

Following this introductory statement, the genealogy itself begins in verse 2. According to Matthew 1:17, the genealogy is arranged in three segments, each containing fourteen generations. The first began with God’s covenant with Abraham, in which Abraham was promised that his descendants would rule the world.

The second segment begins with King David and with God’s promise to fulfill his covenant with Abraham by establishing David’s dynasty forever. This second segment

ends with God's people being exiled from the Promised Land because of their sin and covenant breaking.

The third segment of the genealogy runs from the exile to the birth of Jesus. Israel had broken God's covenant and fallen under his covenant curses. But God still intended to bless Israel by fulfilling the promises he had made to Abraham and David. The past kings of Israel had failed. But now the last King of Israel, the one who would fulfill Israel's destiny, had finally come.

The list of Jesus' ancestors ends in Matthew 1:16, where we read these words:

Jacob [was] the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ (Matthew 1:16).

In this way, Matthew proved that Jesus had a fully legal claim to David's throne through his father Joseph.

The Messiah had to be a descendant of David because of prophetic revelation basically because it was predicted so. And that goes all the way back to Genesis where the tribe of Judah is prophesied to be the one through whom the kingship would come. That prophecy was, of course, fulfilled in David, King David, himself, who was the greatest king of Israel. Every king that followed David was compared to him either favorably or unfavorably. Then, of course, we have the covenant made with David himself. When David proposed to Nathan, the prophet, to build a house for the Lord, to build the temple, Nathan came back and said, "You're not going to build a house for the Lord; the Lord is going to build a house for you." And by house, he meant dynasty. It's in 2 Samuel 7, and that prophecy that God would build a house for him, would establish his kingdom forever, that his descendant would reign forever on David's throne, became the foundation for the messianic prophecies that followed. And so, when the prophets referred back after the collapse — especially of the Davidic dynasty, the Davidic kingdom — when they referred back and looked forward to the hope that God would restore the glories of the Davidic dynasty, it was through the line of David that God would raise up a king. And so the King, the Messiah, had to come through the line of David.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

Following Jesus' genealogy, we find his infancy narrative.

Infancy Narrative

Jesus' infancy narrative runs from Matthew 1:18–2:23. This section is fairly brief, only 31 verses, compared to 116 verses in the Gospel of Luke. In this section, Matthew's

purpose was quite limited. Each of the five short paragraphs was designed to focus attention on one central fact: Jesus the Messiah had been born. Each paragraph tells a brief story, and then explains how that story fulfills the Old Testament expectations for the Messiah.

One of the most interesting things we learn in Jesus' infancy narrative is that he didn't have a human father. Instead, God was his father — literally. The Holy Spirit caused Mary to conceive Jesus even though she was still a virgin.

Now, some critics of Christianity have suggested that this is a weakness in Jesus' genealogy, since he wasn't physically a descendant of Joseph, through whom he claimed the throne of David. But it's a well-recognized fact that biblical genealogies, such as those in 1 Chronicles 1–9, often trace ancestries through adoptive parents.

Moreover, because Jesus was the Son of God, he was also fully divine. And this meant that he was able to keep God's covenant perfectly. Merely human kings had never perfectly obeyed God's covenant. And therefore, they had never been able to inherit the full covenant blessings God had promised to Abraham and David. So, God sent his perfect Son to be King, in order to ensure that his covenant would be kept, so that his promises of blessing would be fulfilled.

It's very clear that the Messiah comes through David's line as human. And there's a lot of important truths there. But it's also crucial to realize that the Messiah also has to be God, has to be divine. Why is that the case? Well, ultimately it's because our problem as human beings before God is that we have sinned against him. He must provide the answer. He must provide the solution. The problem of forgiveness that we want to sometimes speak about, is that our sin before God isn't something that he can overlook. It's not something that he can say, "I'll grade on the curve," or "You do your best." God is a holy God. God is righteous and just. We cannot simply have him overlook our sin. That would be a denial of himself. So, for him to forgive us, he must take the initiative. He must provide, ultimately, the solution to the satisfaction of his own righteous requirements. God himself must do it. Now, when you read the Old Testament, this comes through over and over again. You think of, say, of Jonah 2:9: "Salvation is of the Lord." It's God himself that must provide. It's God himself that must provide the solution. It's God himself that must forgive. So that if there is going to be salvation through the Messiah, he must represent us — be human. Yet, he also must be the Lord. The Lord who comes. The Lord who saves. The Lord who satisfies his holiness and righteousness, and that is why the Messiah must be divine.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

In the introduction to his gospel, Matthew presented Jesus as the messianic King, the royal Son of David who received all the blessings God had promised to Abraham and

the people of Israel. In this way, Matthew set the stage for the amazing good news that is the subject of the rest of his book.

Following the introduction are the five major literary divisions of the gospel. Each of these five divisions is composed of two parts: a narrative section, in which Matthew described what Jesus did, followed by a discourse section, in which Matthew reported what Jesus said.

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

The first major division of Matthew's gospel tells the story of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. This section extends from Matthew 3:1–7:29.

The Messiah had Come

The narrative portion begins in Matthew 3:1 and ends in 4:25. Here, Matthew proclaimed that the messianic King had come, and that he had brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

The first section of the narrative is Matthew 3:1-12, where John the Baptist announced that God's Messiah would soon come and baptize his faithful people with the Holy Spirit. For 400 years, the Holy Spirit had been relatively inactive in Israel because of God's judgment against his wayward people. But now, just as Old Testament prophets had predicted, a new day was about to dawn when God's Spirit would be poured out.

The narrative continues with Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13-17. In this event, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, anointing him for his messianic ministry, and the Father announced from heaven, "This is my Son," applying to Jesus the royal title from Psalm 2:7.

The divine voice also alluded to the suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1-2 by describing Jesus as the one "whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Jesus was the royal Messiah, but he would be a different kind of King. He would fulfill his calling through suffering.

In the next story in the narrative, found in Matthew 4:1-11, Satan challenged Jesus' commitment to this role of a royal suffering Messiah. Three times he tempted Jesus to be a Messiah without suffering, essentially saying, "Don't be hungry like a man. Astonish people into believing without pain. Rule the nations without suffering." But each time Jesus rejected the easy path that would have denied the character of his suffering messiahship.

Then in Matthew 4:12-17, Jesus began his public messianic mission by preaching the gospel of the kingdom.

Listen to how Matthew summarized Jesus' message in Matthew 4:17:

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17).

According to Matthew, the good news that Jesus preached was that the kingdom of heaven was near — that through his own ministry, Jesus was about to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. And this kingdom was available to all who would repent of their sin and faithfully follow Jesus as king.

The “kingdom of heaven” is used in Matthew’s gospel, and only in Matthew’s gospel, I think synonymously with the “kingdom of God.” I would agree with most scholars who say there’s no difference between them. The fact that it is described by Jesus as being near, or as some translations have it, “at hand,” indicates that the end-time rule of God has in some sense already come in the person and work of Jesus. But there’s a sense in which it awaits its completion. The technical term is “consummation,” which will happen at the second coming of Christ, so that Christians then live in a rather — to use a technical expression — a rather dialectical existence. They have one foot in God’s end time kingdom, but there is another foot that is not yet within God’s end time kingdom. And a great deal of the challenge of Christian discipleship is negotiating in terms of life and life decisions and how we think about life, what it means that the kingdom of heaven is already here in some sense and what it means on the other hand that it is not yet fully appeared.

— Dr. David Bauer

When Jesus went preaching from village to village in the Gospels, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand,” or “is near,” he was saying a couple of things. He was saying, first of all, that in him the kingdom of God was present, was in their midst. And that’s something that he showed and demonstrated by his authoritative teaching, by casting out demons and taking authority over the demons, and also through his healing ministry as well. So, the first thing Jesus was saying was that the kingdom and the authority of the King is present in me, right here in your midst. But the other thing that he was saying is that the kingdom is coming; the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness, but at one time in the future the fullness of God’s reign will be visible to everyone. So that’s what Jesus was talking about when he was saying, “the kingdom of God is near.” So, by calling people to repent because the kingdom of God was near, he was calling them to submit to the king, that by their submission, by their obedience, by literally following the King they were then being incorporated, or reincorporated, into the covenant people of God. So, it’s that sort of submission to the King that is signified by repentance.

— Dr. Greg Perry

In Matthew 4:18-22, Jesus called his disciples. The picture is one of the messianic King recruiting the leaders of his kingdom.

Following this, in Matthew 4:23-25, Matthew gave a preview of the next two sections of the gospel. He announced that Jesus traveled throughout Galilee teaching and healing the crowds. Matthew 5–7 illustrate Jesus' teaching, while chapters 8–9 illustrate his healing.

Now that we've looked at Matthew's narrative on the gospel of the kingdom, let's turn to the accompanying discourse that appears in Matthew 5:1–7:29.

Sermon on the Mount

This discourse is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. In this teaching, Jesus described the righteous lives of kingdom citizens. He explicitly mentioned the kingdom seven times, and the entire sermon revolves around this theme.

Time after time, Jesus stressed that the challenges of righteousness were far greater than the leaders of Judaism had imagined. He also stressed that the heavenly Father of the citizens of the kingdom was closer and more ready to bless than they ever imagined. It's the combination of these twin thoughts that gives the sermon its distinctive character.

Consider just one example from the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus' teaching on adultery. Jesus taught that the law of God demanded more than a surface reading might indicate, and more than the Jewish teachers commonly taught.

Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28:

You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28).

When Jesus referred to what was "said," he was talking about common interpretations of Scripture among the Jewish rabbis of the day. Some rabbis taught that the Old Testament commandments prohibited adultery, but they failed to address the more fundamental issue of the human heart. But Jesus pointed out something that was true even in the days of the Old Testament: God is not just interested in controlling outward behavior; he wants obedience to begin in the heart.

I think sometimes we can have a perspective on the Old Testament versus the New Testament where we think, in the Old Testament God required these external signs: he wanted people to be circumcised, he wanted sacrifice, he wanted them to observe special days. And that was a sort of an external religious expression. And then in the New Testament this is now as a religion of the heart. God wants our hearts; he wants our affections. But that won't work, I don't think, when one begins to look closely at the material in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. The prophet Joel, for example, says, "Rend your hearts, not your garments," which is a direct statement against an

external religion, where God didn't just want their external forms of expression to him, but he wanted their hearts, he wanted what was internal to them, what made them who they were. You see this as well, for example, in Psalm 103. "Bless the Lord, O my soul. All that is within me bless his holy name." I mean, here the psalmist is calling on the people of God to bless him, to worship the Lord with everything that makes them who they are. So, this sort of idea that the affections is something that's in the New Testament and heartfelt religion's not in the Old Testament, doesn't do justice to the full orb'd reality of God's covenantal involvement with his people in the Old Testament.

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience led him to describe the citizens of the kingdom as "meek" in 5:5, as "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" in 5:6, and as "pure in heart" in 5:8. Now, of course, Jesus knew that his followers would not be completely changed into these kinds of citizens until the kingdom of heaven had come in all its fullness. But he still exhorted them to be righteous before then. Listen to what he said in Matthew 5:48:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

In one sense, this command is impossible to fulfill — no one can be as perfect as God is. But that shouldn't lead us to despair. On the contrary, Jesus also gave us a gracious, encouraging promise. Throughout his sermon, he assured his faithful followers that the kingdom already belongs to us.

For instance, in the Beatitudes, found in Matthew 5:3-10, we find eight blessings. The six in the middle promise that the blessings will be received on that future day when the kingdom of heaven comes in all its fullness. But the first and the last blessings are different — Jesus said his people already have these blessings of the kingdom.

Listen to the way Jesus stated these blessings in Matthew 5:3, 10:

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3, 10).**

The truly great challenge of following Jesus is matched by the equally great promise that God's kingdom power is already transforming us into righteous citizens of his kingdom.

In the first major division of his gospel, Matthew emphasized the gospel of the kingdom by drawing attention to the purpose and message of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was the messianic King that brought the kingdom of heaven to the people of God. He taught them about the life-transforming power of that kingdom. And he promised them that if they were faithful, they would inherit the great blessings of the kingdom when it came in all of its fullness.

THE SPREAD OF THE KINGDOM

The second major division of Matthew's gospel deals with the spread of the kingdom. It extends from Matthew 8:1–11:1.

Jesus' Miracles and Reactions

The narrative dealing with the spread of the kingdom runs from Matthew 8:1–9:38. It consists of stories about Jesus' miracles and the reactions that different people had to his miracles.

This narrative section divides into eleven segments involving Jesus and a leper in 8:1-4, a centurion's servant in 8:5-13, Peter's mother-in-law in 8:14-17, a storm in 8:18-27, two demoniacs in 8:28-34, a paralytic in 9:1-8, tax collectors and sinners in 9:9-17, a girl and a woman in 9:18-26, two blind men in 9:27-31, and another demoniac in 9:32-34. Then this section ends with a depiction of Jesus' compassion in 9:35-38.

Time will only permit us to make a few observations about these events in Jesus' life. He exercised his kingdom power over sickness by healing a leper in 8:1-4, a centurion's servant in 8:5-13, and Peter's mother-in-law in 8:14-17, a paralytic in 9:1-8, a hemorrhaging woman in 9:20-22, and two blind men in 9:27-31.

He also brought a dead girl back to life in Matthew 9:18-26, proving that he even had power and authority over death itself. Jesus demonstrated his control over nature by calming the storm in Matthew 8:23-27.

Beyond this, Jesus demonstrated his power over the kingdom of Satan by driving demons out of two men who lived among the tombs in Matthew 8:28-34, and out of a man who couldn't speak in 9:32-34. The call of Matthew as a disciple introduces a larger segment in dealing with Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners in 9:9-17. Jesus called Matthew to leave his life as a tax collector and to begin a new life. This change was nothing short of a miracle. The transformation of tax collectors and sinners was so astonishing that Matthew immediately moved to Jesus feasting with tax collectors and sinners so much that he had to explain the reason for their joy.

In addition to focusing on Jesus' power, Matthew also called attention to the crowds' reaction to Jesus' power. Simply put, they were amazed. We see this in places like Matthew 8:27, 34, and 9:8, 26, 31, and 33. And their amazement most commonly led them to oppose Jesus.

Some opposed Jesus simply by disbelieving. Others — especially the Jewish leaders — criticized him openly. Some feared Jesus, as in Matthew 8:34. Others were horrified and shocked, as in Matthew 9:3. Occasionally, the opposition to Jesus seems to have been well-intentioned, as in 9:14 — though it was still wrong. And sometimes people opposed Jesus because they willfully rejected what they knew to be true, as in Matthew 9:34. Sadly, opposition to Jesus became more and more prominent as Jesus' ministry continued.

Probably one of the greatest puzzles, when you look at the New Testament, is how the people could reject Christ when they saw with their own eyes the miracles. The people were amazed, the Scripture

says, over and over at what he did. When we consider that question, how could they do that, I think we need to look at Matthew 22:29. Jesus said to the Pharisees you are in error because you do not know the Scripture or the power of God. Now he, in that context, specifically addressed the Sadducees, but I think the same could be said of the Pharisees, the teachers of the law. They had taught the people in error; the expectations for the Messiah who was to come had been shaped by incorrect teaching. I think there is a great lesson for us there today — people who mishandle the Word of God and incorrectly teach the people, set up false expectations on the part of people. And I think that is exactly what happened in the first century in Israel. They had expected a messiah to come, and it was a nationalistic triumphalism, you might say. And Jesus came. Even though he did things they had never seen and would never see again, they ended up rejecting him because the attacks of the leaders upon Christ always sought to discredit his miracles. They wanted to put him in a league with Satan as the means of doing these things. And this eventually, sad to say, the decades, the generations, of incorrect teaching, the attacks of those in positions of authority, religious authority, eventually turned the hearts of many of the people away from Christ in spite of the miracles that they saw.

— Rev. Jim Maples

Matthew closed this narrative section on Jesus' powerful miracles in 9:35-38 by describing Jesus' compassion for the crowds. Listen to this account in Matthew 9:36-38.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:36-38).

Jesus understood that one reason his people did not receive him as king was that they had been mistreated and poorly taught by many of their leaders. But he also knew that his miracles were softening their hearts, and inclining them to follow him. So he instructed his disciples to pray that God would raise up evangelists and righteous leaders — men who would bring the lost into God's heavenly kingdom on earth, and teach them how to be its righteous citizens.

Emissaries of the King

Having explored Matthew's narrative on the spread of the kingdom, let's turn to the corresponding discourse in Matthew 10:1–11:1. This discourse focuses on the disciples as emissaries, or representatives, of the king.

In this section, Jesus answered the challenge that he had posed at the end of the preceding narrative. After commanding his followers to pray for God to raise up evangelists and leaders, Jesus extended his personal kingdom ministry by empowering twelve disciples for ministry, and commanding them to announce the presence of the kingdom in word and deed, just as he himself had done.

As we read in Matthew 10:7-8, Jesus commissioned them with these words:

**As you go, preach this message: “The kingdom of heaven is near.”
Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons (Matthew 10:7-8).**

Jesus gave his disciples many warnings before he sent them out. Life would not be easy when they followed Jesus’ example. The world would not be kind to them. They would suffer. They would be mocked, arrested, and killed.

But Jesus also promised that their ministry would be blessed by their heavenly Father and that eventually the life of the kingdom would be theirs. Listen to how Jesus reassured his disciples in Matthew 10:39:

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:39).

Jesus’ disciples were abandoning their prior lives for the sake of Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry. But Jesus assured them that they would find true kingdom life in the company of King Jesus himself.

In this second major division of the gospel, we’ve seen that Matthew described the spread of the kingdom especially in terms of Jesus’ works of power, and Jesus’ instructions to his disciples. And this provides a good model for our own ministry in the modern church. As we rely on Jesus’ power and serve him as faithful disciples, Jesus will build his kingdom through us as well, and reward us with heavenly blessings.

SIGNS AND PARABLES

The third major division of Matthew’s gospel continues the display of the King and his kingdom through both signs and parables, and is found in Matthew 11:2–13:53.

Signs and Reactions

Matthew’s narrative focuses on the signs Jesus performed and reactions to his signs and extends from Matthew 11:2–12:50. These signs demonstrated that the King and his kingdom were present, and corrected false expectations of what the kingdom would look like. As a result, the criticism that had already taken root began to grow and spread.

This series of episodes divides into five segments: In 11:2-19, Jesus assured John the Baptist that his signs proved that he was the Messiah who fulfilled Old Testament

prophecies, and Jesus called for the crowds to respond to his signs with repentance. In 11:20-30 Jesus addressed the cities where he had performed miracles, and he warned the unrepentant and offered rest to those who would come to him. As he put it in Matthew 11:30:

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:30).

In 12:1-21, Matthew begins several episodes that focused explicitly on the reactions of the Pharisees to Jesus' signs. First, he reported how Jesus disputed with the Pharisees about God's purposes for the Sabbath and demonstrated his authority by healing a man on the Sabbath. Jesus taught that the Sabbath is for healing and saving lives.

In 12:22-37, the Pharisees accused Jesus of using the power of Beelzebub, even as the crowds were astonished by his miracles. Rather than receiving him as the Messiah, the teachers of the law believed he was possessed by the devil.

In 12:38-50, the Pharisees hypocritically demanded another sign, but Jesus warned that they would only receive the sign of Jonah. And what was this sign? Much like Jonah's exit from the huge fish after three days led to the repentance of Gentiles in Nineveh, Jesus' future resurrection after three days in the earth would lead to the repentance of many more Gentiles.

To demonstrate how God would receive anyone from any nationality who repented, Jesus even went so far as to say that his natural Jewish mother and brothers were not his family. Rather, as he put it in Matthew 12:49-50:

Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother (Matthew 12:49-50).

Now that we've looked at Matthew's narrative of the signs that Jesus performed, let's turn to his discourse on Jesus' kingdom parables in Matthew 13:1-53.

Kingdom Parables

Matthew's account reports Jesus' well-known parables in five segments. The parable of the sower in 13:1-23, the parable of the weeds in 13:24-30, the mustard seed and the yeast in 13:31-43, the hidden treasure and pearl in 13:44-46, and the parable of the net in 13:47-53. These parables were designed to correct misunderstandings that explained the kingdom of God.

In some of the parables — such as the parables of the mustard seed in 13:31-32, the yeast in verse 33, the treasure in verse 44, and the pearl in verses 45-46 — Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven was of supreme value and was to be sought at all cost. It might look insignificant at first, but one day it would be seen in all of its glory.

But Jesus also told other parables that focused on Israel's failure to embrace King Jesus and his kingdom. In the parable of the sower and its explanation in Matthew 13:1-

23, Jesus made it clear that there were many obstacles to belief, and that most people would reject the kingdom.

This idea is reinforced by the parable of the weeds in verses 24-30 and 36-43, and the parable of the net in verses 47-51. Jesus taught that many would refuse to embrace the kingdom and would be destroyed in the end. These parables were clear warnings to those who opposed Jesus; they provided an opportunity for unbelievers to repent, and to become faithful followers of the one true King.

Christ has come. He has fulfilled the prophecies; he has brought his kingdom to pass. Yet, it still awaits its culmination. We as Christians, we enter into that kingdom, but we need to constantly be reevaluating in terms of our priorities, repenting of not following him as we ought, making sure that we are faithfully seeking to live out our lives in conformity to his will, agreeing with him in terms of his values, what the kingdom is all about. So, there's a constant need for repentance, confession, coming to him as a Prophet, as well as Priest, as well as King, the one that we then seek to follow and serve in such a way where we carry out his purposes for us in this world.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

We are to encourage Christians to pursue and long for the coming of God's kingdom. First, in the personal dimension, the authority of the kingdom of heaven is our power in life. It motivates us to submit to God, and live a God-centered life, so that the authority of God manifested in our lives would become the goal of our spiritual lives. Second, we need to learn the concept of the kingdom of heaven in view of redemptive history. As we learn how it begins, uncovers, and completes his redemptive plan. Then we will see that the teachings of the kingdom of heaven unify the Old and New Testament. They help us to see the grand blue print of our redeeming God and easily grasp his comprehensive purpose. Third, the kingdom of heaven creates a right biblical world-view, and helps us to see that all things belong to God. His kingdom will come to completion, and he will judge and wipe out all the evil powers on earth because God himself is the absolute King. So, we no longer live just for ourselves. We want to care for our neighbors, society, and the well-being of this world. We ought to pay attention to the things, either near or far from us. We ought to enter into the society and transform all aspects accordingly, as our duty.

— Dr. Stephen Chan, translation

FAITH AND GREATNESS

The fourth major division of Matthew's account focuses on faith and greatness beginning in 13:54 and continuing through 18:35. This division reveals what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus who reaches greatness in his kingdom.

Resisting Faith in Jesus

The narrative portion of this section runs from 13:54–17:27 and includes thirteen episodes that report different ways in which all but one woman resisted putting their full faith in Jesus.

The first two episodes focus on two times when faith in Jesus was entirely rejected. First, when Jesus came to his hometown in Nazareth, in 13:54-58, his former neighbors did not dispute his ability to do miracles. But they still took offense and rejected him. In 13:58 we read that the people of Nazareth did not receive many miracles because they lacked faith.

Next, 14:1-12 is about Herod and the death of John the Baptist. Herod deserved the judgment of God for what he did to John. But more than this, verse 1 explains that Herod did not dispute the reports of Jesus' miracles. Instead, his advisors believed that Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead to trouble Herod.

The next three episodes focus on Jesus' disciples and how they needed to grow in faith. Matthew 14:13-21 is the story of Jesus feeding five thousand. Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd that followed him, but in verse 15 his disciples doubted and complained that he had too little food. So, Jesus proved his power by multiplying their food and feeding five thousand with plenty to spare.

In 14:22-36, Jesus walked on water. At first, Peter showed confidence in Jesus by stepping out of the boat, but Peter doubted when he saw the danger and began to sink into the sea. After rescuing him, Jesus commented in verse 31, "You of little faith... why did you doubt?"

Chapter 15:1-20 reports a conflict between Jesus and some Pharisees. Peter asked Jesus for an explanation of something simple that Jesus had said. So, in verse 16, Jesus replied disapprovingly, "Are you still so dull?"

In 15:21-28, we have the only time in these episodes when someone firmly believed in Jesus — a Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter. Unlike others, she begged Jesus to help her. And in verse 28 Jesus responded approvingly by saying, "Woman, you have great faith!"

Matthew then returned to the weak faith of Jesus' disciples. In 15:29-39, he wrote about the feeding of four thousand. In verse 33, the disciples asked where they could find enough food, even though they had seen Jesus feed five thousand earlier.

In 16:1-12, Jesus debated with the Pharisees and Sadducees. At one point, he turned to his disciples and warned them of "the yeast of the Pharisees," and they thought he was angry because they had not brought bread with them. But Jesus reminded them of the times when he had made bread for thousands, and in verse 8 he called his disciples, "you of little faith."

Following this, we find two closely related episodes. On the one hand, Peter's well-known confession of faith in 16:13-20. In 16:16, Peter declared of Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus praised and blessed Peter for his faith.

But on the other hand, in 16:21-27, Jesus rebuked Peter just as strongly. Jesus began to tell the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. When Peter objected, Jesus replied harshly in verse 23: "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus explained that Peter was thinking like men and not like God.

Following this rebuke, we come to Jesus' transfiguration in 17:1-13. When the disciples saw Jesus in his glory, they wanted to build a shrine at the place. But in verse 12, Jesus reminded them that his true glory would be seen only after he died and was resurrected.

In 17:14-23, we read of a young demoniac. Jesus' disciples had tried but failed to cast out the demon. After doing it himself Jesus said in verse 20, "You have too little faith."

Finally, in 17:24-27, collectors came to Jesus' disciples and asked if Jesus paid the temple tax. Peter replied quickly, and probably out of fear, that Jesus did pay. Then later Peter came to Jesus for the money, and Jesus provided by performing a miracle and explained that Peter had no reason to be concerned.

Matthew mentioned those who rejected Jesus and the believing Canaanite woman, but his main focus was on the need for his disciples to grow in their faith in him.

Once again, Matthew followed his narratives with Jesus' discourse in 18:1-35. This discourse focuses on true greatness in the family of God's kingdom, greatness that comes from humble service among the brothers and sisters of God's kingdom.

Greatness in the Kingdom Family

In the last segment of the previous chapter, Jesus spoke of his followers as sons of God, the King. This identification led Matthew to begin this portion of his gospel with a key question. As we read in Matthew 18:1:

Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:1).

Jesus answered this question by mixing instructions with illustrations and parables in four main parts. First, in 18:2-4, Jesus exhorted his disciples to live in humility as little children.

In the face of increasing opposition from his enemies, Jesus taught his disciples how to live in the kingdom of heaven as children of God. He knew that the future consummation of the kingdom had not yet arrived. And he knew that struggles against enemies and sin would be a part of life for God's children.

And in verses 5-14, he taught them to care for the weak like their heavenly Father cared for his lost sheep. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 18:10, 14:

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones... [Y]our Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost (Matthew 18:10, 14).

Jesus built on this idea in Matthew 18:15-20, where he demanded that his followers deal with each other as members of the family of God even when sin disrupted their relationships. And in verses 21-35, he insisted that they forgive the sinning “brother” the same way their heavenly Father had forgiven them.

God’s glory continues to increase in our own day, because God continues to do many mighty works and to grow his kingdom on earth. But just as in Jesus’ day, this often means that resistance to God is increasing as well. Thankfully, God gives us many precious gifts to help us in our struggles with hardships and temptations. Among these gifts are endurance and peace, and even his immediate presence with us. And one of the most special gifts is our relationship to God as our Father. God cares for us and protects us, and he understands and sympathizes with our weakness. And he also gives us a family of human beings that can minister to us and love us — the church, our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

PRESENT OPPOSITION AND FUTURE VICTORY

The theme of the fifth major division of Matthew’s gospel is the present opposition to the kingdom of heaven, and its future victory. This narrative extends from 19:1–22:46 and shows how Jesus faced great opposition at this point in his life.

Intensifying Opposition

These chapters divide into three main sections based on Jesus’ movement. In 19:1–20:16, Jesus faced opposition in Judea. There he dealt with Pharisees and the question of divorce. He also dealt with opposition that grew out of misunderstandings of riches and power.

Earlier in the gospel, Matthew had noted the beginning stage of the tensions between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. In this section, he reported that full hostility had developed. For instance, the Pharisees sometimes asked questions designed to trap Jesus, as in Matthew 19:3-9; 21:16, 23; and 22:15-40.

As just one example, listen to Matthew’s report in Matthew 22:15:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words (Matthew 22:15).

At the same time, Jesus sometimes challenged the Jewish leaders. We see this in the parables of the two sons, the tenant farmers, and the wedding banquet in 21:28–22:15.

But the conflict wasn’t always limited to verbal exchanges. Sometimes it was more direct and forceful, as when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and drove them out of the temple in Matthew 21:12-16. Especially biting were his words in the seven cursing woes of 23:13-35.

Listen to how Jesus rebuked them in Matthew 23:15:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15).

Of course, Jesus and the Jewish leaders were not the only characters in these chapters. The hostility of the Jewish leaders was aggravated by the way the crowds still honored Jesus on occasions such as the triumphal entry in 21:1-11.

Throughout this section Jesus encouraged his disciples to put this confrontation into perspective. In Matthew 19:27-30, he promised that one day they would sit with him in glory. But in 20:17-19, he also warned them that those glorious days would only come after his own suffering death.

Moreover, Jesus insisted that his disciples would reach glory only after a life of humble suffering. Jesus drove home this point three different times. In Matthew 19:30, Jesus said:

Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first (Matthew 19:30).

Then in Matthew 20:16, he said:

The last will be first, and the first will be last (Matthew 20:16).

And he repeated this in Matthew 20:26-28, saying:

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26-28).

Jesus’ kingdom looked strange. His followers would suffer, and the King of Israel himself would be killed by the people of Israel. Apparent defeat would come before victory.

The next segment of intensifying opposition involves Jesus going to Jerusalem in 20:17-34. Jesus made it clear that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He only faced opposition from the mother of two disciples who sought authority for her sons in the kingdom. Then, Jesus was welcomed by the crowds into Jerusalem as he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy in his triumphal entry.

In the next segment, in 21:12–22:46, Jesus faced opposition as he moved in and out of Jerusalem and the temple. He drove out money changers, told parables that warned about God’s coming judgment. Moreover, Jesus and the religious leaders disputed theologically over taxes to Caesar, the resurrection of the dead, the greatest commandment and the question of whose son the Messiah was.

But Jesus dealt with his opponents so well that we read these words in Matthew 22:46:

No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions (Matthew 22:46).

Having surveyed Matthew's narrative on the intensifying opposition to the kingdom of heaven, we should now look at the discourse that accompanies it.

Future Victory

This section extends from Matthew 23:1–25:46. In this discourse, Jesus described the future victory of the kingdom of heaven.

This section begins with announcements of seven woes against Jesus' opponents in Matthew 23:1-38. This discourse focuses especially on the Pharisees, their false teachings, their abuse of God's people, and their hypocrisies.

Near the end of this discourse, Jesus summed up his feelings about Jerusalem in this way in Matthew 23:37-38.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look your house is left to you desolate (Matthew 23:37-38).

The next section of Jesus' discourse is often called the Olivet Discourse and it appears in Matthew 24:1–25:46. It's often called the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the Mount of Olives.

The Olivet Discourse can be divided into three primary sections: In 24:4-28, Jesus described the birth pangs of this strange age in which the kingdom of heaven had come to earth but had not yet been manifested in the fullness of its glory and power.

In 24:29-31, he spoke of the fullness of the kingdom, foretelling the day when the Son of Man would come on the clouds, and the kingdom of heaven would arrive in all of its power and glory.

Then in 24:32–25:46, Jesus exhorted his people to watch carefully for the coming day of glory because no one knows when it will be.

Well, as far as when Jesus is going to return, he was very intentional to make sure that we didn't try to pinpoint that in some point in time any more than we should. He said no one knows the day or the hour of his return. Even he in his human nature didn't know the time of his return. So, for us to then speculate and think we can narrow it down is just disobeying Jesus. But that's not to say we shouldn't anticipate, look forward to, and even look for signs that his return is near. The main purpose of teaching on the second coming of Christ in the New Testament is primarily to sober us, to give us encouragement, to give

us hope, to lead us to holy living, and expectant return of Christ. And so even though we don't know the exact time, we should be ready, at any moment for him to return, so that we can greet him eagerly and joyfully.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

We should have full confidence that he will be returning. We should have full confidence that he is coming again, and he will culminate all that he has begun. We should also be faithful. We should not be sort of looking at, say, Acts 1 as Jesus departed, and they looked up into the sky and the angel says, "What are you looking up in the sky for? You should be about the business of taking the gospel to the nations." He will come back, but we should be busy carrying out the Great Commission. We should be busy in the service of our King by taking to the nations the announcement that the King has come. He is coming again. Repent and believe the gospel. We should be discipling those who enter into that kingdom who profess faith in Jesus Christ, growing them up so they live to the glory of God, or conform to him. We should be living for God's glory in every aspect of our lives with our constant looking to his coming and saying with the church, in every age, "Come, Lord Jesus."

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

In this fifth major division of his gospel, Matthew reported that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, and even planned to kill him. But Jesus made it clear that all the planning in the world couldn't stop the future triumph of the kingdom. And history proves that he was right. The Jewish leaders did kill him. But his kingdom has continued to grow throughout the ages. And one day, history will prove the last part right, too. Jesus will come again, with power and great glory, to bring his kingdom in all its fullness, and to reward his faithful people with the kingdom's ultimate blessings.

CULMINATION OF JESUS' MINISTRY

The narrative conclusion to Matthew's gospel runs from Matthew 26:1–28:20. Here, Matthew describes the culmination of Jesus' ministry as the messianic King in his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection.

As we explore the conclusion to Matthew's gospel, we'll focus on three themes that involve Matthew's kingdom focus: the themes of conflict, discipleship, and victory. Let's turn first to the theme of conflict.

Conflict

The kingdom that Jesus actually brought was very different from the kingdom that the Jews expected the Messiah to bring, and this brought them into direct conflict with Jesus and his kingdom. As we have seen, this conflict intensifies throughout Matthew's gospel, but it culminates in the narrative conclusion. For example, we see it in the Jews' plot against Jesus in 26:3-4; in their engineering of his arrest and trial in 26:14-16, verse 47, and verses 57-68; and in their crying out for his crucifixion in 27:20-25. And it comes to a head when the Jews themselves accept responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion. Listen to Matthew's report in Matthew 27:25:

All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25).

Then while Jesus suffered on the cross, the Jews mocked him, ridiculing his claim to be the messianic King of Israel. As we read in Matthew 27:41-42:

The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel!" (Matthew 27:41-42).

Ironically, the Jews opposed Jesus on the grounds that he was an offense to God and an imposter to the throne, while in reality they were rejecting the only king that had the power to save them.

Besides the theme of conflict, the theme of discipleship also highlights the kingdom emphasis of Matthew's conclusion.

Discipleship

In particular, Matthew emphasized how difficult it was to follow a suffering Messiah. He stressed this by reporting the failures of Jesus' disciples at this crucial moment of Jesus' ministry. Judas betrayed him in Matthew 26:14-16 and verses 47-50, and he committed suicide over this failure in 27:3-10. Peter, James, and John failed to keep watch with him in Gethsemane in 26:36-46. And Peter repeatedly denied that he even knew Jesus in 26:69-75. Finally, all of Jesus' disciples deserted him in 26:56.

The fact is that following Jesus can be very difficult. We believe in a messianic King that suffered, and who has called us to suffer as well. If we are faithful to him, the likelihood is that we will experience hardship and suffering, too, and that we will be tempted to fall away. The kingdom of heaven has not yet come in all of its fullness. And because of this, there are many aspects of the Christian life that are not yet as they should be.

Having considered the themes of conflict and discipleship, we are ready to turn to the theme of the victory of the kingdom.

Victory

The theme of victory appears clearly in Jesus' resurrection, which was the proof that the messianic King had conquered all of the enemies of his people, even death itself. And we also see the theme of victory in Jesus' last words before his ascension. Jesus' final words recorded in Matthew's gospel are found in Matthew 28:18-20, and they are usually called the Great Commission. They are the Lord's final instructions to his disciples, commissioning them to ministry in his absence. And it is noteworthy that these instructions begin with Christ boldly claiming all kingdom authority. Listen to Jesus' proclamation in Matthew 28:18.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).

Jesus is the only one who can claim all dominion, all power, with legitimacy. And, by the way, his power is not destructive because it is power and love. Power motivated by love. Power moderated by love. See, if you have love alone, you have a nice sentiment, but maybe you are helpless because you don't have power to change anything. If you have power alone without love you destroy, you kill, you hate. It's the divine genius that brings love and power together. "God so loved the world that he sent his Son." He is the only one that can legitimately claim all power because he is the only one that walked on this planet earth and never sinned, never lied, never deceived. He's also the only one who, after he was killed, dead, buried, came back. So, he's the risen Lord. It is the inauguration of a new era of human history. He's bringing hope to the nations. And so the kingdom of God is at work in very powerful ways, and that's where world evangelization and discipling the nations then is based on this, what I call, "the great foundation." You don't have a great commission without the great foundation. And then he caps it with a great promise, "And I will be with you to the very end of the ages." So Jesus the Lord, Jesus the King, is the ruler who has all power, and so we go, we disciple, we teach, we proclaim his rule in his power.

— Dr. Peter Kuzmič

All authority belonged to the king who conquered. The Jews rejected him; the Romans crucified him; and they all mocked him. But the grave could not hold him, and the resurrection was the great victory of the messianic King. Through him, the kingdom of heaven had come to earth. And *that* is the good news of the Gospel According to Matthew.

Now that we've explored the background of the Gospel According to Matthew, as well as its structure and content, we're ready to consider some major themes that Matthew emphasized.

MAJOR THEMES

In this section of our lesson, we'll turn our attention to two prominent themes that Matthew emphasized throughout his gospel: the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel, and the people of God for whom Jesus was bringing the kingdom.

Let's start with Matthew's emphasis on the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel.

OLD TESTAMENT HERITAGE

Matthew's gospel is actually a fascinating account of how significant it is that the Old Testament anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus comes onto the scene, and he is Israel incarnate. He goes down to Egypt. He is forced out into the wilderness where he's tempted. He goes onto a mountain and he begins to deliver the Law again. All of these images of the new Moses, or Israel incarnate, find their source and their scope back in the Old Testament. Because when Israel was called, when Israel was elect by God, her election, that was never just a privilege to be enjoyed. It was a responsibility to be performed, to be a blessing to the nations. And yet, because of Israel's long and rather dramatic history of sin, she could never be for herself or for the nations what she was called to be. So, here you have Jesus as the Son of God, as Israel incarnate, who shows up onto the scene, and he is for Israel what Israel couldn't be for herself or for the nations. And I think it gives us a more textured, a deeper reading, on how the Old Testament anticipates Jesus, rather than finding him in a verse here or there. It's the whole history of Israel. It's the election of Israel. It's the whole failure of Israel that anticipates the coming of Jesus, and Matthew picks up on that, especially in his first five or six chapters.

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Above all else, the story of the Bible is about God binding himself to his people with unbreakable cords of love. It's the story of his faithfulness in keeping his promise to be with them in blessing. This is why Matthew told his generation of God's people that they could still trust the ancient promises and that they could still believe that God was working in their own day in the person of Jesus. And it's why Matthew felt so confident continually drawing on the Old Testament in order to support the claims and ministry of the messianic King, Jesus Christ

We'll briefly survey five ways that Matthew demonstrates the Old Testament Heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel: Matthew's Old Testament quotations and allusions, his emphasis on the kingdom of heaven, his description of Jesus as the messianic King, Jesus' conflict with unbelieving Jewish leaders, and Jesus' humility and gentleness. Let's begin with Matthew's Old Testament quotations and allusions.

Quotations and Allusions

Matthew quoted the Old Testament far more often than any other gospel writer. Scholars debate the exact number of times Matthew quoted the Old Testament, but certainly he did so at least 40 times, and he alluded to it many other times.

One strategy Matthew commonly used employed the phrase, “in order that it might be fulfilled.” Matthew used this phrase to make explicit connections between the Old Testament and events in Jesus’ life.

For example, listen to what Matthew wrote in Matthew 8:17:

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Matthew 8:17).

Immediately before this Old Testament quotation, Matthew had reported many of Jesus’ healings. But he didn’t just want his readers to see Jesus as a healer. Rather, he wanted them to know that Jesus healed people in fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

What was important from Matthew’s point of view, and I would say should be from our point of view, is that in Jesus was the manifestation of the coming kingdom of God that people had been longing for, had been waiting for. So, they weren’t necessarily looking for a Messiah to fulfill a pinpoint prediction on a historical map, but they were longing for freedom, for release, for restoration, for salvation. And the Old Testament taught them that when the kingdom of God came, it would be announced by a particular person, the Messiah, and that at that announcement, God’s reign would begin, and all the restoration and salvation and the blessings that the Old Testament promised would begin to come into fruition. And so, the apostles in general, and Matthew in particular, didn’t simply sit with a chart on their lap waiting to see who fulfilled all of these predictions, but they saw a person in whose works and in whose teaching, and whose character, and everything about him, manifested the kingdom of God. In fact, the kingdom of God was in Jesus, not just announced by him, and he brought that kingdom. And so, out of that experience of the power and the teaching and the working of Jesus, the apostles — Matthew included — went back to their Old Testaments to see how Jesus had been anticipated by the Old Testament. And when they read their Old Testaments from the standpoint of experiencing Jesus, they found that the Old Testament Scriptures had, in fact, witnessed to him and him specifically. So, as we read the Old Testament, we don’t just read it with a jeweler’s magnifying glass on our eye, but we read it looking for an encounter with Christ himself, who is the chief subject of the Gospels as he comes as the witness and as the embodiment of the kingdom of God.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

The second way Matthew's emphasis on Jesus' Old Testament heritage can be seen is in his emphasis on the kingdom of heaven.

Kingdom of Heaven

In the Old Testament, God had promised that he would bless his people; and that his blessing would come through a royal Son of David. Matthew announced that God's kingdom blessing in Jesus was the fulfillment of those ancient promises.

And in Matthew's gospel, Jesus himself commonly reminds people of this fact. He regularly teaches that God is faithful to his Old Testament kingdom promises. This is how Jesus was able to present his kingdom as good news, even though it entailed suffering, and even though he didn't do everything the Old Testament prophesies. Jesus insisted that his people trust God's Word in the Old Testament enough to believe that Jesus would eventually return to *finish* everything he had *started* — that he would eventually return to fulfill *everything* that God had promised.

In fact, this confidence in the Old Testament picture of the kingdom of heaven is the basis on which Jesus regularly called his followers to submit to and trust the Old Testament. It is the basis on which he instructed them to love and serve one another, as fellow citizens of God's kingdom.

The knowledge that the God of heaven and earth is in control of all history and is faithful to his promises should motivate his people in every age — including ours — to trust that his promises in Christ are still good. They should inspire us to believe that one day God really will make everything new and right. And they should give us strength and endurance as we wait patiently for God to bring his kingdom in all its fullness.

A third way Matthew emphasized the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel was by insisting that Jesus was the expected messianic King.

Messianic King

We mentioned this idea earlier in this lesson when we discussed the genealogy of Jesus. It's also seen in the fact that Matthew called Jesus "Son of David" more frequently than all the other gospel writers combined. Matthew also used many other royal titles for Jesus, including King of the Jews, King of Israel, your King, and simply King. Moreover, some of the verses in which Matthew uses royal titles for Jesus don't appear in any other gospel.

For example, in Matthew 2:2, Matthew reported this question from the wise men:

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? (Matthew 2:2).

No other gospel includes this verse, or this great an emphasis on Jesus' messianic kingship.

The fourth emphasis on the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel that we will mention is Jesus' conflict with unbelieving Jewish leaders.

Unbelieving Jewish Leaders

Matthew's early readers might have been tempted to think that Jesus' conflict with many of the leaders in Israel proved that Jesus wasn't the messiah. To make sure they didn't get this impression, Matthew made it clear that God was keeping his promises through Jesus despite the faithlessness of the Jewish leaders.

Time after time, Jesus rejected the teachings of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. He corrected their views on fasting in Matthew 9:14-17, on the Sabbath in 12:1-13, and on hand washing in 15:1-20. And most of the Sermon on the Mount — especially 5:17-48 — contrasts the Jewish view of the law of God with Jesus' fulfillment of that law.

Well, sometimes people have wondered when Jesus said the words, “You have heard it was said, but I say to you...” in the Sermon on the Mount, to be Jesus actually contradicting what was said in the Old Testament. But I think what's the most obvious way of reading that is that Jesus was refuting some of the ways in which the Old Testament Law — that God did say — had been interpreted by various scribes and teachers down the ages. And what Jesus is doing is setting himself up as the one who is rightly able to interpret God's law and to take what was written in God's law and apply it to his hearers in that day.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

When Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount using this phrase, “You have heard it said but I say to you...” he was not saying that the Old Testament Law is now being nullified. In fact, he says quite the opposite very explicitly, that “I have come to fulfill the Law.” But what Jesus is doing is he is using a well-known rabbinic technique that teachers of the Law would use to talk about their own teaching authority. “You've heard different people in the tradition say these things about the teachings of the Law, but I say to you...” And that comes with a present authority, with an additional authority. And so, Jesus is establishing his teaching authority with this well-known teaching technique. Not to discount the Old Testament Law, but to say something very important theologically and christologically, that “it's important to interpret the Old Testament Law in relation to me and to my teaching of the Law.”

— Dr. Greg Perry

No, Jesus was not contradicting the Old Testament. But one of the themes we see in the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is the new Moses, and that he is superior to Moses. So, we have the Old

Testament revelation given through Moses, which is the authoritative word of God, but Jesus stands as the sovereign interpreter of the Law. So much of what we see in the Sermon on the Mount represents an accurate interpretation of what Moses meant. So, Jesus has not abolished the command, “Do not murder.” He simply explains to us that murder begins in the heart with anger. Remember how that section begins? Jesus says, “I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it,” which I think means to rightly interpret the Law. But I think what Jesus is arguing there is, he actually fulfills the true intention of the Law. The Law must be interpreted in light of Jesus Christ’s coming and his death and resurrection and his ministry. But when we understand him in that way, Jesus does not abolish the Old Testament Law, but he fulfills it.

— Dr. Thomas Schreiner

Jesus really did fulfill the Old Testament’s messianic expectations. But many Jews rejected him because their own expectations were not fully in line with the Old Testament. And their misunderstandings are a caution to everyone who tries to follow Jesus. They warn us that it’s easy to let our own ideas of what God’s work looks like cloud our vision. They warn us not to place artificial limits on what God can do, but to let him define our hopes and expectations.

The fifth way Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus’ Old Testament heritage is evident is in his description of Jesus’ humility and gentleness.

Humility and Gentleness

The Jews of Jesus’ day correctly understood that, according to the Old Testament, God would send his mighty warrior to deliver his people. But Matthew stressed that the mighty deliverance of God was rooted in his gentle compassion for his people. And he made this point by drawing on the Old Testament.

For instance, in Matthew 11:29, Jesus invited the heavily burdened with these words:

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:29).

Here, Jesus quoted Jeremiah 6:16 to prove that the Messiah would provide rest for his people.

Similarly, in Matthew 12:15-21, Matthew reported Jesus’ compassionate healing ministry, and quoted Isaiah 42:1-4 to explain what Jesus was doing.

Listen to the description of Jesus in Matthew 12:19-20:

**He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not
snuff out (Matthew 12:19-20).**

Jesus was not the harsh militaristic king many Jews were looking for to lead them in battle against Rome. Instead, he was gentle and compassionate.

In keeping with the Old Testament, Matthew portrayed Jesus as the conquering King and the authoritative teacher of God's people. At the same time, Matthew stressed that Jesus was the humble, compassionate King. The call to follow Jesus in our own lives and ministries challenges us to speak the truth with the same kind of compassion that Jesus modeled.

Matthew stressed the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel in many different ways. At the same time, he made it clear that Jesus fulfilled all the ancient expectations in a way that transcended average expectations. But the good news — the gospel — was that he did fulfill them. The kingdom, the Law, and especially the King himself were all fulfilled as Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Having looked at the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel, we're ready to consider the theme of the people of God.

PEOPLE OF GOD

In the Gospel of Matthew, just as in the rest of the Bible, the people of God are the ones that belong to God, the ones that he keeps as a prized possession, and the special nation that he rules over as king. And they are not just in relationship directly with God; they are also in a close relationship with everyone else that belongs to him.

We'll explore the theme of the people of God in three parts. First, we'll see that Matthew identifies the people of God as the church. Second, we'll see that he also calls them the "family of God." And third, we'll consider the calling the people of God have received from Jesus. Let's begin with the idea that the church is the people of God.

Church

In the Old Testament, Israel was God's people. But in the New Testament, God's people are most commonly called "the church." Our modern term for "church" translates the Greek word *ekklesia* in Matthew. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *ekklesia* is a translation of the Hebrew word *qahal*, which the Hebrew Old Testament typically used to refer to the assembly or congregation of the people of Israel. This shift in vocabulary — from the "assembly" of Israel to the Christian "church" — demonstrates that both Jesus and Matthew saw the Christian church as the continuation of the assembly of Israel.

Consider the use of the Hebrew word *qahal*, or "assembly," in the Old Testament. The people of Israel are identified as the "assembly" in Leviticus 16:33; Numbers 16:47; Judges 20:2; and Psalm 22:22. In fact, the assembly of God's people was so important in

the Old Testament that it was one of the names the prophet Joel used to identify Israel when he foretold that God's people would be restored in the last days. In Joel 2:16, he proclaimed:

Gather the people, consecrate the assembly (Joel 2:16).

In the Hebrew original of this verse, the word translated “assembly” is *qahal*. But in the Greek translation of the Septuagint, the word is *ekklesia* — the word commonly translated “church” in the New Testament.

Matthew used this same language when he reported these words from Jesus in Matthew 16:18:

I will build my church (Matthew 16:18).

Here Jesus echoed Joel's prophecy when he said that he would build his church, meaning his *qahal* or his messianic assembly of the last days.

Jesus does say in Matthew's gospel that he will build his church. I think a good starting point is remembering that the word for church in the Greek New Testament, *ekklesia*, is really the Greek term used to convey the Old Testament idea of the assembly of God's people, the *qahal*, so that the New Testament church is in continuity with the Old Testament assembly, the assembly of God's people.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

We've already seen that the events of Matthew 16 took place at a time of growing resistance to Jesus' claim to be the messianic King. And this resistance is one of the reasons Jesus encouraged his disciples with a reference to the assembly of Israel — he wanted them to have confidence in his plan to build his messianic assembly, or church.

Jesus' words also made it clear that the church belonged to him. It didn't belong to Peter. It didn't belong to Israel. It wasn't a democratic institution owned by its members. It was the Messiah's church — a point Matthew had already made in the introduction to his gospel when he reported the angel's words to Joseph.

Listen to Matthew's record in 1:21:

You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

In this verse, before Jesus was even born, the angel assured Joseph that the child in Mary's womb was the Messiah to whom the entire people of God belonged. He was their king, and they were his people.

And so we're not just followers of Jesus individually, but we are the embodiment of this new creation that Jesus has brought in by his resurrection from the dead and by his giving of the Spirit to us as his

new temple, so that we are the presence of the kingdom of God in the church where people can find mercy and forgiveness, and they can find provision when they lack, and they can find companionship when they are lonely. So, the church really is a foretaste of the new heavens and earth, which will one day be visible throughout the whole creation.

— **Rev. Michael Glodo**

When God's people are under pressure, when the events of life threaten to drag them down, when the darkness hanging around them can almost be felt, Jesus says, "I will build my church. I will build my messianic assembly." He assures us that he is our king, that he has our best interests in mind, and that he will certainly rescue and bless us in the end. It may not happen in *this* life. But it *will* happen. Of *that* we can be certain.

In addition to describing the people of God as the church, Matthew also identified them as the family of God.

Family of God

The Gospel of Matthew uses familial language like "father," "son," and "brother" over 150 times to describe the relationship of God's people to himself and to each other. The only other gospel writer to use familial language so frequently was John. But when John used it, he was typically talking about the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father.

In contrast, when Matthew used it he was talking about the relationship between God and his people — he was talking about the family of God. And primarily, Matthew used this vocabulary to emphasize the care and protection that God shows for his children.

For example, in Matthew 6:4, Jesus spoke of God's care for his people in this way:

Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:4).

And he used this same language again in verse 6, and yet again in verse 18. His point was that God was concerned with his children and intent on encouraging and providing for them.

And when Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he prefaced his instructions in Matthew 6:8 by telling them:

Your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:8).

We can be confident that God will bless us, and that he will hear our prayers, because we know that he is our loving Father.

My teaching area is spiritual formation, and one of the things I say about the Lord's Prayer is that we start prayer by the recognition that at any given moment there could be millions of other people who are praying at the same time. One of the reasons we call God "God," is that God can take each one of those prayers and can deal with them as if they were the only one that was vying for his attention in that moment. But that brings us into a holy fellowship, part of that kingdom of heaven personnel. Then right after that, of course, is the word "Father." So that no matter who I am or where I am in that prayer, I'm moving toward God as Abba, moving toward God as Father. And if a person in Poland is calling God "Father" and I'm calling God "Father" in the United States, then that means we're brothers and sisters. If we have the same father, then we're members of the same family. So, I think Matthew gets at this in a powerful way with the concept of the kingdom of heaven, which he uses over and over again. But it's the life of prayer that draws us into the realization that in the moment that I'm praying, I'm praying with other people who are saying the same thing that I am, but when they're saying what I'm saying, it means we're family.

— Dr. Steve Harper

There is nothing more encouraging than to think about the fact that God has adopted us into his family. It's a great thing to be forgiven, but as J. I. Packer says in his book *Knowing God*, it is also a great thing to be justified, but it is an even greater thing to be adopted into God's family. To have God as our father, really, is the pinnacle of God's work in our lives. We're not just forgiven by the judge, we're adopted into God's family, and he's our Father, and we're his children. And, so then, we are co-heirs with Christ. Everything that's coming to Jesus, which is all things, becomes ours. That's our inheritance as well. There was a time when we were just children of wrath, when our inheritance was the wrath of God. And rather than wrath, we now are co-heirs with Christ. We are partakers of the divine nature and we are actually called brothers with Christ because we have sonship in him. We've traded in our filthy rags of unrighteousness for Christ's righteousness. But in that we then become children of God, invited into his family. And that is the greatest blessing we could ever imagine.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus used two different examples to assure God's children of his care. He talked about the "birds of the air" and "the lilies of the field," pointing out that God cares for the needs of the smallest members of his creation. And his point was

that if God cares even for these small things, then he will certainly care far more for his people. Our heavenly Father will provide even better food, clothing and protection for us.

Jesus also emphasized God's fatherly care and protection when he warned his disciples of the great difficulties of ministry. For instance, in 10:19-20, Jesus told them that they would be arrested. But he also told them that the Father's Spirit would be with them. And he reminded them that when their lives were in danger because of their ministry, their Father would protect them.

Listen to Jesus' encouraging words in Matthew 10:29-31:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father... So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31).

For many believers, life is very difficult being a Christian. Many parts of the world are under persecution. And the great joy of their life is that they are part of the body, and they can identify themselves as the people of God. The Scripture tells us that God is our Father. We have the tremendous privilege, as Romans 8 tells us, of being able to call upon God as Abba. We also have the fact that God is constantly caring for us. And we also see that God gives the members of his family a love. And so, for the believer, the heart of his life is this encouragement that comes through Christ because God is now our Father.

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

Having considered the people of God as both the church and the family of God, we are ready to consider the calling of the people of God.

Calling

The people of God are greatly privileged to be his church and his family. But our calling as his people also includes hardship, danger, and suffering. Jesus himself is our suffering messianic King. And as we follow him, we suffer too.

For instance, in Matthew 10:34-36, Jesus said that our calling is characterized by strife. Listen to what he said there:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36).

And in Matthew 16:24-25, he put it this way:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it (Matthew 16:24-25).

Jesus knew that his people would be rejected just like he was rejected. For our King, suffering is the path to glory. And the same is true for us.

On the cross people may have thought that he was losing a battle, and even in the grave they thought that he was counted out, but they forgot about the third day morning. Jesus said that “you tear this body down, in three days I’ll rise again.” And so, when we think about how the church has been ostracized, criticized, maligned on every corner, we do understand that this same church that Jesus put forth into action is the same church that is working today. Look how much it has sustained and how much it has gone through, yet it is still there. And let me go a little step further. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh — they couldn’t kill him then, they can’t kill him now. So, we are part of... we are the church that is his church, and he will not allow anything, not even the very gates of hell to prevail and stop his mission. This church has a mission, and it is to go into all the world to bring and make disciples of those that are lost. And what a joy that is, and you and I can have a great security and have a really resurrected moment even now, knowing that the church will be sustained.

— Dr. Willie Wells

Jesus promises to end the suffering of his people, to give us rest from our hardship, to establish peace for us, and to bless us immeasurably — but not yet. Until he returns to make all things new, our calling is to follow in the footsteps of our suffering King.

Jesus told us that he came in order that we might have life and have it more abundantly. But, you know, in this life, after we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, we still experience suffering, pain, illness; we still die. We still have frustrations and ambitions. We still experience irritations and, for that matter, griefs. You know, a part of what we need to recognize here is that evidently a part of what it means to receive this abundant life is to have Christ in the midst of these things. We will come to know things in our Christian life we would not know if we were never irritated or frustrated. We would never know if we did not experience grief as well as exhilaration and joy. I think there’s something more here that’s really important. Jesus said, “I came that you might have life, and that you might have life that is abundant.” But, you know, we are yearning for something. A part of what it

means to be “in Christ” is to yearn for the fullness that he’s going to bring. There’s a day coming when Christ is coming for his church. There’s a day coming when Christ will reign over all things in a way that is visible to all. There’s coming a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. There’s coming a day when every eye will be dry, and every tear will be wiped away. And part of what it means right now, for us to have the abundant life in Christ is for us to rest in Christ, experiencing all the joys and travails that come into a life and this fallen world while yearning for that which we know is coming. The abundant life means trusting Christ until he comes.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

CONCLUSION

In this study of the Gospel According to Matthew, we have explored its background in terms of its authorship, original audience and occasion; we have surveyed its structure and content, and we have considered the major themes of its Old Testament heritage and its emphasis on the people of God.

Matthew’s gospel proclaims the good news that the Old Testament promises of the kingdom of heaven have been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus the messianic King. And the good news is that Jesus established and continues to build his kingdom for us and through us. But this good news is not always easy. As we have seen, Matthew described our calling to follow the suffering messianic King in radical terms. But he also described the blessings of the heavenly Father in radical terms — blessings that enable us to follow our King faithfully, and to persevere through our own suffering, until the kingdom of heaven comes to earth in its full glory.

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The Gospels

LESSON
TWO

The Gospel According to Matthew Faculty Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson Two: The Gospel According to Matthew

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. David Bauer
Dr. Dan Doriani
Dr. Mark Gignilliat
Rev. Mike Glodo
Dr. James Hamilton
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Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Frank Thielman

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Willie Wells
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

Why is it important to understand the historical setting in which Matthew and other gospels were written?

In some ways the book of Matthew may be thought of as the most difficult of the Gospels to interpret, since it assumes so many things that most modern readers don't understand. This is true of all four gospels to some degree. But Matthew in particular assumes a great deal of knowledge about its historical setting in 1st century Palestine. Why is it important to understand the historical setting in which Matthew and the other gospels were written?

Dr. Peter Walker

Well, any biblical book is set in a particular context and it's really helpful to have an opportunity to work out why the author was writing and when he was writing. At the same time, I think we need to be a little bit careful not to overplay that. You know, what's written is the most important thing, and you could spend a lot of time looking behind the scenes to try and work out exactly when it was written and what the purpose of it was. If we can get some idea of the exact location of it or the timing of it, then that can help us to understand the context which he was writing in, and then we can probably then work out what our context is and reapply the same message to our different context.

Dr. Richard Bauckham

I think that most of the books of the Bible in one way or the other simply assume a certain amount of historical context. They assume we know something about geography and relevant history and the culture and customs of the time. In other words, they take for granted a lot of things that they don't spell out, and therefore, it's very useful to know something about these things. I mean, an example for the Gospels is that the Gospels keep referring to people of the Pharisees. They don't actually tell us who the Pharisees are, but you know, we have material outside the

Bible that tells us more about the Pharisees and simply filling in things like that. Or think about the way that Matthew's gospel tells us about Herod, and then there's another Herod, and there's another Herod in Acts. We might get very confused as to which kings these are. They're taking for granted that we know it, we know something about the Herods; we can fill in that background information. So there are just lots of ways in which these writers simply assume that their readers know things, that since we are reading them in a much later period of history, we have to supply that knowledge.

Dr. Mark Strauss

When we're talking about the Gospels, for example, we really have two levels of historical context for the Gospels. The first level is the level of Jesus himself and the events of his life. So to understand what Jesus is saying, what he's doing, we have to understand 1st century Palestine. We have to understand that the Jewish state under Roman rule. We have to understand religious groups like Pharisees and Sadducees, and political groups like the Herodians, and why there was a governor like Pontius Pilot in Judea and a king like Herod Antipas in Galilee in the north. So to understand what Jesus says, what Jesus does, how others react to him, we have to enter into the world of the text. So, that's the first level of historical context for the Gospels.

The second is the fact that the Gospels were all written somewhat after the fact — anywhere from thirty to fifty years after the events. And each gospel writer is writing about the events of Jesus, but also writing for the readers of his day. And those readers are going through different struggles and different issues. And so, understanding that historical context, the context of the writers and the readers, as well as the context of Jesus in 1st century context in which he lived, is crucial. One example of this, Mark's gospel for example — Of course, to understand Mark's gospel you have to understand 1st century Israel and Jesus and his interaction with the disciples, his interaction with the religious leaders, but you also have to try to understand what is going on in Mark's community. Most scholars think Mark's gospel is written to a church in Rome, to the church in Rome, the suffering church in Rome, and so Mark's call and Jesus' call in that gospel, to take up your cross and follow him, to be willing to suffer and die for your faith, is a call, not just to the first disciples in Jesus' life, but also to Mark's readers — to be willing to suffer persecution, to follow Christ even to death. So there's that second level of historical context that we need to understand in order to understand the message, the overall message of the Gospels.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

I believe that when we study any of the Gospels, such as the Gospel of Matthew, it's valuable to know its author's historical background. After all, if Jesus' life is a historical fact, then the more information we have about the historical record of his life, the better we'll be able to understand his life itself. Of course, as readers receiving the message of Matthew's gospel, we don't always realize how helpful it is to learn about its author. But learning about a book's author and historical setting really can help us understand its contents.

Question 2:**How confident should we be that the apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew?**

One crucial aspect of the historical setting of every book is its author. And the Gospel of Matthew has been attributed to the apostle Matthew since the earliest days. But this attribution is challenged in many scholarly circles. How confident should we be that the apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

I think that we can be fairly confident about one thing, which is that the titles of the gospels, the ascription of the gospels to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, go back to a very early stage. And I think the best argument for this is once you think the gospels were circulating, if you think of the gospels circulating around the churches... once a church has more than one gospel, they've really got to have some way of distinguishing one from another. You know, this is the Gospel of Matthew; this is the Gospel of Luke. And we have no evidence at all that they ever distinguished the Gospels in any other way. And so it's very likely, I think, that even if the titles may not have, as it were, been written at the top of the page — very often in ancient literature they weren't — nevertheless, when the Gospels circulated, the information about the person they were ascribed to would have gone along with them. And then when they put them in their book cupboard, as they would have had a small collection of books belonging to the church, each scroll or codex had to have a sort of name tag so that you'd know what it is before you pulled it off the shelf. And, again, these would have to be labeled, no doubt, "Gospel According to Matthew," and so forth.

Dr. Robert Plummer

Every ancient copy that we have of the gospel of Matthew has the title at the top of it "*Kata Matthaion*," "According to Matthew," consistently across a wide geographic area. And of course for that to take place from the earliest copies of that manuscript, it had to be written on there. Martin Hengel, a famous German scholar, has argued that as soon as that manuscript began to be copied — so from the earliest times — it had to have a title affixed to it according to customs of manuscripts circulating and so on, and also to account for later evidence. So from the earliest time it had the title "*Kata Matthaion*" or "According to Matthew." Also, early church testimony is unanimous that Matthew, one of Jesus' twelve apostles, wrote this gospel. There's a number of incidental features in the gospel which are interesting and may support that.

Remember, of course, that Matthew was a tax collector. We read in the Gospel of Matthew, in chapter 9 where Jesus calls him. He was working at this toll booth, or this revenue booth, and it is interesting if you look at the parallels in Mark 2 and Luke 5, Matthew is the only one who identifies this man as Matthew. The other ones mention him as Levi. Of course it's not unusual at that time for people to go by two or three names as we see with Saul and Paul, or Cephas and Peter and Simon, and so on. But Matthew in his own gospel identifies this disciple, this apostle who is called Matthew. Also it's been noted that Matthew is a tax collector, has in his gospel an interestingly higher percentage of teaching of Jesus that relates to money or parables

that deal with money or revenue. So not only do we have the title of the gospel, and early church testimony, but these incidental details within the gospel themselves seem to substantiate that claim.

Question 3:

What can the structure and content of Matthew's gospel reveal about his purpose for writing?

Knowing that Matthew authored the gospel that bears his name helps us interpret what he wrote. Our knowledge of Matthew informs our reading of his book. But we can also use the text to learn things about the author, such as his purpose for writing. What can the structure and content of Matthew's gospel reveal about his purpose for writing?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

Well first of all, you need to understand when you're talking about the structure of the Gospel of Matthew that it has a very deliberate structure, not an accidental structure. Obviously at the beginning you have birth narratives; at the end you have the passion and resurrection narratives. The real question about structures is how do you structure the stuff in between? And that's precisely the part of the material that we find the most variance between one gospel and another in terms of structure. What Matthew tends to do is give you a block of narrative, then a block of teaching, then a block of narrative, then a block of teaching, then a block of narrative, then a block of teaching. Now this is an artificial structure. What we know for sure is Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "Ok, this week I'm just a talking head, next week I'll do fifteen miracles." That's not the way it happened in Jesus' life. So what Matthew has done is grouped together the teaching of Jesus in terms of themes, major themes, or topics. So he's sort of collected Jesus' greatest hits, as you will, on this subject or that subject or the other subject, and we have major blocks of teaching. Now here is the interesting bit. Some people have said, "Well, Jesus is being presented as the new Moses in the Gospel of Matthew." The real focus of Matthew however, is to present how much greater than Moses Jesus is. He is, in fact, the wisdom of God come in the flesh. So he, if you will, is the exegesis, the interpretation of the mind of God, come in the flesh. And so we have these large blocks of teaching material in which Jesus's wisdom, that he has as God and from God, that he will share with his disciples and with the world. And that's one of the major things that structures the Gospel of Matthew and makes it different from, for example, Luke's gospel.

Question 4:

How did Matthew see Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes?

To fulfill his broader purposes toward his predominantly Jewish audience, Matthew pointed out that Jesus fulfilled a number of Old Testament themes and expectations. How did Matthew see Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes?

Dr. James Hamilton

Matthew was focused on presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament because if the Old Testament is not fulfilled, God's word fails — God's word fails, and God's people can rightly doubt a God who doesn't keep his word. And so, Matthew wants to present Jesus as the fulfillment and the culmination of everything that the Old Testament has pointed forward to, to assure God's people that they can trust God's word.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Matthew's gospel is actually a fascinating account of how significant it is that the Old Testament anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ. And the way in which Matthew does this, especially in the first five or six chapters, isn't primarily through proof texting, although he does that — for example, Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" — so, there are these proof textings that can go on within Matthew's gospel, but there's more that goes on; it's more textured than that. So that you see Jesus, who actually embodies Israel, and does what Israel is supposed to do and be, and yet, historical Israel never could do that. So, what you see happening with Jesus is, Jesus comes onto the scene, and he is Israel incarnate. He goes down to Egypt. He is forced out into the wilderness where he's tempted. He goes onto a mountain and he begins to deliver the Law again. All of these images of the new Moses, or Israel incarnate, find their source and their scope back in the Old Testament.

Rev. Mike Glodo

Why did Matthew care that Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies and expectations, and why should we? Well, there were many in Jesus' day that claimed to be the Messiah, and so certainly in Matthew's mind, one important reason is to distinguish Jesus from among those who were falsely claiming to be the Messiah. But the bigger reason for Matthew, and for us, I would say, is not so much that the Old Testament predicted that there would be a certain person and a certain place and a certain time — although the Old Testament does do that to some extent — but what was important from Matthew's point of view, and I would say should be from our point of view, is that in Jesus was the manifestation of the coming kingdom of God that people had been longing for, had been waiting for. And so out of that experience of the power and the teaching and the working of Jesus, the apostles, Matthew included, went back to their Old Testaments to see how Jesus had been anticipated by the Old Testament. And when they read their Old Testaments from the standpoint of experiencing Jesus, they found that the Old Testament Scriptures had in fact witnessed to him and him specifically. And that's how we should approach the question as well. We shouldn't approach the question skeptically as to, "Well, was Jesus really the one?" But we should approach the question simultaneously from whether he was the one, but also seeking an encounter with him to receive the purpose of the gospel, which is to present to us the living Christ who offers himself to us. So as we read the Old Testament, we don't just read it with a jeweler's magnifying glass on our eye, but we read it looking for an encounter with Christ himself who is the chief subject of the Gospels as he comes as the witness and as the embodiment of the kingdom of God.

Question 5:

What does the Transfiguration teach us about Jesus' role as the Christ?

Matthew didn't just point out explicit ways that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament messianic expectations. He also shaped a number of his narratives to draw attention to this theme. A striking example appears in Matthew 17 in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. What does the Transfiguration teach us about Jesus' role as the Christ?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The transfiguration is this amazing scene where Jesus goes up on the mountain, and his disciples, just three of them go up with him. And they get this display of the glory of Christ. And so, first we get a glimpse of these two natures of Christ, where this man, nevertheless, is transfigured and we get a display of his glory that had always been true of him, but as that Christmas hymn says, was veiled in flesh, but we see the godhead. We get this blinding display of his glorious presence, so glorious that the disciples come down off the mountain and they themselves are glowing. But when we think about the fulfillment of the covenant, that's powerful, because who does he meet with in the Transfiguration? He meets with Elijah and Moses. And so in this we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, and the fulfillment of the prophetic office, fulfilling his messianic identity in these ways. So the old covenant is coming to its fulfillment in Jesus, the Messiah, as he meets with the giver of the Law, Moses, and then the fulfillment of the great prophetic office in Elijah, Jesus here comes, meets with them, and establishes his messianic identity in that amazing transfiguration.

Dr. Frank Thielman

The question of what the Transfiguration teaches us about Christ's role is important because the Transfiguration is one of those events in the life of Christ, and its narration in the Gospels — this is one of those events that ties who Jesus is firmly back into the Old Testament. Jesus appears on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah and with Moses. Elijah is the great prophet who worked many miracles, just like Jesus also was a great prophet who worked many miracles. And Moses was the great teacher of Israel, the great Law-giver of Israel, and Jesus is presented in the New Testament also as a great teacher. And if you look at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also gives a kind of law. He gives a reinterpretation of the Mosaic law there, his own teaching. And so we can see how Jesus is tied back into the Old Testament, and has to be interpreted by means of the Old Testament, but at the same time the narrative makes very clear that Jesus is greater than either Elijah or Moses, that Jesus can't be explained simply in terms of Elijah and Moses because God himself appears on the scene and says, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased." So the Transfiguration is one of those places in the New Testament where we can see both the continuity — the really critical and important continuity between Old and New Testament — and some of the discontinuity, some of the surprises that Jesus brings to us as someone who comes on the scene fulfilling all that the Old Testament has to say.

Question 6:**What does the Lord's Supper signify in Matthew's gospel?**

In his institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus drew additional connections between himself and the Old Testament. On the night he was arrested, Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with his disciples. But he gave the meal new meaning by focusing its symbolism on his messianic mission. And it's that new meaning that the church has observed in the Lord's Supper. What does the Lord's Supper signify in Matthew's gospel?

Dr. James D. Smith III

What the Lord's Supper signifies is rooted in the Old Testament description of the Passover, that meal by which God was expressing a deliverance for his people through the leadership of Moses, but also the obedience of the people to see the open way that God had provided. Jesus commemorates that in the upper room in the Last Supper, and that celebration in which there is the bread, which signifies his body; there is the wine or cup, which signifies his bloodshed.

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the fascinating things in the Gospels is to see how Jesus in the upper room, when he breaks bread with his disciples, is doing it not that far away from another place in Jerusalem which Jesus has visited a few days before, which is the temple. And the temple was the place into which Jesus had gone and had done this cleansing of the temple, signifying that everything the temple stood for was now about to come to an end. And people wondered, how on earth is he doing that and why? And now, if you like, Jesus with his disciples on his own gives the answer: Instead of the temple being the place where sacrifices are going to be made, Jesus is going to open up an alternative new way. And that's what's going in the Last Supper, Jesus opening up an alternative to the temple, an alternative sacrifice. And as he breaks bread and he says, "This is my body," their eyes are opened to the reality that Jesus is about to die and is about to give his life as a sacrifice. He's opening up a new way into God's presence. In contrast to the temple, now this is the way. And he's placing himself right at the center. One of the fascinating things about the story is that we're uncertain whether or not there would have been a Passover lamb on the table. I personally believe that there wasn't, and that Jesus is celebrating this just a fraction ahead of schedule because he's going to be dead the next day. Therefore, there wasn't a Passover lamb on the table. But when Jesus says, "...this is my body broken for you," effectively he's saying, "I am that Passover Lamb. That which you need to eat at this meal is me." So he's making an incredible claim that he is the one who is going to be like the Passover lamb, redeeming people.

Question 7:

How was Jesus a greater prophet than Moses?

Matthew taught that the salvation Jesus' secured for his people is even greater than what God had done through Moses in the Exodus. One way he did this was by portraying Jesus as the prophet that was foretold in Deuteronomy 18, who fulfilled and surpassed what Moses had done for Israel. How was Jesus a greater prophet than Moses?

Dr. Glen Scorgie

It's very interesting that we have in the Scriptures certain parallels drawn, sometimes explicitly, between Moses and the future Jesus. The significance of that, I think, is intriguing. Because at one level, the emphasis of the New Testament as it presents Jesus, is that one greater than Moses is now present. And we could list some of the significant ways that Jesus Christ is greater than Moses. But all of that relative greatness is premised on certain affinities or similarities between Moses and Jesus, always keeping in mind that eventually, if you will, Jesus trumps Moses. But Moses is the quintessential mediator of the Law of God. Moses was the liberator, the one God used to bring a people in bondage into a Promised Land. And in a somewhat more spiritualized and profoundly more important way, Jesus is the new and greater Moses who delivers people from the multifaceted dimensions of bondage into the Promised Land of infinite grace and an eternal future.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

In the Old Testament we have anticipation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in terms of his work, in terms of prophet, priest and king. Deuteronomy 18 is a very, very important passage, which speaks of a prophet in the future to come like a Moses. In the Old Testament context, "like a Moses" was one who, like Moses, met God face to face, who uniquely received God's revelation. In fact, Moses stood as sort of the pinnacle of all the prophets. As you work through the Old Testament, particularly even at the end of Deuteronomy 34, there is the announcement there that no prophet like Moses has yet arisen. And this sets us up for one to come who will be like a Moses, yet greater, who will speak God's word, who will give us God's truth, who will know God face to face, and that really is culminated in our Lord Jesus Christ. John 1 picks this up — Our Lord who knew the Father from all eternity, who discloses him. Acts 3 picks this up, as well, that this is the fulfillment of this, so that Jesus is the one who brings God's kingdom, he brings God's revelation to pass, he is the one who fulfills Moses' role yet in a greater way. And Hebrews 1 particularly emphasizes that that God speaking through the prophets, including Moses, is now culminated in Jesus Christ his son who brings that revelation to pass.

Question 8:**Why did Matthew generally use the term “kingdom of heaven” instead of the term “kingdom of God”?**

Most scholars agree that Jesus is the anticipated Old Testament Christ and that he came to fulfill the Old Testament expectation of establishing the messianic kingdom of God on earth. But in Matthew’s gospel, the term “kingdom of God” is only used a few times. Far more often, Matthew wrote about the “kingdom of heaven.” Why did Matthew generally use the term “kingdom of heaven” instead of the term “kingdom of God”?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

When reading the Gospels together, the theme of the kingdom of God clearly is a major theme that’s in Jesus’ teaching and ministry in every way. But one of the things that stands out when you compare Matthew with the rest, especially Mark and Luke, is that Matthew alone uses this unique phrase, “the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew also, on occasion, does use the phrase “the kingdom of God,” and, in fact, Matthew has a bunch of other language as well. He calls it “my kingdom,” “my Father’s kingdom,” “your kingdom,” “the kingdom,” so it’s not as if he only uses kingdom of heaven. But that phrase, “kingdom of heaven” really stands out because it’s unique to Matthew, and in fact, it’s unique to all literature preceding Matthew. It becomes a very important idea after Matthews’ time, but before that we don’t have any clear reference to the idea of kingdom of heaven. So why does Matthew use this phrase? Well, some have tried to argue in more recent times, or modern times, that there’s actually a difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately, this doesn’t really pan out at all. Because, in fact, when you compare what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven with other places where Mark and Luke have the very same passage and call it the kingdom of God, that’s one of the definitive ways to see that they have the same reference, that they refer to the same thing.

But in Matthew, the kingdom of heaven, while it has the same denotation, or the same referent as the kingdom of God, what’s really important and beautiful to see is that it has a very different connotation. That is, although it means the same thing as the kingdom of God, it has more evocations in Matthew’s language to call the kingdom of God the kingdom of heaven. And what is that evocation? Well, when you read Matthew overall you’ll see that there’s a major theme of contrasting God in heaven with humanity on earth. God’s way of doing kingdom, which he calls the kingdom of heaven, and humanity’s way of ruling and reigning and acting and behaving towards each other which we might call the kingdoms of this world.

One of the places you can see this heaven and earth contrast so clearly and so wonderfully is the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus teaches us as Christians to pray, that the Father’s will, the Father’s name and the Father’s kingdom might come to earth even as it is in heaven. This idea is that right now we are experiencing a fallen and broken and imperfect reality in our relationships, in our relationship to each other, to God and

society, but that God has a perfect plan and vision and kingdom and reign and rule that he's going to establish on the earth. And for Matthew to talk about the kingdom of heaven is a very powerful way for him to feel the difference between merely the things of this world, and our Father in heaven who reigns and rules and promises to come again. So, the point of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's language is to let us feel and taste the difference between God's reign that is still yet to come and all the reigns and ruling and behavior of this earth. There's a contrast between those two realities, and Matthew using kingdom of heaven helps us feel and taste and hope in that time coming for God's kingdom of heaven.

Question 9:

Why is it important for Christians to pursue the kingdom of heaven?

The kingdom of God — or as Matthew usually called it, the kingdom of heaven — will only be fully realized in the future. As a result, it sounds rather intangible to many Christians. Some even wonder if the kingdom has much relevance to life in the present age. Why is it important for Christians to pursue the kingdom of heaven?

Dr. Peter Walker

The kingdom of heaven is the way in which the New Testament refers to also the kingdom of God, and yes, it can sound a little bit as though it doesn't apply to us. I think we think of the phrase, "kingdom of God," that's more helpful, and then remember that that actually means that God is becoming King through his appointed King, who is Jesus Christ. And once we get that sense, then we realize that whenever we're spreading the news of Christ or living for Christ, we are bringing in the kingdom. And so it's actually a very practical thing, it's not all about what happens in the future or in heaven, if you like, it's far more this-worldly. This world is meant to be the place where Christ rules, and wherever we bring that in, that's important for Christians to be doing.

Dr. Simon Vibert

When we speak about the kingdom of God, we often talk about it as having come, but actually we still anticipate the kingdom coming in the future. In fact, Jesus taught us to pray like that — "Your kingdom come now as it is in heaven." And there is a sense in which because the king has come — he's inaugurated and set up his kingdom here on earth but we wait for his return, the second coming of Christ will be the day in which all the full benefits of what Jesus did when he first came will, the implications will, be finally worked out — and there is the sense in which every believer has the job of announcing the king's future coming as they go out into this world with the gospel. So we call people to get ready for the day when Christ will return. But yet, as believers, we do enjoy the privilege of having Christ as our Lord now. So, we live under his reign now but wait for the day when we will fully have that realized, not only for us, but actually for the whole of creation too.

Question 10:

How did Jesus' death atone for sin?

In Matthew, just as in the other gospels, one critical aspect of Jesus' role as messianic king was his atoning death. But for many people, it seems strange to think that the death of the King could somehow benefit his people. So, how did Jesus' death atone for sin?

Dr. J. I. Packer

The death of the Lord Jesus for sin — that's how it's presented all the way through the New Testament — worked, if one can put it this way, because he became our penal substitute. "Substitute" means he took our place, and "penal" points to the fact that he took our place in enduring the judgment, the penalty which all of us had merited by our own transgressions of God's law, the penalty, that is, with which God had threatened us for breaking his law. God's nature is such — I mean this is his holiness in reality — his nature is such that where there has been sin, there has to be retribution. And the wonderful, wise, loving way of salvation that God planned was to divert the penalty from our guilty shoulders, if I can put it that way, onto the innocent flawless shoulders of his incarnate Son, who thus fulfills the pattern of the flawless animal sacrifice that was demanded all through the Old Testament. And it seems to me that if the reality of penal substitution isn't stressed, well, witness to the truth of the atonement is not being adequately borne. I just quote one Scripture for that, 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him" — that's the Lord Jesus — "who knew no sin" — he was innocent of all transgression — but "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him." "Made sin" means he was treated as a sinner. "Made righteous" means that we are treated as righteous in the way that he himself is treated by his Father as righteous, even though we're not righteous. But we are forgiven, and the guilt of our sins is blotted out because the Lord Jesus took our place. And, Isaiah 53 says it all, "The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all."

So, that's how I understand the, should I say, the mechanics of atonement, and that's how the New Testament exhibits them again and again. There's an illustration, as a matter of fact, in Colossians 2 which most people read over so quickly that they don't feel the force of it. It says that God took out of the way the penal requirement of the Law, nailing it to his cross. And the picture there is that, well, if we had stood before the cross when Jesus was crucified, we would have seen a notice, a placard, nailed up on the top of the cross above Jesus' head declaring the crime for which Pilate was executing him: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." The Gospels tell us about that, but if now we look back to the cross with the eye of faith, what we see on the placard is the wretched list of our own transgressions. Nailing it to the cross, that's what that little phrase is pointing to as the explanation of what was happening when Jesus died.

Question 11:**Why is the resurrection of Jesus an indispensable part of the gospel message?**

Jesus died, but he didn't remain in the grave. On the third day, he rose from the dead. In Scripture, the fact of Jesus' resurrection was often included in gospel presentations. And historically, it has been an important part of the church's confession of Christ. Why is the resurrection of Jesus an indispensable part of the gospel message?

Dr. Peter Walker

The resurrection of Jesus is basic to the gospel because without the resurrection, with a dead Jesus, we have nothing. I mean, what help is there in a dead Jesus? Crucified, failed. So, the resurrection in the New Testament is a sign that Jesus has been vindicated. And if we talk about the forgiveness of sins coming about through his death, well, if Jesus had died and not been raised again, we don't know that we're forgiven. The whole doctrine of salvation falls apart without the fact that Jesus is raised from the dead. But it's more than that. I mean, it means that Jesus Christ is alive today. And an essential part of the good news is that here is a living person that we can know and have our lives transformed by. We're not following just a dead hero; we're following a living person. But it's more than that. It's that there's actual new life beyond the grave for those who believe in Christ. So, death is not the end. The resurrection is a sign that there is a new kingdom established and that we have hope beyond the grave. And it is even more than that. It's that God has got a purpose for his whole world. This creation which is subjected to frustration finds through the resurrection that there's a hope of new creation. And so the resurrection turns out to be absolutely key, not just for individuals, but for the whole world.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

So why is the resurrection so important for Christians — so important that they would celebrate their gatherings together on that day rather than on the Sabbath? Well there are many reasons. One is that the life and suffering and death of Jesus would ultimately be meaningless if it were not for the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead it was God's vindicating that Jesus was right. You may remember that many of his enemies accused him of being satanic or foolish or a crazy revolutionary, but instead he spoke truth and wisdom and healed and lived in humility and lived with sinners and was accused being a sinner himself for living with them. Yet, God vindicated by raising him from the dead that he was the true Son of God.

Another reason why Jesus' resurrection is so essential and why his life and death and suffering are not sufficient in and of themselves is because in the resurrection Jesus not only provides an example, but he also conquers death itself. In his rising, death is put to death. Death itself is killed. And so, if we only had his suffering and his death, he would serve a great example, but it would not deal with our sin problem. We would still face our deaths, only with an example of someone who also faced death

with nobility. But the resurrection of Jesus provides an assurance that not only Jesus was truly from God but that death itself is now conquered.

Another reason that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so important — and this is one that I am afraid we often don't speak of, though it's in the Scriptures — and that is that the resurrection of Jesus inaugurates and initiates the new and final age of the world itself. Not only is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the means by which we can receive forgiveness of sins and atonement for our sins, but as important, and maybe even more importantly, the resurrection begins the new and final age of the world. The new creation, as the Scriptures call it, begins at that tomb, that empty tomb. It is the new epicenter, the new focal point, the new hinge of history itself. It is not just another event. It becomes the focal point by which all of history is now understood because all that Adam did and failed to do, and that death reigned from the time of Adam's fall up to Christ. Now life reigns because a new second Adam has come, and the resurrection is this turning point in history. This is why the rest of the New Testament authors regularly look back to the centrality of Jesus being raised from the dead, and speak of us now living in the end times. We are now all living in the end times, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has inaugurated this beginning of the end, and the hope for the Christian is that that beginning will now find its consummation at the second coming of Christ which is called, according to the Scriptures, a new creation itself.

Another reason the resurrection is so important is because it affirms the value of God's created order. It affirms that our bodies as made by God, and all matter, do matter. That it affirms that God cares about creation and that our hope is a resurrection body ourselves in physical bodies even though creation itself is marred, what God has made is good, and the creation itself, the Scriptures say, is longing for its redemption, the adoption of the sons of God. The resurrection not only inaugurates this, but shows that God cares about our physical bodies and the physical world that he has made.

Question 12:

When is Jesus coming back? And what should we be doing in the meantime?

We know that one day Jesus will return and consummate God's kingdom on earth. He will judge all rival powers and authority, and fully establish his earthly reign. And as we look at Scripture, it's evident that Jesus' future return ought to impact the way we live at the present time. But when is Jesus coming back? And what should we be doing in the meantime?

Dr. Willie Wells

When will Jesus come back and what should we be doing in the meantime? Well, right off let me tell you that he is coming back. Just like he left, he's coming back. When he's coming back, we don't know. Anybody that would try to apply a date, a

time to it, would be in error because the Father didn't tell. The Word of God doesn't say when he's coming back, but it does say that he is coming back. So when we think about that, Jesus, after he was resurrected, hung around here for 40 days, and he was revealing himself to the disciples and others to reaffirm them, to give them the reassurance that what he had said about his sacrificial death and his resurrection had come true. Then the cloud took him back, and now he sits on the right hand side of Father God, and the Scripture says that he is interceding for us all now.

So what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to just go to church on Sunday, go to midweek services, have church? Are we just to wait for his return? Are we just to go in and hoard up all the physical things that we can? Are we to get all the moneys and put them in bigger barns? Are we to just wait for him? No, there is a direction that he's given us, some directives, that we are to be witnesses for Christ. We are to be busy about the work of the Lord. Interesting. Jesus said that "I come to do the will of my Father," and so that's our will, to do the will of the Father. And how do we do that? Yes, by maintaining church attendance. Yes, by being on fire for the Lord, witnessing to everyone we come in contact with. Yes, by making disciples of those who have just been new converts who have come in, assimilating them into the church to make them become, in a snowball effect, to be witnesses for Christ. Yes, we are to be doing that. Yes, we are to be busy about growing and maturing in Christ. Yes, we are to be reading our Bibles and praying and having great communication with the Lord. Yes, we are to do all of those things. But more importantly, we are not to sit by idly waiting for him to come back, for the Bible says that he will come like a thief in the night. We know he's coming back. We don't know. It may be today. It could be tomorrow. The problem is for us not to count the days when he will come because we don't know, but it's to work while it's day, for night will come when no man can work.

Question 13:

In the Sermon on the Mount, was Jesus contradicting the Old Testament?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus frequently taught his followers how to think, feel and act as members of God's kingdom. One of his most famous teachings of this type is known as "the Sermon on the Mount." Sadly, some things Jesus said there have often been misunderstood by Christians. In fact, some interpreters actually believe that Jesus was contradicting and perhaps even refuting the Old Testament. So, it's important to ask the question: In the Sermon on the Mount, was Jesus contradicting the Old Testament?

Dr. David Bauer

Many readers of the Gospels have problems with what are called "the antitheses" in Matthew chapter 5. Six times there in Matthew 5:21-48 Jesus says something like, "You have heard that it was said, but I say to you..." This is a good example of interpreting passages in context. That passage should be read in light of the

immediately preceding verses: 5:17-20 where Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For I tell you not one jot or one iota shall pass from the Law until all these things are fulfilled. Therefore, whoever teaches, or does these commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever loosens these commandments shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you’ll never enter the kingdom of heaven.” So, if you understand 5:21-48 in light of those verses, it’s quite clear that the “You have heard that it was said” statements are specific forms of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees that is inadequate for entrance into the kingdom of heaven, whereas the “but I say to you” statements represent specific forms of the exceeding righteousness that is necessary for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

Dr. James Hamilton

When Jesus presents these “You have heard that it was said... but now I tell you...” statements in the Sermon on the Mount, I think that the best way to look at this is that Jesus is getting at the true meaning of the Law. Not that he’s introducing something new, but that he is expositing, in a sense, what God was aiming at all along. So that when the Law says “you shall not commit adultery,” God never intended his people to think that they could get away with looking lustfully at women who are not their wives, or even looking lustfully at their own wives. So Jesus is not introducing a new requirement, he’s making plain what’s already inherent in the Law.

Dr. Dan Doriani

When Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you,” he was not contradicting the Old Testament. He was not saying, “The Old Testament is wrong, and I will set it right.” He was, however, correcting, in the first place, misunderstandings of the Old Testament, which generally tended at the time toward a relatively shallow or legal or, we might say, legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament. And he was also correcting, shall we say, a merely superficial reading. So, you have something like, “You shall not kill.” Jesus says, “You’ve heard that it was said to the ancients long ago, ‘You shall not kill.’ But I say to you...” and then he moves on from there. Well, he certainly doesn’t contradict it. He certainly doesn’t say, “And you’ve heard that it was said long ago that you shall not kill, but by the way, you can kill people.” Now, we may say that in the case of a just war it’s permissible to kill, and so forth, but that’s already in the Old Testament. What Jesus does instead is to say, “Look, you might have been satisfied by refraining from killing someone, but I say to you that we must root out the hatred that leads to murder. You must root out the despising that leads to murder.” Even the belittling statements — don’t call someone “*racca*.” Don’t call someone “*morra*.” Don’t call them stupid. Don’t call them a fool. Don’t say they have an empty head. Don’t say they have an empty heart. Because when you do, you devalue them.

What makes people kill? Well, rage makes them kill. So, don’t be angry. Despising makes people kill. Indifference makes people kill. What’s the most common form of

killing in America and the world today? Surely, it's the taking of the life of the unborn. And why does it happen? Because they're despised. Because someone says, "They are '*racca*.' They are '*morra*.' They are worthless. They are better to me dead than alive. They don't deserve to live." "This world would be a better place — I'd be happier if this person were dead." "I do not care about that life." So, it's not just anger, but belittling. Of course, the thing that Jesus does is move beyond. You know, he just keeps going deeper and deeper in the Law. So, "don't kill," "don't be angry," "don't despise," "don't belittle," "don't call people names." And then at the very end he switches it, and he says, "Oh, by the way, and one more thing, don't let anybody be angry and want to kill you either." If you go to the temple, and you're about to offer a gift on the sacrifice, and you remember that your brother has something against you — not that you have something against them, but they have something against you — go and be reconciled. It's not enough to put off your anger. You have a responsibility, indeed, to put off anger if you possibly can throughout this world, with people who are justly angry, and even with people who are, most irritatingly, unjustly angry at you. Remove murder and all murderous, or pre-murderous, dispositions from yourself and everyone around you.

Dr. Ben Witherington III

One of the interesting things about the Sermon on the Mount is the so-called antitheses — "You've heard it said... but I say to you." Now what's interesting about this is that sometimes Jesus is contrasting his own teaching with the teaching of earlier Jewish teachers. You've heard the elders say "X," I'm saying "Y," and sometimes there really is a correction, if you will. But even more than that, Jesus is actually saying here, "I'm instituting a new covenant. New occasions call for new duties, new commandments. You have heard Moses say, 'If you're going to divorce your wife, give her a bill of divorce,' but you see, Moses gave that commandment due to the hardness of your heart. I'm now saying something to you different. I'm saying you're going to be called to a higher standard of rectitude now in the new covenant. No divorce." Now that's certainly different from Moses. I wouldn't want to call it a contradiction, but I'd say it's different. And the difference is he's intensified the level of demand. I mean, the demand from the beginning was that a man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife and stay with the spouse permanently. That leads you to understand that there are a variety of things in the Old Testament that were given for the hardness of heart of God's Old Testament people, and probably also that the Holy Spirit has not yet been poured out on all flesh as well. Well, Jesus brings the new covenant, and that brings with it some old things, some new things, some things reaffirmed, some things intensified, and some things completely new altogether new.

Question 14:

Was Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience new, or was it already present in the Old Testament?

As Jesus applied the Old Testament to his day, he often drew attention to our hearts and our motives. And some Christians have thought that attention to the heart was

a new teaching — that the Old Testament only ever required external adherence to the Law. Was Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience new, or was it already present in the Old Testament?

Dr. James Hamilton

Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience was absolutely present in the Old Testament. If we think, for instance, about the Levitical sacrificial system, these Israelites are required to bring up a very expensive, flawless animal, and they're going to put this thing to death and they're not really going to receive anything from it. So, really, the only people who are going to do this are those who believe that what Moses has prescribed for them actually will make them right with God. And believing that, they then carry this out, which costs them a lot of money. It's going to result in them getting absolutely filthy, they'll be bloody, and the only thing they walk away with is the peace of mind that they have obeyed God and that, as Leviticus says, they've made atonement for their sin and that God, now, is not going to strike them dead.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience is a concept that was already present in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God sent prophets to teach his people that their belief should be earnest and deeply felt. Jesus wasn't introducing a new idea. As God, he has always known our hearts, and he has always wanted us to obey him sincerely.

Question 15:

Why did so many people that witnessed Jesus' miracles still reject him as Messiah or Christ?

Many of Jesus' teachings challenged the Jewish religious leaders of his day and in the days of the early church. So, when Matthew recorded Jesus' teachings in his gospel, he typically recorded miracles, too, in order to confirm that these difficult teachings were supported by divine authority. So, why did so many people that witnessed Jesus' miracles still reject him as Messiah or Christ?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Why did the Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah, despite the fact that they saw his miracles? I think there's two key factors that we have to keep in mind. One is the Jews were really focused on political liberation. They were under the oppressive reign of the Romans, suffering from crushing tax burden, and so they wanted a Messiah who would lead military victory against the Romans, and Jesus showed no signs of doing that. So I think, probably, even though they thronged to him to be healed, to be fed by the loaves and the fishes, they really didn't see him as the Messiah they wanted, which was a conquering Messiah. But there's another major factor and that focuses on the religious leaders themselves. Whether Jesus performed miracles or was purported to perform miracles, for them, Jesus was primarily a threat. He was a threat to their influence among the people. He was a threat to their leadership, especially when he came to Jerusalem and cleared the temple, for example. He was really

claiming that Israel was in apostasy, and they were the leaders over Israel, so they were responsible, if you will, for that disobedience to God and for that apostasy. So Jesus directly claimed their authority as Israel's shepherds, as Israel's caretakers, and so they were going to reject him as a threat to their power; to their influence, no matter what he did, no matter what miracles he performed.

Question 16:

Why should the church be important to Christians?

Sometimes, people are willing to accept that Jesus is the Christ and that he performed many miracles and was a true and authoritative teacher, but they aren't willing to accept the idea that the church Jesus established is important. Why should the church be important to Christians?

Rev. Mike Glodo

Well, we should understand that it's God's purpose to gather us into Jesus' church. There are things God does for us in the church that he doesn't do for us outside the church. We have the Lord's Supper, which Jesus instituted. We have baptism, which marks the entrance into the assembly, or the church of Jesus. We also have to appreciate letting Scripture interpret Scripture, that the church is the apple of Jesus' eye. The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that he loved her and gave himself up for her. And it's Jesus' desire to gather his people into a community. And this is really a present important reality for us, that Jesus himself was the embodiment of the kingdom. But as he gathers us into him, he also gathers us into a fellowship with one another. It's not just an elective or voluntary organization where we can get things done better, but we reflect the unity of Jesus when we unite together in his church and come under his shepherds, because he did leave us, first of all, apostles. He told Peter, "You are the rock on which I will build my church." Jesus is the cornerstone, the apostles are the foundation stones — we're told in places like Ephesians 4. And we're all being built into a spiritual house or a temple for God, as I Peter 2 reminds us. And so, we're not just followers of Jesus individually, but we are the embodiment of this new creation that Jesus has brought in by his resurrection from the dead and by his giving of the Spirit to us as his new temple, so that we are the presence of the kingdom of God in the church where people can find mercy and forgiveness, and they can find provision when they lack, and they can find companionship when they are lonely. So the church really is a foretaste of the new heavens and earth, which will one day be visible throughout the whole creation.

Question 17:

What practical encouragement can we draw from the fact that we're part of God's family?

One way Matthew's gospel draws attention to the importance of the church is by characterizing it as the family of God. What practical encouragement can we draw from the fact that we're part of God's family?

Dr. Steve Harper

When Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven in Matthew, to me, that's as expansive as it can get. I mean, he could have talked about the kingdom of Palestine, or the kingdom of Rome, or the kingdom of Greece, but he talks about the kingdom of heaven. That's almost even more than, you know, the kingdom of earth. That's almost connecting the visible and the invisible, the time-bound and that which is eternal. So it's a huge concept, and it would be easy for us to get lost in that. And what saves us from doing that, I think, is when he talks in the Lord's Prayer and says, "When you pray say, 'Our Father.'" My teaching area is spiritual formation, and one of the things I say about the Lord's Prayer is that we start prayer by the recognition that at any given moment there could be millions of other people who are praying at the same time. One of the reasons we call God "God" is that God can take each one of those prayers and can deal with them as if they were the only one that was, you know, vying for his attention in that moment. But that brings us into a holy fellowship, part of that kingdom of heaven personnel. Then right after that, of course, is the word "Father," so that no matter who I am or where I am in that prayer, I'm moving toward God as "*Abba*," moving toward God as Father. And if a person in Poland is calling God "Father" and I'm calling God "Father" in the United States, then that means we're brothers and sisters. If we have the same father, then we're members of the same family. So I think Matthew gets at this in a powerful way with the concept of the kingdom of heaven, which he uses over and over again. But it's the life of prayer that draws us into the realization that in the moment that I'm praying, I'm praying with other people who are saying the same thing that I am, but when they're saying what I'm saying, it means we're family.

Question 18:**Why does suffering currently exist in the kingdom of heaven on earth?**

Being part of God's kingdom and family is a source of blessing and encouragement. But God's people aren't yet experiencing all the blessings that Scripture promises. In fact, even though we have an abundant life in Christ, we still experience sorrow and sickness and death. We still suffer. Why does suffering currently exist in the kingdom of heaven on earth?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Life is filled with suffering. Ever since the fall of humanity, God has cursed the world and brought a relentless difficulty to every day. The world has difficulty and pain and suffering woven throughout. And especially if we pay attention, we will find that an undeniable fact. So how, then, do we find peace and joy in the midst of all the trial? Well, it comes through depending on God, the Creator and the one who cursed everything, and his redeeming work, if we're ever going to have hope. The Bible says that when you see things from God's perspective, that, as hard as the suffering is in this life, it's a slight, momentary affliction compared with the surpassing weight of glory that will be revealed. Paul says in Romans 8 that the struggles of this present

time, the suffering of this present time, isn't even worth comparing with the glory that's going to be revealed. So, when we are able to trust God in his sovereign goodness, that he is all powerful, he's all good, as he's working out his plan, and even in the midst of suffering — often mostly in the midst of suffering — God is refining us, and redeeming us and in the process of restoring what was lost in the Fall. That's where we find our hope, in the God, who's working everything out for good, and for his glory. Ultimately, suffering in the fallen world is solved by the cross of Christ. The most horrible thing that's ever happened, the most evil thing that's ever happened is Jesus, the only man who never sinned, being nailed to a cross and bearing the wrath of God in our place. Well, that's the ultimate solution to the problem of evil. Christ comes, and he resolves this deep problem of evil that we have. And so, God solves the problem in Christ. He doesn't leave the problem unsolved. He gets right at the root of the problem and defeats the sin that got us in this trouble in the first place.

Question 19:

Why did Jesus call his followers to the difficult and dangerous task of evangelizing the entire world?

Matthew ended his gospel by quoting Jesus' command that Christians in every age go into the whole world where persecution abounds and make disciples of all nations. Why did Jesus call his followers to the difficult and dangerous task of evangelizing the entire world?

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

The Great Commission in the Gospel of Matthew declares that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and that Jesus has sent us out to make disciples of all nations. With such great authority behind us, why do we still suffer? I believe this is the cost of being disciples. From the very beginning, the Gospel of Matthew gives us descriptions and prophecies concerning the kingdom of heaven. And during this overlap of the ages of the kingdom, we're like wheat among the tares. We can't escape the suffering that's already in the world. That's why we're called to be patient in the midst of suffering while we complete the work of the Great Commission. And in the meantime, there's simply no way to escape suffering.

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, the Great Commission as recorded at the end of Matthew's gospel is to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, teaching men and women to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. And there is a thrust out into all nations with the unique message of Jesus Christ, and the challenge to not just make converts but to make faithful disciples and followers of him. And the church continues in that role even now, to make sure that all unreached places have the opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus Christ and thus continue that commission.

Dr. Peter Kuzmič

I think the most crucial question that we have to ask is, how do the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world intersect? Where and why do they collide? Where do they partner? How does the gospel of the kingdom relate to the conditions of humanity in the world in which we live? You know, we evangelical Christians claim to be the “Great Commission” Christians. I hear the Great Commission called it all the time, and I tell my American friends, “Wait a moment. You are not really faithful to the Great Commission when you say, when you call the Great Commission, Matthew 28, and you say, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations.’” Again, I say, that’s not where the Great Commission begins. It doesn’t begin with our going. It begins with his being. And so, it really begins a verse earlier where the risen Lord gathers his disciples and says, “All power,” — depending on the translation. I think New International Version says, “All authority.” The Greek word “*exousia*” is not easy to translate. It could be translated “dominion,” you know, relating to the rule of the kingdom — kingdom of God. “All power,” all *exousia*, “in heaven and on earth is given to me. Therefore,” I will translate, “as you go, make disciples of all nations.” This is a very important linkage.

Now, when Jesus says, “All power in heaven and on earth is given to me,” for somebody out in the world who doesn’t understand biblical language, that sounds scary. Whoever claims all power is dangerous. We’ve known here in Europe, West and East, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin. We’ve known in other parts of the world, from Mao Tse Tung to Pol Pot, and so on, history’s full of tyrants and dictators who claim to accumulate all power, and became very destructive, killing millions, if not hundreds of millions, of innocent people. Now, Jesus is the only one who can claim all dominion, all power, with legitimacy. And by the way, his power is not destructive because it is power and love, power motivated by love, power moderated by love. See, if you have love alone, you have a nice sentiment, but maybe you are helpless because you don’t have power to change anything. If you have power alone without love you destroy, you kill, you hate. It’s the divine genius that brings love and power together. “God so loved the world that he sent his Son.”

Now, Jesus, who is the incarnated love, and who claims all power — and remember it’s after his resurrection, that is central to his kingdom. Kingdom is Jesus’ master thought. In the first three gospels alone, 121 times you have the kingdom mentioned. We don’t understand who Jesus was, why he came, what he taught, and what happened on the cross and what happened on the third day. We don’t understand what he means when he says, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” He is the only one that can legitimately claim all power because he is the only one that walked on this planet earth and never sinned, never lied, never deceived. He’s also the only one who, after he was killed, dead, buried, came back. So, he’s the risen Lord. It is the inauguration of a new era of human history. He’s bringing hope to the nations. And so the kingdom of God is at work in very powerful ways, and that’s where world evangelization and discipling the nations then is based on this, what I call, “the Great Foundation.” You don’t have a Great Commission without the Great Foundation. And then he caps it with a great promise, “And I will be with you to the very end of the ages.” So Jesus

the Lord, Jesus the King, is the ruler who has all power, and so we go, we disciple, we teach, we proclaim his rule in his power.

Question 20:

What exactly is repentance, and what does it have to do with God's kingdom?

Christians have been given the monumental task of evangelizing and discipling the whole world. And throughout the world and history, the church has found a variety of ways to do that. Not all believers agree on what a gospel presentation should sound like or what principles should be emphasized in discipleship. But it's clear that when Matthew recorded Jesus' example for us, he often focused on Jesus' teaching that the presence of the kingdom of heaven obligates us to repent. What exactly is repentance, and what does it have to do with the God's kingdom?

Dr. David Bauer

The notion of repentance is very closely related to the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's gospel. This is suggested by the very structure of the passage, which calls persons to repent and announces the kingdom of heaven — Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" So, repentance has its basis in the proclamation of the kingdom; "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This means a number of things. It means for one thing that the possibility of repentance comes by virtue of the presence of God's end-time kingdom in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It's because God is at work in Jesus Christ bringing in his end-time kingdom that repentance is possible. This means, then, that repentance is not something that is a human possibility. It's a human impossibility. Humans can do it only as they respond to what God has already done. This is truly gospel then. It has to do with the possibility of our acting in truly redemptive and holistic ways, achieving goodness in life by virtue of what God has already done, what he has offered to us in Jesus Christ.

Beyond that, however, the linking of repentance with the kingdom of heaven, as the Matthean Jesus does there in 4:17, gives specific content to what repentance means. Repentance has often been pointed out, or the word, the verb "to repent" is in the Greek *metanoeo*, which really means "a changing of the mind," or in context perhaps better, "a turning around of the whole of life beginning with one's thinking," a realignment of all of life beginning with thinking. Matthew 4:17, then, suggests that repentance involves a reorientation of the whole of life beginning with the way one thinks around the one ultimate reality that God is bringing in his kingdom in the person of Jesus Christ and is about to bring it to consummation with the second coming of Christ.

Matthew's gospel testifies that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah that the Old Testament promised would bring God's heavenly kingdom to earth. Matthew wanted his readers to be confident that Jesus was who he claimed to be, and that the

blessings of God's kingdom could be obtained only through faithfulness to Jesus. Matthew also wanted his readers to take up the call Jesus had given to his church, namely, to preach the good news of Christ to the whole world, and to make disciples of the nations. There's no doubt that Christian life can be difficult, since our Lord hasn't yet consummated his kingdom on earth. But if we remain loyal to him, Matthew's gospel assures us that the blessings we'll receive will be worth any price.

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The Gospels

LESSON THREE

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK



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The Gospels

Lesson Three

The Gospel According to Mark

INTRODUCTION

Every day, thousands of Christians suffer persecution simply because they follow Christ. On a daily basis, millions of believers face the possibility of having their property confiscated; their leaders beaten and jailed; and their families harmed, kidnapped, or even murdered.

In fact, the persecution of Christians was on Mark's mind as he wrote what is now the second gospel of the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark. The early Christian church had suffered in many ways. But how were believers to understand the significance of their suffering? What could Jesus' example teach them about their difficulties? Mark responded to questions like these by telling the story of Jesus' life in ways that strengthened the faith of early Christians and encouraged them to persevere.

This is the third lesson in our series *The Gospels* and we have entitled it "The Gospel According to Mark." In this lesson, we'll look closely at Mark's record of Jesus' life so that we can apply his teachings more effectively to our modern lives.

Our study of Mark's gospel will divide into three main parts. First, we'll consider the background of Mark's gospel. Second, we'll explore its structure and content. And third, we'll look at some of its major themes. Let's begin with the background of Mark's gospel.

BACKGROUND

We'll explore the background of Mark's gospel by considering the author Mark himself, his original audience, and the occasion or circumstances of his writing. Let's look first at the author of Mark's gospel.

AUTHOR

We'll look at the authorship of Mark's gospel in two parts. First, we'll look at the traditional view of its authorship. And second, we'll explore the author's personal history. Let's start with the traditional view on this gospel's authorship.

Traditional View

Early church tradition is unanimous that the Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark. When we look in the New Testament, John

Mark is described as a cousin of Barnabas. He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey in the book of Acts. His mother is described as having a home in Jerusalem in which the early disciples met. Peter mentions John Mark as his son in one of his letters. Papias says that John Mark followed Peter around in Rome and accurately wrote down his teaching.

— Dr. Robert Plummer

Among the earliest Christian writers that said Mark wrote the second gospel was Papias. Papias lived at the beginning of the second century, and was a bishop in Asia Minor around A.D. 130.

We know of Papias' view from the famous church historian Eusebius, who wrote around A.D. 325. In his work *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 39, section 15, Eusebius offered this quote from Papias:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers.

According to Papias, Mark's gospel was heavily dependent on the teaching of the Apostle Peter. Mark had not been an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus, but he recorded what Peter had seen and heard from Jesus.

I think that the very earliest church traditions we have are sufficiently close to the time of the writing of the gospels and the early circulation of the gospels for people to have had some good information. And much the best example of this is what we know from Papias, who was Bishop of Heirapolis in Asia Minor the beginning of the second century. Papias wrote a big book which, sadly, has not survived, and we only have some little fragments of what he wrote, but among these are some comments on the gospels. And notably, Papias tells us that Mark wrote his gospel depending on the preaching of Peter. He was Peter's interpreter according to Papias, which presumably means that he translated Peter's Aramaic into Greek or Latin. And Papias tells us that he composed the gospel out of his knowledge of Peter's preaching. I think that's probably the most authentic and early tradition we have about the Gospels, and really, I see no reason to question it.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

Other writers in the early church also affirmed the traditional view that Mark wrote this gospel. For example, the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* to the second gospel, written around A.D. 170, directly asserts Mark's authorship. The church father Ireneaus,

who wrote around A.D. 177, also affirmed this view. And in addition to this, the earliest Greek manuscripts that give a title to this book call it “According to Mark.”

The evidence affirming that Mark wrote the second gospel was widespread in the early church. In fact, we have no record from the ancient church of any significant debate over his authorship. Although in recent centuries some scholars have tried to deny this traditional view, they have not refuted the ancient testimony to Mark’s authorship, nor have they been able to point to anything in the gospel itself that rules out Mark as its author. For these reasons, modern Christians can confidently affirm that Mark wrote this gospel.

Now that we’ve confirmed the traditional view that Mark wrote this gospel, let’s explore his personal history so that we can better understand his account.

Personal History

According to Acts 12:12, Mark was the son of a woman named Mary who lived in Jerusalem. It was in her home that some of the Christians in Jerusalem met to pray for Peter while he was in prison. So, Mark’s association with Peter and other apostles began at least this early.

Mark was also the cousin of Barnabas, as Paul mentioned in Colossians 4:10. He even assisted Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. But as we learn in Acts 13:13, Mark deserted them in the middle of the trip and he returned to Jerusalem.

As a result, Paul refused to allow Mark to join him on his second missionary journey. As we read in Acts 15:36-41, Paul and Barnabas separated over the issue. So, Barnabas took Mark with him to minister in Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas to replace Barnabas as his traveling companion.

According to Colossians 4:10, however, Mark later won back Paul’s confidence, and was even with Paul during one of his imprisonments.

Later, Mark also assisted Peter when he ministered in Rome. In fact, he had such a close relationship with Peter that Peter affectionately called Mark, “my son” in 1 Peter 5:13. It was probably during this time that Peter taught Mark most of the details of Jesus’ earthly ministry that are recorded in Mark’s gospel.

Mark or John Mark, as his full name is, is a fascinating character in the Bible. He shows up just briefly at a few instances. His mother was named Mary. His mother owned a house in Jerusalem, we know, because the church at times met at that house. He was the cousin of Barnabas, who was one of the missionary companions of the apostle Paul. He traveled with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Church history tells us he was a close associate with Peter, as well. In fact, church tradition tells us that Mark, in fact, his gospel was really, sort of, the recollections of Peter. So some people say, “Well, who is this Mark? He wasn’t an apostle.” Certainly true that he wasn’t an apostle, but just look at his credentials; quite amazing credentials. He almost certainly saw and knew Jesus maybe as a very young youth at the time. So he was an eye-witness to Jesus, almost

certainly an eye-witness to the resurrection. Who were his mentors? His two main mentors were Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter, really the representative of the twelve apostles. So, qualified to write a gospel of Jesus Christ? Absolutely qualified.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

Now that we've talked about Mark as the author of this gospel, we should explore the identity of Mark's original audience.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

The witness of the ancient church and several details of Mark's gospel point to the churches in Italy, especially in the city of Rome, as Mark's original audience.

We'll explore the idea that Mark wrote to the churches of Italy and Rome by looking briefly at the witness of the early church and at some details of Mark's gospel itself. Let's turn first to the witness of the early church.

Witness of Early Church

The three ancient witnesses we mentioned earlier — Papias (who wrote around A.D. 130), the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* (written around A.D. 170), and Irenaeus (who wrote around A.D. 177) — all reported that Mark wrote his gospel in Italy, and some specifically identified the city of Rome. Moreover, none of them suggested that Mark had sent his gospel to the church in any other city. This indicates that Mark wrote to the local churches where he lived. And this conclusion is strengthened by 1 Peter 5:13 which locates Mark in Rome during the days he ministered alongside Peter.

Of course, like all the Gospels, history proves that God intended the Gospel of Mark to be used by the whole church in all ages. But we are better prepared to interpret Mark's gospel the way he intended when we understand that he wrote out of a deep concern for what was happening to the Italian, and especially, Roman Christians of his day.

In addition to the witness of the early church, many details of Mark's gospel also suggest that he wrote to churches in Italy, and more particularly in Rome. We'll mention four details of Mark's gospel that support the claim that he wrote to the churches of Italy and Rome.

Details of Gospel

First, on a number of occasions, Mark explained Palestinian customs to his audience. For example, Mark explained the Pharisees' practice of washing their hands in

Mark 7:3-4. Explanations like this suggest that Mark's audience included a substantial number of Gentiles who lived outside Palestine.

A second detail that is compatible with an Italian and Roman audience is that Mark explained Aramaic expressions. For example, listen to his explanation of the names given to James and John in Mark 3:17:

James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder) (Mark 3:17).

Mark provided similar explanations in 5:41, 7:34, and 15:22, 34. Aramaic speaking Palestinians would not have needed these explanations, and even many Jews outside Palestine would have been familiar with Aramaic and Hebrew from their synagogues. So, this detail suggests that Mark wrote to Gentiles outside Palestine.

A third detail that points even more clearly to an audience in Italy and Rome is that Mark used more Latin words than any other gospel writer, indicating that a substantial part of his audience understood Latin.

During the first century, Latin was not widely spoken in the Mediterranean world. It was primarily limited to Italy, the homeland of the Roman Empire. So, it's significant that Mark used Latin words at least 15 times. For example, in Mark 12:42, he used the Latin word *lepta*, referring to a small copper coin. Although he spelled the word in Greek letters, the word itself was Latin and was not likely to have been understood by those who didn't speak Latin.

A fourth detail that shows the plausibility that Mark wrote to the churches of Italy and especially Rome is that Mark mentioned a man named Rufus.

In Mark 15:21, we're told that the man who carried Jesus' cross to Golgotha was the father of Rufus and Alexander — two men that play no role in Mark's gospel. So why did Mark mention them? One of the best explanations is that they were known to, or even part of, Mark's audience. And in fact, a man named Rufus is mentioned as a member of the Roman church in Romans 16:13. Assuming he is the same Rufus mentioned by Mark, the implication is that Mark wrote to the church in Rome.

None of these details individually proves that Rome was the destination of Mark's gospel. But their cumulative effect confirms the strong witness of the ancient church. And as we'll see later in this lesson, reading the gospel with a Roman audience in mind can help us draw out some of Mark's particular emphases, and apply them to our own lives in the modern church.

With the author and original audience of this gospel in mind, we're ready to examine a third aspect of the background of Mark's gospel: the occasion or circumstances of its composition.

OCCASION

We'll explore two aspects of the occasion for Mark's gospel. First, we'll consider the date when Mark wrote. And second, we will explore Mark's purpose for writing. Let's begin by looking at the date of Mark's gospel.

Date

The date of the composition of Mark's gospel can't be determined with absolute certainty. But overall, the evidence seems to point to a date in the mid- to late-60's of the first century.

Ancient witnesses such as Irenaeus and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Mark claim that Mark wrote his gospel after the death of Peter. Peter was most likely martyred in Rome during the persecutions inflicted on the church by the Roman emperor Nero, following the burning of Rome in A.D. 64. Papias may imply that Mark began his work while Peter was still alive, but he does not rule out the possibility that Peter died before Mark finished. So, it seems reasonable to accept that the earliest date Mark would have completed his gospel would have been sometime around Peter's death in A.D. 64.

The latest year Mark could have written is harder to determine. As we saw in an earlier lesson, many scholars believe that Mark was the first gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke both used Mark as a reference when they wrote their own gospels. Since none of these three gospels mentions the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, which took place in A.D. 70, many scholars conclude that Matthew, Mark and Luke were all written before that time. And if Matthew and Luke received and utilized Mark's gospel before completing their own works, it's safe to say that Mark was completed even sooner than A.D. 70 — certainly by A.D. 69, and probably as early as A.D. 67, which would provide more time for Matthew and Luke to have become familiar with Mark's gospel before writing their own.

With the date of Mark's gospel in mind, let's consider his purpose for writing.

Purpose

In one sense, Mark and all the other gospels shared one common purpose: to preserve a true historical record of Jesus' life and teachings. From A.D. 50 onward more and more of the apostles and eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were dying. So, there was an increasing need to preserve their testimony and witness. As Eusebius and other early church writers mentioned, part of Mark's purpose was to preserve Peter's record of Jesus' ministry.

But preserving this record was not Mark's only purpose. As with every gospel writer, Mark didn't just want his readers to learn about Jesus. He also wanted them to draw lessons from the life of Jesus that they could apply to their own lives. But what were their lives like?

The 60's A.D. in Rome was a really tough time for Christians. You've got to remember that up until that time, in Roman law, if you were Jewish you were part of a recognized religion; it was known as the *religio licita*, a permitted religion. And so there's not much persecution coming to Jewish Christians because the Romans are thinking, "Well, they're just part of Judaism." But what happens when the Roman authorities begin to sense, "Ah, this new religion

seems to be including Gentiles, non-Jews, and is rather different to Judaism?” Suddenly it’s no longer a safe or permitted religion, and the Roman authorities might get rather uptight about that. Now, that’s precisely what’s beginning to happen, or being recognized, in Rome in the early 60’s A.D. The year 59, Nero goes slightly mad, and the first five years of his reign are rather good, but from then on until he dies in 68, he’s becoming more and more unpredictable. Then you’ve got Paul arriving in Rome in about A.D. 60, and he’s willing to die for Christ and willing to show that this newfound religion is for everybody, including the emperor Nero. And it’s possible that as Nero encounters this, he begins to realize, here is a religion which I don’t like. I’m meant to be in charge, and here are these Christians proclaiming, “Jesus is Lord.” So, when there’s a great fire in Rome on July the 18th, A.D. 64, and Nero gets the blame, if you like; he then passes the blame on to this new group, this new sect called the Christians, and it’s tragic what we hear of that.

— Dr. Peter Walker

During the years that Mark was probably writing, the church in Rome was suffering persecution under the Roman Emperor Nero. Nero ruled from A.D. 54 to 68. He is notorious for blaming the Christians for setting fire to Rome in A.D. 64, and for punishing them in horrible ways.

Under the rule of Nero, Rome persecuted the church severely. Initially, Rome was constituted as a republic. Later, after the assassination of Julius Caesar, Augustus led his army, and occupied the City of Rome and dissolved the Senate. So, the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire, and Augustus became its first emperor. That marks the beginning of the history of Roman brutality. In fact, Nero wasn’t the worst in terms of persecuting Christians. Other emperors attacked Christianity even more fiercely, and many Christians suffered and were killed by being nailed to crosses or burned to death, according to historical records. There were many martyrs in the early church that by their deaths bore witness to the mercy and righteousness of God.

— Dr. Stephen Chan

Life was difficult in many ways for the Christians in and near Rome during this period. And as we’ll see, Mark designed his gospel to minister to their circumstances. While there are many ways to describe Mark’s purpose for writing, in this lesson we’ll focus on the idea that Mark wrote his gospel to strengthen the persecuted Christians of Rome.

Mark’s gospel made it clear that whatever difficulties and temptations the Roman Christians faced as they suffered for Christ, they could be sure that Jesus had already

faced them. He had been unjustly condemned in a Roman court. He had been beaten by Roman soldiers. And he had been crucified on a Roman cross. But through his suffering, Jesus had been victorious. And Mark wanted to assure his audience that if they followed Jesus faithfully, they would be conquerors too. Yes, they would suffer. But their suffering would be their path to glory, just as it had been for Jesus.

Now that we've looked at the background of Mark's gospel, let's turn to its structure and content.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

On a large scale, Mark's gospel divides into five main sections. First, Mark opened his gospel with a relatively brief announcement of Jesus as the Messiah in 1:1-13. Second, there is a large section of narrative describing the power of the Messiah in 1:14-8:26. Third, a short, pivotal centerpiece presents the apostles' affirmation of the Messiah in 8:27-30. Fourth, another large section of narrative deals with the suffering of the Messiah in 8:31-15:47. And fifth, there is a short conclusion that records the victory of the Messiah in 16:1-8. We'll look at each of these portions of Mark in some depth, beginning with the announcement of the Messiah.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE MESSIAH

Listen to how the gospel opens in Mark 1:1:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).

When Mark referred to Jesus as "Christ," he used the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. Similarly, the term Son of God was another indication that Jesus was God's Messiah.

In the Old Testament and in contemporary Jewish theology, the Messiah was to be the descendant of King David who would restore the royal throne to Israel and turn the nation into God's kingdom on earth.

This opening declaration is followed by a brief account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in Mark 1:2-11. At the end of Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, and God the Father's voice was heard from heaven announcing that Jesus was his beloved Son. In this way, both the Spirit and the Father confirmed that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah.

It is very interesting to think of what the Jews of Jesus' day thought in terms of the coming of the Messiah. And actually, there were a lot of diverse beliefs out there. We have some documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls that show that some believed in two messiahs coming, a

priestly messiah and a kingly messiah. But the mainstream expectation was that the Messiah would be a son of David and that he would bring in political peace, that he would drive out the Romans. I think the religious establishment believed that the kingdom would come in if Israel would obey the law. They actually viewed Jesus as a threat in that regard, because Jesus didn't seem to be advancing obedience to the law but transgression of it, at least in their view. So he didn't have the political machinery that they expected, and then in terms of the law, he didn't do what they expected as well, and so they were, I think, scandalized by him. Actually, I think at the end of the day, they viewed Jesus in terms of Deuteronomy 13, a person who did signs and wonders and miracles but was actually a false prophet and therefore that he should be put to death.

— Dr. Thomas Schreiner

But Jesus was not the kind of Messiah many people expected. In general, first-century Jews thought the Messiah would march into Israel and take over the government. But in Mark 1:12-13, we learn that immediately after Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit sent him into the desert to be tempted by Satan. He would ultimately triumph. But according to God's plan, his path to victory would follow a long road of trouble.

Following the announcement of Jesus as the Messiah, Mark described the power of the messiah in Mark 1:14–8:26.

THE POWER OF THE MESSIAH

In this section of Mark's narrative, Jesus began to demonstrate his power and authority as the Messiah. Many crowds gathered to see and benefit from this ministry, but they didn't recognize that Jesus' power proved he was the Christ. In fact, nowhere in this entire section did anyone refer to him as the Christ. Even Jesus remained silent about his own identity, and he encouraged others to remain quiet, too.

Of course, the first readers in Mark's Roman audience were Christians, so they already knew that Jesus was the Messiah. But Mark's strategy in this portion of the narrative allowed them to feel the tension of the crowds around Jesus, who must have wondered who this man of power really was, and what he had come to do.

Unfortunately, critical scholars have often taken Jesus' silence as an indication that Jesus was not self-conscious of his messianic role during his early ministry. But as we've seen in Mark 1:11, God himself announced Jesus' role as Messiah at his baptism. In this light, it's much better to understand Jesus' silence as strategic. Jesus had a particular goal to fulfill, and he knew that the more people flocked to him, the more that goal would be hindered.

Mark's narrative describing the power of the Messiah can be divided into four parts. First, Mark provided an introduction that set the tone for the entire narrative. Second, he focused on Jesus' localized ministry near the city of Capernaum. Third, he explained that Jesus' ministry expanded to the rest of the region of Galilee. And fourth,

he reported that Jesus eventually moved beyond Galilee, even into predominantly Gentile areas. We'll look at each of these three sections, beginning with the introduction in Mark 1:14-15.

Introduction

Listen to the way Mark summarized Jesus' preaching in Mark 1:15:

"The time has come," [Jesus] said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

Mark indicated that Jesus' central purpose in Galilee was to preach the gospel or good news that the kingdom of God was near, and that its blessings were offered to all those who would repent and believe.

Throughout his record of the power of the Messiah, Mark focused on Jesus' ministry in and around the region of Galilee, beginning near the city of Capernaum, and spreading out from there. By comparing Mark's account with the other gospels, it appears that Mark omitted times when Jesus ministered in other places. These omissions indicated that Mark's goal was to report Jesus' activities and strategy in the region of Galilee, rather than to provide a detailed report of all his travels.

After the introduction, Mark described Jesus' ministry near the city of Capernaum in the region of Galilee in Mark 1:16–3:6.

Near Capernaum

Mark began by reporting that Jesus called his first disciples in Mark 1:16-20. In this section, we see that one way people responded to Jesus was in radical obedience. Jesus told them to follow him, so they dropped what they were doing and became his disciples.

Next, Jesus proclaimed the gospel by teaching and working miracles in Capernaum in Mark 1:21-34.

During this time Jesus' fame began to spread throughout Galilee, as it would continue to do so throughout his ministry. Because of his growing fame, crowds began to gather around Jesus, often hindering his ability to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel. So, he began to instruct others not to promote him as Messiah.

Jesus then left Capernaum and began teaching and performing miracles in neighboring villages, as we see in Mark 1:35-45. Jesus moved to neighboring villages partly to spread his gospel through his teaching and miracles. But he also did it to escape the crowds in Capernaum that were preventing him from ministering freely. As he had done previously, he encouraged those he met not to spread reports about him.

Next, Mark reported that Jesus returned to Capernaum, where he clashed with Jewish leaders, as we read in Mark 2:1–3:6.

This part of Mark's gospel deals with things like Jesus' authority to forgive sin, his justification for ministering to sinners, and his teachings about the Sabbath. But it also introduces another consequence of his growing fame: Jesus' detractors began to grow in number, and to oppose him more strongly. In fact, the section ends by foreshadowing Jesus' death. In Mark 3:6, Mark reported that Jesus' opponents were so angry that many of them began plotting to murder him.

Jesus was not accepted because of his preaching and because of his miracles. When we read the New Testament, we think why wouldn't people accept him? Why wouldn't they see his power? Why wouldn't they hear his teaching? But the teaching of Christ... several things caused people to reject it. One was that his content was not what they wanted. They were expecting a kingdom on this earth. He was speaking about a kingdom that would come into the heart and transform people's lives, the rule and reign of God in people's hearts. It was also because his teaching struck to the heart. And of course his miracles were deeply hated because the enemies of Christ who disagreed with his teaching knew that his miracles in some way verified what he was saying. And so the fallen heart does not naturally or readily accept the teaching of God, and Christ's ministry is the glaring example of that, because here is God among men, and yet men reject him.

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

We often come to God with our agendas. We have our expectations of what he should be like, and how he should work. And when he defies our agendas, our expectations, often we don't have much tolerance for that. And so, people will hate Jesus when he comes preaching a Kingdom that doesn't fit their ideal Kingdom. He comes as a Messiah that doesn't fit their preconceived expectations of what the Messiah should be like. And so, he unsettles their expectations. And we don't like that. Sometimes Jesus was hated because he came with a very different plan than the religious leaders had. He came preaching a Kingdom that was going to remove the kind of power and prominence and authority, prestige they had in their religious roles and they didn't want anything to do with that. And so any time we come to God with our agenda, we're setting ourselves up to be in opposition to God rather than coming to him with humble hearts, teachable hearts, trusting him in whatever he brings our way.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Now that we've surveyed Jesus' work near Capernaum, let's see how he expanded his ministry throughout the region of Galilee in Mark 3:7–6:13.

Region of Galilee

At this stage, Jesus preached and demonstrated the nearness of God's kingdom in new areas, moving beyond Capernaum to the rest of the surrounding region. As he preached repentance and faith in these areas, he continued to attract crowds, and to inspire strong opposition.

This section begins with Jesus' withdrawal from the crowds in Mark 3:7-12. This paragraph sets the tone for the entire section by emphasizing that Jesus' fame was spreading everywhere, despite his attempts to minimize it. And the resulting crowds that gathered around him made it difficult for him to minister. This difficulty appears to be one reason that Jesus extended his ministry to other areas of Galilee.

The next section of this narrative reports Jesus' appointment of twelve of his followers to be his special disciples, as we read in Mark 3:13-19. Jesus chose these twelve disciples to help him preach the gospel and perform miracles. But Mark also reminded his readers that one of these disciples would eventually betray Jesus. Opposition to Jesus would come not just from his enemies, but even from his closest followers.

After this, Mark reported the opposition Jesus faced from teachers of the law and from his own family, as we see in Mark 3:20-35. This narrative demonstrates that as Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom with miraculous power, he faced opposition from all sides. Rather than receiving him as the Messiah, the teachers of the law believed he was possessed by the devil, and his own family believed he had lost his mind.

Following this, Jesus proclaimed the gospel through parables about the kingdom of God in Mark 4:1-34. Jesus commonly taught in parables when he was surrounded by unbelievers. He did this in order to reveal God's kingdom to those who believed, and to hide it from those who did not. As he told his disciples in Mark 4:11-12:

The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" (Mark 4:11-12).

Sadly, sometimes Jesus' parables also confused his disciples. But when this happened, Jesus explained his meaning in private to make sure they understood.

The main point of the parables in this section of Mark's narrative is that God would bring in the fullness of his kingdom only after a long process of slow growth through the spread of the gospel. Jesus was bringing God's kingdom to earth. But he was doing it in a prolonged way that would often require his followers to face suffering and opposition, just as he had.

Mark's account of Jesus' parables is followed by several displays of power in Mark 4:35-5:43. Here, Mark reported that Jesus controlled the weather, cast out demons, healed disease, and raised the dead. In each of these stories, the people were terrified in the face of danger. But after Jesus miraculously rescued them, their terror actually increased, because they didn't understand who this man of power really was.

The disciples, Jesus' followers, express fear in the gospel sometimes when they see Jesus doing dramatic things, when he is working amazing miracles. They express fear when God is at work. For example in Mark 4, the disciples are in the midst of a great storm on the sea. The waves are washing into the boat and it looks like the boat is about to be sunk, and Jesus is asleep on the cushion. So they wake Jesus up, hoping apparently that he'll help them bail out the boat, and they say, "Master, do you not care that we're drowning?" And Jesus gets up and he tells the wind and the waves to be quiet. And so they're saved, and they had been very afraid of the storm, but now Mark tells us, they were filled with great fear. Well, so why are they afraid? The storm's no longer there; the waters are calm. They're afraid because they know that the only person that can still the wind and the waves is the person who created the wind and the waves, God himself. And they realized that they are in the boat with God himself who has just stilled the wind and the waves. That creates fear in them because I don't think they quite yet know what kind of God this is. They've been sort of thrown for a loop, and they don't know the character of Jesus.

— Dr. Frank Thielman

Following these displays of power, Mark wrote about the opposition Jesus faced in his hometown of Nazareth in Mark 6:1-6. This narrative reemphasizes that many people strongly opposed Jesus at this stage in his ministry. Even as his gospel spread with power, and the crowds following him increased, the people of his own hometown rejected him and his gospel.

Finally, the account of Jesus' ministry in the region of Galilee concludes with the sending of the twelve disciples in Mark 6:7-13. Jesus sent his 12 disciples to preach the gospel of the kingdom and to perform miracles throughout the land of Palestine. But Jesus also made it clear that as the disciples spread the gospel of repentance and faith, people would respond to them in the same way they had responded to him. Some people would accept them, but others would reject them. Jesus consistently taught that the kingdom of God continues to grow despite its opposition.

After reporting Jesus' gospel ministry near the city of Capernaum and the surrounding region of Galilee, Mark turned his attention to the power of the Messiah in Jesus' ministry beyond Galilee in Mark 6:14–8:26.

Beyond Galilee

In recording Jesus' work beyond the region of Galilee, Mark continued to emphasize some of the themes we've already seen. He reported the powerful spread of the proclamation of the kingdom, and the reaction of enthusiastic crowds, and the increasing number of Jesus' opponents.

But Mark also began to focus on the disciples in new ways. He emphasized the ways Jesus trained them for the difficult days ahead. And he called attention to the ways they regularly misunderstood his teaching and failed in their commitments to him.

Mark's report of Jesus' ministry beyond Galilee begins with an emphasis on Jesus' growing fame in Mark 6:14-29.

In the past, when Jesus had limited his ministry to the area around Capernaum, his fame had spread throughout the entire region of Galilee. And now his fame continued to precede him. As Jesus remained on the outskirts of Galilee, his fame was spreading throughout Palestine and even reached King Herod. Mark also used this opportunity to address a question about Jesus' identity. Specifically, Mark explained that Jesus could not be John the Baptist, since King Herod had put John to death.

Next, Mark reported several miracles in Mark 6:30-56. This section begins with Jesus attempting to withdraw from the crowds, but then it describes several works of power that demonstrate why the crowds had gathered in the first place. Jesus displayed his power by feeding crowds of 5,000 people and 4,000 people, by walking on water in the Sea of Galilee, and by healing the blind and the deaf. His miracles demonstrated his undeniable control over all creation. And because of these powerful miracles, the crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. Sometimes they even preceded him.

Following Jesus' miracles, Mark reported the continuing opposition from the Pharisees in Mark 7:1-23. Jesus and the Pharisees clashed over the proper way to observe the Old Testament Law, the value of traditions, and the nature of holiness. And as a result, the tension between Jesus and the influential Jewish parties increased.

Lastly, Mark reported another set of miracles in Mark 7:24–8:26. This section begins and ends with statements about Jesus trying to avoid and even to prevent crowds. And between these statements, it reports that Jesus performed many miracles among both Jews and Gentiles. And it even records that some Gentiles had faith in him.

In the midst of this list of miracles, Mark drew special attention to the shortcomings of Jesus' disciples. Earlier in his ministry, the disciples had failed to understand the parable of the sower, as we see in Mark 4:13. And at this point, they still weren't able to understand some of his teachings. So, Jesus confronted them directly. Listen to Mark's record in Mark 8:14-17:

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand?" (Mark 8:14-17).

Jesus was talking about spiritual corruption, but his disciples thought he was talking about bread for their stomachs. It's easy to see why Jesus would have been frustrated with them.

Throughout Mark's report of Jesus' power as the Messiah, Jesus' miracles and teaching confirmed that he really was the Christ. So, why did so many people oppose him? Why did they reject him? Why did even his disciples have such difficulty

understanding and following him? It was largely because Jesus was not the kind of Messiah people anticipated. Instead of rising to political supremacy as they had expected, he was using his power to preach the gospel and minister to the needs of others.

The evidence from the first century suggests that the Jews were looking for, especially, a political and military Messiah who would establish God's kingdom, who would expel the Romans, defeat the Romans, and establish God's kingdom in Jerusalem as the center. So it was very nationalistic in that sense. Jesus didn't show signs that he was going to fulfill that nationalistic sense; instead he had a much larger vision, really. It wasn't about the Romans; it was really about creation itself. Creation was in a fallen state, and Jesus came to reverse the fall, to establish — once again to establish — God's kingdom on earth. And that kingdom meant the defeat of sin, the defeat of Satan, the defeat of death. So Jesus was looking at something much greater than merely a political victory, merely a military victory.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

Jewish people have been expecting for some five or six hundred years someone to restore the Kingdom to Israel. They haven't had a King; they haven't had their own independence. So there is a lot of tension in first century Palestine, that when Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom and hinting that he is the Messiah, they are really on tender hooks to hear what he is saying. What were they expecting? Well, they were expecting someone perhaps who was going to restore the temple; there were doubts about whether the temple was really — now it had been rebuilt by pagan king Herod the Great — whether that was really the temple that God intended. But more than that, they were longing for God to redeem Israel, to fulfill his promises that he had made in the Old Testament. Where is God going to fulfill his promises? So that's what they were particularly looking for, but by that they probably meant, well here we are, under Roman occupation, surely if God is going to fulfill his promises, he's going to get rid of the Romans. And probably they were expecting political independence. What we have in the New Testament, then, is Jesus claiming that he is the Messiah, that he is the one who's going to restore the temple — that actually he is going to be the true temple — and also he is going to be the one who's going to bring in the Kingdom, but actually it's not going to be a politically independent Jewish kingdom. Actually, it's going to be the news that Jesus Christ the King is Lord over the whole world. So, it's slightly different than what they expect, but it's a deeper fulfillment of what was promised.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Mark's original readers probably experienced the same tension the twelve disciples felt over the kind of Messiah Jesus was. The church in Rome had been planted at a time when Christianity was well received. And like much of the early church, they had probably expected Jesus to return relatively quickly to consummate his kingdom on earth. But instead, the passing years brought horrible suffering and persecution under Nero. So, Mark made it clear that Jesus would always be the powerful Messiah, even though he doesn't always do the things his followers expect. And because he's the powerful Messiah, believers can trust that when the time is right, he will victoriously consummate his kingdom just as he promised. But in the meantime, he is still the Lord, and he can sustain us through whatever troubles we face.

After Mark's long narrative describing the power of the Messiah, we come to the third main section of his gospel: a short episode that records the apostles' affirmation of the Messiah in 8:27-30.

THE APOSTLES' AFFIRMATION OF THE MESSIAH

This is the famous scene on the way to Caesarea Philippi in which Jesus drew out of his disciples the confession that he was the Christ. And almost every Markan scholar agrees that it forms the centerpiece of Mark's gospel.

In the first verse of the gospel, Mark wrote, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Jesus was the "Christ," the Messiah. But since that verse, the word "Christ" had not appeared anywhere in Mark's gospel. Mark had not spoken of Jesus as the Christ. He had not reported that the disciples had called him the Christ, or that the people who witnessed him had speculated that he was the Christ, or even that the demons had used the term Christ.

In fact, nearly everyone who had tried to identify Jesus had been wrong. They thought he was a mere miracle worker, or a prophet, or John the Baptist, or a lunatic, or a demoniac possessed by Beelzebub. But at this moment, Jesus decided it was time to press his disciples to acknowledge who he really was. Listen to their dialogue in Mark 8:27-29:

[Jesus] asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:27-29).

After 8 chapters of evidence, the apostles finally affirmed their belief that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the one who was bringing the kingdom of God.

After the apostles' affirmation of the Messiah, the fourth major section of Mark's gospel deals with the suffering of the Messiah. This section extends from 8:31-15:47.

In the first half of his gospel, Mark had focused on how Jesus' powerful ministry led up to the glorious affirmation that he is the Christ. But at this point, Mark began to emphasize a different aspect of Jesus' messianic work: his suffering and death in Jerusalem.

THE SUFFERING MESSIAH

Mark's record of the suffering of the Messiah divides into three main sections: Jesus' preparation of his disciples for his suffering and death, his confrontation with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that provoked his suffering and death, and finally his experience of suffering and death. We'll explore each of these sections, beginning with his preparation in Mark 8:31–10:52.

Preparation

The material describing Jesus' preparation of his disciples can be divided into three main parts, each of which begins with him predicting his suffering, death and resurrection. The first section focuses on Jesus as Lord of the Kingdom in Mark 8:31–9:29.

Mark began with a report of Jesus' unexpected strategy for bringing God's glorious kingdom to earth — namely Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection — which Mark explained in 8:31–9:1. Throughout his teachings in this section, Jesus talked about his own suffering, and warned his disciples that they would also have to suffer as they continued his gospel ministry.

After this, Mark called attention to Jesus' unique authority by reporting an event commonly known as the Transfiguration in Mark 9:2–13. In this event, Jesus' glory was revealed visibly to Peter, James and John. Moses and Elijah also appeared with Jesus, indicating that Jesus affirmed and continued in the teachings of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. But God commanded the disciples to honor and obey Jesus above even Moses and Elijah. This event prepared Jesus' disciples by reminding them to remain loyal to Jesus above all others and by encouraging them that loyalty to Jesus was the purest form of loyalty to God and his Old Testament revelation.

Finally, Mark focused on Jesus' unique power by revealing his ability to control demons in Mark 9:14–29. Jesus' disciples could not exorcise a particularly difficult demon, and Jesus taught that such demons could only be exorcised through prayer. But Jesus himself was able to cast out the demon with a simple command. In this way, he demonstrated his superiority over all others, and ensured his disciples that he had unlimited power to bring his will to pass. Regardless of the doubts and fears they were to experience when he was killed, his power should have encouraged them to stand fast in their faith in him.

The second part of Mark's account of Jesus' preparation for his suffering, death and resurrection deals with the values of the kingdom of God, and is found in Mark 9:30–10:31.

Like each section of Mark's account of Jesus' preparation for Jerusalem, this one begins with Jesus predicting his suffering, death and resurrection. This helps us see that Mark was still emphasizing the disciples' preparation for those events. After this prediction, Jesus continued to prepare his disciples by explaining that God does not judge things the same way human beings do. So, no matter what they suffered, and no matter what strange things happened, they weren't to judge matters in the way the world does.

Rather, they were to be assured that God was using these events to bring in his kingdom and to glorify Jesus.

After Jesus' prediction in Mark 9:30-31, Mark reported Jesus' teachings on the values of the kingdom. In this section, Jesus demonstrated how worldly intuitions clash with God's truth in five areas of life.

First, Jesus talked about honor in Mark 9:32-42, pointing out that those who are most honored in the kingdom of God are the ones that are honored least in this life.

Second, Jesus talked about worth in Mark 9:43-50. Specifically, he instructed his followers to get rid of anything that hindered them from pursuing the goals of the kingdom of God, regardless of how valuable those things seemed to be in this life.

Third, Jesus talked about marriage in Mark 10:1-12. His point was that marriage and divorce should ultimately be reckoned according to God's law rather than human law — even if human law seemed to be intuitively more fair.

Fourth, Jesus talked about children again in Mark 10:13-16. Despite what Jesus had said earlier, his disciples were still preventing children from approaching him. In response, Jesus reminded them that God had already given the kingdom to these children, so that by refusing the children the disciples were opposing God.

And fifth, Jesus talked about wealth in Mark 10:17-31. This is the well-known story of the rich young ruler, who was dismayed when Jesus told him that his attachment to money was hindering him from embracing the values of the kingdom of God.

In each of these sections of teaching, Jesus explained the values of God's kingdom so that his disciples would be better prepared to accept his suffering death, as well as the hardship they would have to endure as his followers.

The third part of Mark's account in Jesus' preparation for Jerusalem deals with leadership in the kingdom of God in Mark 10:32-52.

After predicting his suffering, death and resurrection in Mark 10:32-34, Jesus addressed the question of leadership in the kingdom in three parts.

First, he said that James and John would have to share in his suffering in Mark 10:35-40. They would drink of the same cup and undergo the same baptism. These metaphors implied that Jesus' followers would have to share in his sufferings because of their service to him.

Second, Jesus described leadership in the kingdom as service in Mark 10:40-45. He had mentioned this idea twice before when talking about the values in the kingdom. But this was the first time he had explained the reason behind it: Christian leaders have to be servants because they follow the model of Christ, who himself acted as a servant by suffering and dying for sin.

Third, Jesus demonstrated the motivation for servant leadership by showing mercy to the blind man Bartimaeus. Servant leaders are not to make sacrifices just because they want a greater reward in the kingdom, but because they truly have compassion for those they serve.

Jesus calls Christian leaders to be different, to be servants of their people. In this wonderful passage, in Mark's gospel 10:45, Jesus distinguishes the type of leadership that should be true of his followers from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. The predominant paradigm of leadership in Mark's day was the Roman demonstration

of power and dominance over their people. And Jesus said, “[I] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give [my] life as a ransom for many.” So Jesus is asking, commanding his followers to follow his type of leadership, to lead as a servant, and not to follow the paradigm of Roman dominance that was so prevalent in Mark’s day.

— Dr. Greg Perry

Jesus insisted that leadership in the kingdom of God can’t be modeled on the world’s pattern of leadership. Instead, it needs to follow his own example of suffering.

In some ways, this must have been disheartening news to Mark’s readers in Rome. Instead of reassuring them that their suffering was abnormal and would soon pass, Mark’s gospel assured them that suffering was the standard for those who follow Christ. But at the same time, this news should have had an encouraging side. The suffering of the church is part of Christ’s plan for victory. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:18:

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

After reporting Jesus’ preparation of his disciples, Mark turned to Jesus’ confrontation with the Jewish leaders in Mark 11:1–13:37.

Confrontation

Mark’s record of confrontation divides into two main parts: First, narratives of opposition in 11:1–12:44. And second, the Olivet Discourse in 13:1–37.

Throughout this section of his gospel, Mark reported how Jesus forced the hand of the Jewish leaders. In earlier parts of Mark’s gospel, Jesus had not looked for conflict with the Jewish leaders; he had faced opposition primarily as people had objected to his ministry of mercy. But in this section, Mark reported that Jesus actively sought opposition, in order to move toward his crucifixion.

First, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Mark 11:1–11 publicly declared him to be the Messiah and rightful King of Israel.

Next, his condemnation of Israel as a withered fig tree in Mark 11:12–14, 20–25, and his temple cleansing in verses 15–19, directly attacked the moral standing of the Jewish leaders and undermined their authority and influence over the people.

Jesus also argued with the chief priests, teachers of the Law, and elders in Mark 11:27–12:12. After defeating their challenge to his authority, he told the parable of the vineyard tenants that accused the Jewish leadership of mutiny against God. At this point, they were ready to arrest him, but their fear of the crowds discouraged them.

Next, Jesus argued with and refuted the Pharisees and the Herodians over Roman taxes in Mark 12:13–17.

After this, in Mark 12:18–27, Jesus proved that the Sadducees had misunderstood what the Scriptures teach about resurrection.

And finally, he attacked the teachers of the law in Mark 12:28-44. Although Jesus admitted that some of them knew the law, he insisted that as a whole they were controlled by greed and worldly ambition.

In one way or another, Jesus forced a public confrontation with every party of influential Jews: the priests, the teachers of the law, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. He gave every group a reason to hate him and to seek his death, in order to provoke them into killing him.

The second major section of Jesus' confrontation with the Jewish leadership is a discourse between Jesus and his disciples. This discourse is commonly called the Olivet Discourse because it took place on the Mount of Olives. Broadly speaking, it spans Mark 13:1-37. In this section, Jesus warned his disciples of the hardship they would face in the future so that they would not be caught off guard. He taught them that they would be dragged before rulers to testify about him. They would be beaten. They would be hated. Their families would fall apart. They would suffer natural disasters and great tribulation. In fact, he made it clear that persecution and suffering would characterize the church until his return.

But Jesus also gave his disciples great hope by assuring them of the final victory of the kingdom of God. For example, in Mark 13:26-27, he reminded them of the great victory that would be theirs when he consummated his kingdom in power and glory, as long as they remained faithful to him.

Predictably, Jesus' words to his disciples continued to incite the Jewish leaders against him. For example, in Mark 13:1-2, Jesus taught his disciples that the temple would be destroyed. But as we see in Mark 14:58, his words were overheard and misinterpreted, so that during his trial he was falsely charged with planning to destroy the temple himself.

Now that we've looked at Mark's account of the suffering of the Messiah in terms of Jesus' preparation of his disciples and confrontation with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, we're ready to turn to Jesus' experience of suffering and death in Mark 14:1-15:47.

Experience

The record of Jesus' actual experience of suffering and death is filled with well-known events: the betrayal by Judas, the prediction of Peter's denial, the failure of the disciples to watch and pray with Jesus in Gethsemane, Jesus' arrest, the two trials and Peter's denial, and finally Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

These are dark, threatening chapters. The mood is foreboding. They are filled with failure: failure of the Jewish leaders, failure of the crowds, failure of the Jewish and Roman legal systems, and failure of the disciples. Writing to a persecuted Roman church, Mark made it clear that the Jerusalem birth pangs of Christianity had been as severe as any in Rome.

Mark's record of Jesus' experience of suffering and death can be divided into four main parts, beginning with his anointing for burial in Mark 14:1-11. In this section, Mark reported some very important details. First, he said that the chief priests and teachers of the law were looking for a way to arrest and kill Jesus. Second, a woman anointed Jesus

with very expensive perfume, and he responded by saying that she had anointed him for burial. In this way, Jesus indicated that he would be killed in the immediate future. Third, Judas Iscariot began plotting to betray Jesus to the chief priests and teachers of the law. We might see this as the turning point in the story of Jesus' suffering and death. His death was no longer a vague threat but an imminent reality.

Next, Mark reported Jesus' last hours with his disciples in Mark 14:12-42. This part of Mark's narrative begins with Jesus and his disciples preparing for and eating the Last Supper in Mark 14:12-31. It was during this meal that Jesus instituted the Christian ordinance of the Lord's Supper. He also used this time to give his disciples some final preparations to help them through his suffering and death. For example, he warned them that they would all fall away from him, and he foretold Peter's denials.

After the Last Supper, the group went to the Garden of Gethsemane, as we see in Mark 14:32-42. According to this passage, Jesus was deeply distressed and troubled, and overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He was clearly suffering greatly in anticipation of his crucifixion.

The third section of Mark's report of Jesus' experience of suffering and death is the account of Jesus' arrest and trials in Mark 14:43–15:15. This section begins with Jesus' betrayal by his disciple Judas Iscariot in Mark 14:43-52. It continues with his trial before the Jewish leadership in Mark 14:53-65. Next, we read the report of Peter's denials that he knew and followed Jesus in Mark 14:66-72. And finally, we read about his trial before the Roman governor Pilate in Mark 15:1-15. At the end of these humiliating experiences, Jesus was flogged, and then handed over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified.

The fourth part of Mark's report of Jesus' experience of suffering and death covers Jesus' crucifixion in Mark 15:16-47. It begins with Jesus being handed over to the Roman soldiers to be beaten, humiliated, and put to death on a cross like a common criminal. From a human perspective, his suffering was overwhelming.

The fact that Jesus suffered this mistreatment at the hands of the Romans would have connected these events strongly to Mark's original audience of Roman Christians. They would have quickly seen the parallels between their Lord's suffering and their own, and should have taken his courage as an inspiration for them to persevere through their own difficulties.

But the worst part of Jesus' suffering was that the sin of the world was laid upon him, and he was subjected to the wrath of God the Father. Finally, after he was dead, he was laid in a tomb, his body unprepared for burial because there was no time left before the Sabbath.

Now that we've looked at the announcement of the Messiah, the power of the Messiah, the apostles' affirmation of the Messiah, and the suffering of the Messiah, we're finally ready to turn to the victory of the Messiah in Mark 16:1-8, where Mark described our Lord's resurrection.

THE VICTORY OF THE MESSIAH

Before we get into the content of this section, we should pause to explain why we say that the Gospel of Mark ends in 16:8. After all, most of our Bibles have twenty verses

in this chapter. But most of these Bibles also have notes saying that verses 9-20 don't appear in the most reliable ancient manuscripts of Mark's gospel.

In the ancient Greek manuscripts of Mark, there are three different endings. One group of manuscripts ends at verse 8. The second group ends at verse 20. And the third group has a two-sentence ending after verse 8.

A careful evaluation of all the evidence has led most scholars to conclude that Mark ended his gospel with verse 8. The most ancient and most important manuscript traditions favor the shortest ending as the original.

Many scholars believe that the other two endings seem to have been added because a scribe felt uncomfortable with the idea that Mark concluded the gospel with the sentence "They were afraid." But this scribal discomfort was unfounded. In fact, the theme of fear, awe and amazement runs throughout this gospel. And for this reason, the emphasis on fear is a very appropriate way to end this particular gospel. In fact, it also fits well with the experiences of Mark's original audience. As they faced persecution after the resurrection of Jesus, they were surely comforted to know that the earliest disciples of Jesus had also experienced fear.

Let's turn now to the account of Jesus' resurrection in Mark 16:1-8. Mark's resurrection account is shorter than the same account in the other gospels, but this brevity is completely in character with the outline of this gospel. As you'll recall, the announcement of the Messiah that opened the gospel was also very short, and so was the apostles' affirmation of the Messiah that forms the gospel's centerpiece.

This section on the victory of the Messiah begins with the women who came to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body on the third day after his death and burial. They were met by an angelic visitor whose message was clear and direct. Jesus had conquered death and risen in victory, just as he had predicted so many times throughout his ministry. Listen to the end of the gospel in Mark 16:6-8:

"Don't be alarmed," [the angel] said... "He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him..." Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (Mark 16:6-8).

The women's response is completely predictable in the context of Mark's narrative: they were afraid. Nearly everyone in this gospel responded to God's powerful presence in awe, amazement, and fear.

It's a Markan understatement. Here that the women have been commanded to go and announce his resurrection and instead they are fearful and they run away and say nothing to no one. And yet, here we are two thousand years later reading this and we know that's not the end of the story; we know that God's truth triumphed, and so this is again a foil that we repeatedly see in Scripture of human failure being contrasted with the faithfulness and the purposes of God.

— Dr. Robert Plummer

God's people will experience weakness and need in this life. This was true for Mark's original audience in Rome, and it has continued to be true for the church throughout the ages. But the good news of the gospel is that the kingdom of God has come. The Messiah has conquered the enemies of God's people — even the final enemy, death itself. And for this reason, the people of God can boldly face the enemies of the gospel of the kingdom. The victory is already ours.

Having considered the background and the structure and content of Mark's gospel, we're ready to look at some of its major themes.

MAJOR THEMES

The identity of Jesus as the Messiah or Christ is undoubtedly the most critical theme Mark communicated in his gospel. Mark wanted to make sure that his readers knew that Jesus had truly come to save them from their sins. Jesus was the king who had conquered death. He was powerful, fearsome, unstoppable, and glorious. He was the redeemer who had come to rescue them by bringing the kingdom of God to earth. And despite the fact that they couldn't see him anymore, he was still in control, and he had promised to return to finish the salvation he had started.

For our purposes in this lesson, we'll divide the theme of Jesus' messiahship into two parts. First, we'll consider Jesus as the messianic suffering servant. And second, we'll look at his identity as the messianic conquering King. Let's begin with Jesus' role as the suffering servant.

SUFFERING SERVANT

Our discussion of Jesus as the suffering servant will divide into three parts. First, we'll mention some Jewish expectations regarding the Messiah. Second, we'll briefly highlight the nature of Jesus' ministry as the suffering servant. And third, we'll talk about the proper response Mark wanted his readers to have to this aspect of Jesus' messiahship. Let's look first at the Jewish expectations for the Messiah that were common in Jesus' day.

Jewish Expectations

For hundreds of years before the time of Christ, the vast majority of Israelites lived outside the Promised Land. And those who remained in the Land suffered under the tyranny of Gentile rulers. At first it was the Babylonians, then the Medes and the Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. And this long history of suffering led Jewish theologians to emphasize the Old Testament prophecies that God would eventually send a messianic liberator to restore Israel's kingdom.

Jewish messianic hopes took many different forms. For example, the zealots believed that God wanted Israel to usher in the day of the Messiah by rebelling against the Roman authorities. Different apocalyptic groups believed that God would supernaturally intervene to destroy his enemies and restore the people. There were also nomists, like the Pharisees, who believed that God would not intervene until Israel became obedient to the Law. So, in Jesus' day, there were many people who longed and waited for their Messiah to come.

He came as a humble, suffering servant. Jewish messianic hopes looked for an immediate earthly political kingdom under the rule of Messiah similar to the kingdom that David had ruled centuries before. But Jesus didn't even try to establish this kind of kingdom during his earthly ministry. And this caused many people to reject him as the Messiah.

Interestingly, the idea of the Messiah as a suffering servant wasn't new. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah had indicated this role for the Messiah, especially in Isaiah 53, which the New Testament frequently applies to Jesus. We can even say that if Jesus had *not* suffered and served, then he wouldn't have met the Old Testament requirements as Messiah. And therefore, far from disqualifying him as the Christ, Jesus' suffering service is proof that he really is the Christ. But only a few people discerned this Old Testament theme during Jesus' lifetime. Most of them were so committed to contemporary Jewish speculations regarding the Messiah that they didn't recognize him when he came.

Clearly the concept of the Messiah is very important in the Old Testament. The Messiah is the Anointed One, the anointed King. It's interesting to wonder, how would Christ have come, if in fact Israel had been obedient and had not demanded a human king? But they did. And so you had this succession of "anointed ones" who were not caring for their people, who were not establishing God's justice in the world, who were self-centered. And so you have this longing emerging in the Old Testament. "Oh, couldn't we have a Messiah who would be what a Messiah is supposed to be?" And so you have this picture of the King who is coming, but especially in Isaiah there is a fascinating connection between this coming King and the Holy Spirit. The people of the Old Testament are not only longing for a Messiah, they're also longing for the Holy Spirit to come and enable them to obey their Torah. So it's interesting to see the ways in which Isaiah, in particular, pictures the relationship between the Messiah and the Spirit. He'll be filled with the Spirit; he is anointed by the Spirit. He is the one who speaks through the Spirit. And therefore, the apostles don't seem to be surprised when the risen Jesus says to them, "Wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father." It's as though, "Ah, finally the Messiah has said something we expected the Messiah to say: 'I'm going to make the Holy Spirit available.'" What they didn't do was to understand what the Messiah's cost would be to bring in this age of God's justice and the age of the Spirit. They did not connect Isaiah 53 to Isaiah 11. They did not connect the fact that the Messiah would

have to die in order to bring in this kingdom of justice and peace and the life of the Spirit.

— Dr. John Oswalt

With these Jewish expectations in mind, let's turn to Jesus' ministry as the suffering servant.

Jesus' Ministry

Jesus was a surprising Messiah because he conquered by dying. Early in the gospel, Mark reported the conflicts that eventually led to his crucifixion. And the second half of the gospel is dominated at first by the theme of Jesus' impending suffering and death, and then by his actual suffering and death.

And parallel to this emphasis on Jesus' suffering is an emphasis on his service. He healed and ministered to many different people. He gave his life as a ransom to redeem sinners. He obeyed God's will at every turn in order to benefit God's people.

One place where Mark powerfully joined these themes of suffering and service is Mark 10:35-45. In this passage, James and John asked Jesus for places of honor in Jesus' kingdom. Then the other ten disciples became angry at this aspiration to glory. But Jesus rebuked all twelve of them. He urged them to a life of service, and offered his own life as a model.

Servant leadership just requires the leader to just be actively involved in the life of the ministry and to be willing, as Paul would say, to pour themselves out in service of others, in supporting others, in equipping others. And so the leader doesn't just give, if you will, the command and say go and do--yes, the command is given, but the leader leads the way in accomplishing the goals and objectives. And that reminds me of what Paul said when he talked about laboring. He said he out-labored all his colleagues in that regard there. And so that gives you a tremendous sense of what it means to be a servant leader, to get down among the people and help bear the load and bear it redemptively.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Listen to Jesus' explanation for this kind of leadership in Mark 10:45:

Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Jesus made it clear that leadership was a form of service to God and those who were led. Leadership is not an opportunity for glory. On the contrary, it more often results in suffering for the leaders. In fact, Jesus knew that his mission of serving others would eventually lead to his death. But this was a mission he embraced. And he commanded his disciples to embrace it too.

Well, in Mark's gospel, he seems particularly keen that we get the message that Jesus is the suffering servant who is prophesied in the Old Testament. In the first half of the gospel, Jesus' role as the King was emphasized very much, and in the second half we move to Jesus' suffering and death. And perhaps a key verse is Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." And that particular verse comes in the context in which the disciples are encouraged to be servants like that, that Jesus is the model for us of actually not exercising our rights, but actually laying them aside for the sake of the advancement of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom. And Mark particularly gives us a model actually, of how we shouldn't lord it up on ourselves, we shouldn't be looking for the best seats in heaven as the disciples were often prone to do. But rather, we follow the model of Christ who voluntarily sacrificed himself for the sake of others, and that's the model that we follow.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

So then if we think about what this type of servant leadership that Jesus commands looks like, we can see in the Gospels how Jesus demonstrates that kind of leadership. The first thing that we see Jesus do as he encounters different people and their needs is that he listens very, very well. He meets them where they are. He pays attention to the material needs of their life, to the emotional needs of their life; he really listens to hear what they're saying between the lines, not just in their words. And so for example we can see in Mark's gospel this encounter with the father whose son has been troubled for years and years with demons, such that he cuts himself, and he doesn't feel that he can hope anymore. He says, please "help my unbelief." So instead of chiding him, Jesus responds to him, and he heals his son. And then we see just the trajectory of the gospel, that, where is Jesus going? Jesus is going to Jerusalem to lay down his life for his followers, to pay for their sins. This expression of sacrificial love that sets aside any sort of glory for himself in terms of the culture of that day, and then laying down his life for his followers. So this is the pattern that Jesus demonstrates in the gospel, the way he cares for and listens to the people he encounters, and then where he is going, to Jerusalem to lay down his life. That is servant leadership.

— Dr. Greg Perry

With Jewish messianic expectations and Jesus' ministry in mind, let's consider the responses Mark wanted his readers to have to this aspect of Jesus' identity as the Christ.

Proper Response

Jesus taught that his followers would have to suffer. They would face opposition in society. They would have conflicts with their families. They would be tempted and harassed by demonic forces. They would be persecuted, and some would even be killed. But he still required their loyalty and perseverance. Listen to how Jesus summarized this idea in Mark 12:30:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength (Mark 12:30).

Here, Jesus referred to Deuteronomy 6:5 in order to stress the totality of God's demands on the lives of his people. We have to be totally dedicated to God in every aspect of our being and lives.

Following Jesus involves sacrifice and suffering. But he still requires us to be wholly dedicated to him, and to be willing to live in ways that the world despises for the sake of his kingdom.

As just one example, consider the story of the rich, young ruler in Mark 10:17-31. He came to Jesus asking what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life, and Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. But Jesus' demands were greater than the rich young ruler was able to handle, so he went away dismayed. Jesus told his disciples that this shouldn't surprise them because it was "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." He went on to say that his followers had to be willing to leave behind family, homes, and possessions. They had to be willing be persecuted. They even had to be willing to be martyred for his sake. As Jesus had said in Mark 8:34-35:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

In one way or another, every Christian has a cross. But the glory and blessing of salvation is worth the sacrifice.

Because on the one hand, Jesus said take up the cross, but there are these moments in Peter's life where he looks in his hand and instead he sees a sword. He cut off the ear of the high priest. You see, this has been the dilemma of the church for centuries, sword or cross? Do we follow the way of human ingenuity or human methods or human wisdom? Or do we commit self-death by denying ourselves and

following Jesus? And Jesus made it clear that glory, the kind of glory that God offers through his Son, is only found through the way of the cross, following after the path of Jesus. So the question is not so much how can we compromise, where can we compromise, but really, will we follow Jesus? And when people are committed to that purpose, when they understand that the way of Jesus is the way of the cross, and to follow him means dying to self and living to him, then these questions of compromise and not compromise, unity and disunity, these things tend to solve themselves a great deal as long as we focus on the cross-shaped nature of the Christian life.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

Discipleship is a difficult path. In fact, according to Jesus, entering the kingdom of God is actually impossible when we rely on our own power to do it. But listen to how Jesus encouraged his disciples in Mark 10:27:

With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God (Mark 10:27).

We don't have the power to obey Jesus in the radical way he demands. But God does. And he uses that power within us in order to make sure that we enter his kingdom.

One of the worst things we can do is seek to grow in Christ, and to be sanctified, and grow in holiness and righteousness, apart from the power of the Spirit. That's not pleasing to God, that's not depending on the God who saved us to then in turn sanctify us. So the Spirit's work, the power of the Spirit, is absolutely essential for any good that comes out of our lives, any growth in our lives. The amazing thing is, as Jesus is our example in his humanity, that's exactly what we see in his life. The Holy Spirit comes and works in the life of Christ, enabling and empowering and leading him, anointing him at his baptism at the beginning of his ministry, even before that, bringing about the virgin conception where we have God becoming a man. We see the Spirit leading him out into the desert to be tempted. The Spirit comes and ministers to him. The Spirit is the empowering work in the life of Christ. And so, it's certainly the empowering work in the life of followers of Christ.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Mark wanted his original audience in Rome to know that their suffering and persecution was a sign that they were true followers of Christ. It was part of Jesus' plan for his kingdom. And Mark wanted his readers to be encouraged by this fact. He wanted them to have confidence that God would empower them to persevere through their

difficulties, just as he had empowered Jesus, so that they could face their sufferings with courage and hope.

Jesus is still bringing in his kingdom slowly; he is still using the suffering of his people as a means to that end; and he is still empowering us to endure. Suffering for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom shouldn't discourage us; it should comfort and inspire us. We suffer because we're his servants. And we're confident that one day our suffering will be rewarded with blessings beyond comprehension — blessings that more than make up for the difficulties we endure.

The second aspect of Jesus' identity we'll consider is his role as the conquering King that brings God's kingdom to earth.

CONQUERING KING

The Old Testament made it clear that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David, and that his job would be to restore the glory of David's throne and to rule over Israel forever. We see this prophesied in places like Psalms 89, 110 and 132, and confirmed in Mark 12:35. So, whenever Jesus was identified as the Christ or Messiah, his royal status was also affirmed. For example, this is why he was called "Son of David" in Mark 10:47-48. And Jesus himself openly claimed to be the messianic King in Mark 14:61-62 when he was tried before the Sanhedrin, and in Mark 15:2 when he was tried by Pilate.

We'll consider three aspects of Jesus' role as the conquering King that Mark emphasized. We'll consider the fact that Jesus proclaimed his kingdom. We'll see that he demonstrated his power and authority. And we'll note that he conquered his enemies. Let's start with the fact that Jesus proclaimed his kingdom.

Proclaimed Kingdom

Recall the way Mark summarized Jesus' gospel ministry in Mark 1:14-15, where he gave this report:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15).

The central purpose of Jesus' preaching ministry was to proclaim the gospel or good news that the kingdom of God was near, and that its blessings were offered to all those who would repent and believe.

Jesus also proclaimed his kingdom by teaching its secrets to his disciples. In fact, this is why he often taught in parables — to reveal the kingdom's secrets to those who were chosen, while hiding them from those who were not. Listen to what Jesus told to his disciples in Mark 4:11-12:

The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” (Mark 4:11-12).

And of course, Jesus often described the kingdom of God. For example, in Mark 10 he identified those who could enter the kingdom with ease, such as children, and those who could enter only with great difficulty, such as the rich.

The second aspect of Jesus’ role as the conquering King we’ll mention is that he demonstrated his power and authority as the head of God’s earthly kingdom.

Demonstrated Power and Authority

Jesus demonstrated his kingly power and authority primarily through his miracles. For example, Mark 4:41 says that creation obeyed his commands. And demons frequently recognized him as the Son of God, as we see in places like Mark 1:24, 3:11, and 5:7. Jesus’ ability to accomplish his will over nature and demons was a strong demonstration that he had come to bring God’s kingdom to earth. And the same thing is true of his miraculous healings. The blessings of the kingdom include life and health. So, when Jesus healed people, he was distributing kingdom blessings to them, according to his royal privilege.

Jesus performed miracles probably for at least three reasons: one he wants to show his compassion, God’s compassion towards people who are suffering. So he is healing people because he is moved with compassion, moved with pity for them. He’s wanting to meet their needs, but in doing that, he’s also advertising the truth of who he is, that he is the Messiah and he is bringing kingdom salvation. So the miracles are signposts to his identity, not indicating simply that he is God and so he can do these things, but indicating that he is the Messiah. And so the third feature is that the miracles indicate messianic salvation has come. The age promised by God has broken into history and now we have turning back or rolling back the curse that brings diseases, so he’s healing people. Limitations on food and drink, so he’s providing food and abundant wine and so the miracles are bringing about God’s changes in history because he is the Messiah and that’s his mission to bring this into our lives.

— Dr. John McKinley

Besides performing miracles, Jesus also demonstrated his royal power and authority in other ways. For instance, in Mark 1:16-20, Jesus boldly called the disciples to leave their homes, families, and businesses to follow him. He didn’t just give wise suggestions; he demanded a life-changing response. In fact, this is the same command he

gives to everyone who hears the gospel, and he continues to expect the same response. Every human being is obligated to obey Jesus, committing their lives to him and following him wherever he leads.

Perhaps the most memorable example of Jesus' authority is when he forgave the sins of the paralytic in Mark 2:3-12. Jesus and everyone else knew that only God could forgive sins. But amazingly, Jesus didn't tell the man to seek forgiveness from God; he authoritatively forgave the man's sins. As a result, this statement was not just an assurance of the man's pardon, but also of Jesus' royal authority. By forgiving the man's sins, Jesus demonstrated that he had divine authority to administer justice within the kingdom of God. And by healing the man immediately after forgiving him, Jesus proved that his message truly came from God.

And of course, Jesus' authority to forgive sins is one of the greatest reasons we have to follow him. Through him, our sins can be blotted out, so that we can be reconciled to God. Rather than being his enemies, we can be loyal citizens of his kingdom, with all the eternal blessings that come with it.

The third aspect of Jesus' role as the conquering king we'll mention is that he conquered his enemies.

Conquered Enemies

Jesus had many enemies during his life: the Jewish leaders that opposed him, the unbelievers who rejected him, the demons he cast out, and other enemies as well. And in every instance in which he clashed with his enemies, he won. He defeated their arguments; he avoided their plots; he released people from their oppression. He even used their plots to accomplish his own purposes, allowing them to crucify him on the cross so that he could atone for sin. All these victories proved that Jesus really was the Messiah, the Davidic king that had come to bring God's kingdom to earth.

One set of enemies Mark frequently mentioned was the demons. In fact, Mark put more emphasis on Jesus' power over demonic and satanic forces than any other gospel writer did. Mark focused his readers' attention on Jesus' control over demons.

For Mark, this conflict between Jesus and the demons was evidence that Jesus had brought the kingdom of God. The presence of the kingdom did not imply peaceful living without struggle. On the contrary, it implied that Jesus' kingdom had come to do battle with and eventually defeat the demonic powers of the kingdom of wickedness. For the Christians in Rome, this meant that their sufferings were part of a larger spiritual war. And even though they might be oppressed and persecuted for a time, they were still on the winning side, and one day they would have complete victory. And the same is true for us today.

But as amazing as Jesus' power over demons was, his greatest victory was over death itself, which Paul called the "last enemy" in 1 Corinthians 15:26. As we've seen, before Jesus died he repeatedly explained to his disciples that his death was the means to his victory. Death was an enemy. But Jesus would conquer and use this enemy for his own purposes. As just one example, listen to how Jesus reassured his disciples during the Last Supper in Mark 14:24-25:

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them. “I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:24-25).

As a gentle shepherd, Jesus promised that far from being a cause for discouragement, his death would be God’s covenant victory over sin and its consequences. Jesus also promised that this would not be the last meal he would share with his disciples. After all the horrible things that were about to happen — his arrest, trials, suffering and death — he would drink again with them when his kingdom was consummated in all of its glory. From Mark’s original readers in the ancient world to the church throughout the ages, our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper remind us that Christ’s victory will eventually overcome all our sufferings. One day, we will be rewarded by celebrating a victory meal with Jesus himself.

In his crucifixion, death, and burial, Jesus allowed death to have power over him for a time, so that he could redeem us from sin. But he didn’t remain under that power. In his resurrection, he conquered even death, proving beyond all doubt that he is the Christ, the messianic King God has sent to restore his kingdom to earth.

But if Jesus came to be king, does that mean he failed? This question must have troubled Mark’s persecuted audience, just as it has troubled many Christians in every age. After all, we don’t see Jesus reigning on earth right now. It doesn’t look like he accomplished everything the messianic king was supposed to do.

In Mark’s gospel, in the first half of the gospel, Jesus’ kingship is emphasized quite strongly, so Jesus demonstrates that he has power over sickness. He demonstrates that he has power over nature. He demonstrates that he can gather a following around himself. And all the things that you’d expect a God-king amongst us to do. But the surprise the disciples find difficult to grasp, particularly in Mark’s gospel, is that when Jesus announces or affirms that he is King, as is slowly dawning on their minds, he then goes on to say that he will be rejected, that he will suffer and that he will die. And initially, I think, they found it very difficult to grasp the idea that the King should come among them as one who serves, but actually, with the benefit of hindsight, looking back at the predictions of the coming King, you can put together passages like Isaiah 53 which speak about a king who comes, but who also will suffer and who will die. And Jesus believed that he was doing that to pay the ransom price for human sin, and that on the cross he would lay aside his majesty in order that he could atone for the sins of humankind. But of course, even that’s not the end of the story because then Christ rose from the dead and he was exalted to heaven, and now he occupies the place as King over all creation and he will come back as judge of the living and the dead.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Jesus was not the kind of Messiah most people expected in the first century, and he is not the kind of Messiah most people want today. He lived a life of suffering servitude, and he called his kingdom people to do the same. In his parables of the sower and the mustard seed in Mark 4, Jesus taught that his followers would be troubled by persecution, and that it would look like his kingdom was going to be defeated.

But he also taught that in some people the word of the kingdom takes root and bears fruit. They embrace the kingdom of God in obedience. They follow Jesus, and increase the kingdom of God.

The kingdom is temporarily veiled; it grows slowly; it even suffers. But eventually, the kingdom of God will come in all its fullness. As Jesus said in Mark 4:22:

Whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open (Mark 4:22).

Mark's message to his original audience and to us is clear. The kingdom of God grows mysteriously, struggling against persecution, suffering and enemies. But it also grows certainly, according to God's timetable. God's kingdom and Jesus' ministry cannot be stopped. One day, Jesus will return to finish what he started. He will finally and completely defeat all his enemies, and we ourselves will be glorified, entering the final state of an eternal life that can never end. At that time, there will be no Old Testament prophecy left unfulfilled. He will have accomplished everything.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've considered the background of Mark's gospel in terms of Mark's authorship, his original audience and the occasion of his writing. We have also explored the structure and content of his gospel. And we have focused on two of its major themes: the identity of Jesus as the suffering servant and conquering king. If we read this gospel with these ideas in mind, we'll find that we understand Mark more fully, and that we make better applications to our own lives in the modern world.

The Gospel of Mark highlights aspects of Jesus' character and ministry that aren't always emphasized in the other gospels. It shows us Jesus as a powerful, energetic, active master of his surroundings. But it also shows us that even in his power, Jesus willingly took on the role of suffering servant. And Mark calls us to a variety of responses to our Lord's example. He wants us to fall at Jesus' feet in amazement, to listen to him in silence, and to respond to his words with radical obedience. He wants us to be willing to suffer for the kingdom of God, just as Jesus did. And he wants us to be encouraged, knowing that when Jesus conquered his enemies through the cross, he also secured victory for us. And it's in that hope that we persevere until the day Jesus returns in glory to give that victory to us in the consummation of his kingdom.

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The Gospels

LESSON
THREE

The Gospel According to Mark Faculty Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson Three: The Gospel According to Mark

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Steve Blakemore
Dr. Peter Chow
Rev. Larry Cockrell
Dr. Steve Harper
Dr. Jeffrey Lowman
Dr. John Oswalt
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Dr. James D. Smith III
Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Frank Thielman

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. William Ury
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

How reliable is church tradition regarding the authorship of Mark's gospel?

The text of the Gospel of Mark doesn't tell us who its author is. So, we have to rely on other means to determine who wrote it. And one of the main sources of information we have is church tradition. But of course, church tradition isn't inspired like Scripture, and many people wonder if it's trustworthy. How reliable is church tradition regarding the authorship of Mark's gospel?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

I think that the very earliest church traditions we have are sufficiently close to the time of the writing of the Gospels and the early circulation of the Gospels for people to have had some good information. And much the best example of this is what we know from Papias who was Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, the beginning of the 2nd century. Papias tells us that Mark wrote his gospel depending on the preaching of Peter. He was Peter's interpreter according to Papias, which presumably means that he translated Peter's Aramaic into Greek or Latin. And Papias tells us that he composed the gospel out of his knowledge of Peter's preaching. I think that's probably the most authentic and early tradition we have about the Gospels, and really, I see no reason to question it. It's from an early date. And Papias, we also know that Papias was really in touch with figures from the apostolic age. He didn't know Mark or Peter, but he tells us that in the late 1st century at a time when some of the eyewitnesses of the Gospels were around, certainly people who had known them... in his own town of Hierapolis, the daughters of Philip the Evangelist who are mentioned in Acts... Philip and his daughters settled and it looks very much as though Papias knew the daughters. So he's in close contact with important figures in the early church. So I think Papias knew what he was talking about. I think probably most church tradition after the second century is dependent on those second century sources that we know. So, I think in a way the Fathers, the later writers of the church,

were simply repeating these earlier testimonies. So I think it's these earliest ones that are really well worth looking at very carefully and weighing up as good evidence. Some scholars have simply dismissed it all and, really, because their own view of how the Gospels originate doesn't fit with what these early testimonies were saying. But I think we should take them much more seriously than that.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The other thing about Mark is that most scholars, even those who question the authorship of most of the New Testament, most accept that this Mark, John Mark of Jerusalem, was actually the author of the second gospel. And the reason they say that is that Mark is an obscure, almost unknown figure in the New Testament. So if the church was creating authorship, creating a name of an author, why would they choose John Mark as an author? There's no reason they would choose him as the author which suggests that he, in fact, was the author of the second gospel.

Question 2:

Humanly speaking, how qualified was Mark to write a gospel?

The Holy Spirit's inspiration was sufficient to qualify any ancient writer to write Scripture. But the doctrine of organic inspiration also insists that the inspired human writers made real contributions to Scripture. Humanly speaking, how qualified was Mark to write a gospel?

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the fascinating things in Mark's gospel is there's a tiny little reference in the story of Gethsemane of a young man who loses his clothes, runs away, and runs away naked. And it's only in Mark's gospel. And very likely, this is actually Mark's little signature, saying, "I was there on that first Thursday evening when Jesus was arrested," and it's a little signature, if you like. So, I take it that Mark was a teenager at the time of Jesus' arrest. Quite likely his parents lived in Jerusalem — we have reference in Acts to Peter appearing and knocking on the door of Rhoda, the servant girl at John Mark's house. So, he's a Jerusalemite, he comes from there. And then later in the New Testament we hear that he accompanies Paul on his travels to Cyprus. Then later, he's also accompanying Peter and arrives in Rome. There's a reference in 1 Peter 5 to Mark being with Peter in Rome. Now, that's an impressive portfolio of a character, someone who knows Jerusalem, who perhaps was there at the time of Jesus, now has been with Paul, now has been with Peter, and so when it comes to reading Mark's gospel — and we think that Peter probably has been behind Mark's words, encouraging him to write these things down — I think we should have every confidence that this is someone who knew what he was talking about.

Dr. Mark Strauss

Paul was one of his mentors. So we've got the great apostle to the Gentiles. He traveled with Paul on his first missionary journey, though Paul rejected him later because Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas on that first missionary journey. We

know that much later they were reconciled and Paul says in 2 Timothy, to Timothy, to bring Mark with him because he's valuable in the ministry. So Mark restored himself after that first failure. So, a companion of Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles; also a companion of Peter. Peter refers to John Mark as being with him when he writes his letter of 1 Peter. Also, the church tradition that Mark actually was with Peter in Rome and wrote Peter's version of the gospel. So, think of the mentors that he had. His two main mentors were Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, and Peter, really the representative of the twelve apostles. So, qualified to write as an apostle of Jesus Christ? Absolutely qualified.

Dr. Richard Bauckham

There are several references in the New Testament to someone called Mark. In the Acts of the Apostles we hear about someone called John Mark. John was his Jewish name. Like many other people, he added a Gentile name, in this case, a Latin name, Mark, Marcus. So, the two names, a common practice of bearing two names like that. A figure called John Mark who, according to Acts, was an early disciple, member of the early Jerusalem church, and he travels with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. We also have a Mark who is mentioned in Paul's letters and a Mark who is mentioned in the first letter of Peter where he's called Peter's son — metaphorically obviously — probably his son in the faith, as it were. He came to faith through Peter's ministry. Now, it's been questioned whether all these Marks are the same person, and then again, whether they are the same person as the Gospel of Mark is ascribed to. And some people say the name Mark, Marcus in Latin, was a very common name, so there's no reason to identify these various persons. Actually, that's not very accurate. Roman citizens had three names, and male Roman citizens had three names. And the first of those names, called the "*prinomen*," was really only used within the family. And Marcus was very, very common as a *prinomen*, but you would never use it outside the family circle as the only name by which you identified someone. So if you call someone just Mark, as the title of the gospel does, as Paul and Peter do, if you call someone just Mark, they cannot be a Roman citizen because it would not be the name by which you'd call them. So there must be someone else, a non-Roman who has taken a Roman name. In that case, it would not be the *prinomen*. But there were far fewer people called Mark in that respect, in that way.

So I think it's not likely, actually, that there were more than one well-known Mark in the early Christian movement. So I think there is a good case for saying the Mark to whom the gospel is attributed is the Mark who appears in the Acts of the Apostles. And that's really very interesting evidence, because it takes Mark back to the early Jerusalem church where he would have known a lot of people who knew Jesus, and we find him associated closely with Peter in the first letter of Peter. And that fits rather well with the earliest evidence we have from outside the New Testament about the authorship of any of the Gospels, which is what Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis early in the second century, tells us about Mark's gospel — that Mark acted as the interpreter of the apostle Peter, presumably meaning that he translated Peter's teaching into Latin or Greek, and that Mark compiled his gospel on the basis of the teaching of Peter. And so that actually fits rather well with the reference to Mark in 1

Peter, and it's citing a piece of early evidence that there's really no reason to doubt that, as it were, the largest eyewitness source behind Mark's gospel is the apostle Peter. But we can, of course, imagine Mark supplementing that with things he knew himself from his own experience of early disciples when he was a member of the Jerusalem church. So I think the implication is probably that Peter is the main source behind the gospel, but that some other material Mark may have contributed himself from his own knowledge of early evidence about Jesus.

Question 3:

How does the structure of Mark's gospel help us to understand his message?

Like many ancient writers, Mark appears to have been less concerned with writing a strictly chronological history, and more concerned with organizing his materials in ways that helped communicate his main message. But what was that message? And how does the structure of Mark's gospel help us understand his message?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

Mark's gospel is probably the earliest gospel we have and its structure is really very interesting. It's structured in a way that makes you think theologically about what's going on. For example, from Mark 1:1 all the way to the Caesarea Philippi story in Mark 8, people are asking all kinds of questions about Jesus and his disciples — “Now who is this that can calm wind or wave?” “Why are not your disciples observing the Sabbath correctly?” — I mean, all kinds of questions. And the underlying question is, “Who is this person?” and “Where did his authority come from?” What Mark is telling us in the first 8 chapters of his gospel is, you need to answer the “Who?” question first if you're going to understand why Jesus did what he did and why he said what he said. So Mark positions this story about the revelation of Jesus' identity at Caesarea Philippi right smack dab in the middle of his gospel. “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus says. The disciples say, “Well, some say you're John the Baptist *part deux*, the sequel.” Some say he's one of the prophets, or like Elijah. Jesus then says to the disciples, “Fair enough, but who do you say that I am?” Peter then raises his hand and then says, “I know. You're the Jewish Messiah” and Jesus responds in the affirmative to this.

Now, what's interesting about this is, up to this point in the narrative, nobody has fully come up with the correct answer except maybe the demons, and that's a credit reference you don't want anyway, right? The disciples had been more like the “duh-disciples.” They haven't gotten it yet, but when Peter gives the correct answer about who Jesus is, it's at that point in the narrative that we begin to have in three straight chapters, Mark 8, Mark 9, and Mark 10, the revelation of what Jesus' mission is in life. We hear, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be killed and on the third day rise.” We hear it in Mark 8; we hear it in Mark 9; we hear it in Mark 10; and then in Mark 10:45 the climax of these four passion predictions is “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for the many.”

Now what this suggests, since we didn't have any passion predictions before Mark 8 and then we have three straight chapters of passion predictions after the identity of Jesus' revealed — an identity that matches up with Mark 1:1 — this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. What this suggests is that the “Who?” question has to be answered first before we can ask and answer the question, “What’s the meaning of his ministry, and why did he have to die?” So we have the “Who?” and “Why?” questions answered first, and then we have the statement about “What is the mission?” and then we have the passion and resurrection stories. Mission accomplished. So there’s a threefold structure: “Who is this person?” “Why did he come?” “Did he fulfill his ministry?” Answer: “Yes.”

Dr. Mark Strauss

For all of the gospel writers, the structure, the outline of their gospel, if you will, really focuses and channels the purpose for which they are writing. And Mark's gospel is a very easy gospel to outline because it really basically is structured around two main sections — three if you count the last week of Jesus' life — but the two main structures focus on the Christology of Mark's gospel, the presentation of Jesus. The first half of Mark's gospel stresses Jesus' authority as the mighty Son of God. Jesus does amazing works. He heals the sick. He casts out demons. He teaches with authority. He calms the storm. He demonstrates this incredible authority, demonstrating that he, in fact, is God's Messiah. He, in fact, is the mighty, powerful Son of God, the divine Son of God. So it's all about authority in the first half of Mark's gospel. That really climaxes in chapter eight, with Peter's confession, profession, that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus says, “Who do people say that I am?” and they say, “Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah.” He says, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter says, “You are the Messiah.” And at that point then, Jesus affirms that, but he then describes what the Messiah will accomplish, the suffering role of the Messiah, and that's Jesus' first passion prediction, first prediction of his death in the Gospel of Mark. And from that point on, through the teaching, through still some miracles, Jesus is focusing on the suffering role of the Messiah.

Question 4:

Why was Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ so remarkable?

Many scholars believe that the centerpiece of Mark's gospel is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. Looking at the New Testament, it seems fairly obvious that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. So, why was Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ so remarkable?

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the most remarkable things in the Gospels is that moment when Simon Peter declares — in response to Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” — “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. You are the Messiah.” It's a defining moment. Now, what's so remarkable about it? Well, it is, as Jesus himself says, a moment of revelation, when God himself has revealed to Simon Peter something which he could

not have understood himself, but it's also because there's been such longing and expectation, over what, 500 years, that this Messiah figure would come. And now Peter is declaring that this person who is standing in front of him, "You are the Messiah." And so you've just got to feel the incredible amount of expectation and buildup, and now suddenly this is the moment.

Dr. Simon Vibert

At the point when Peter confessed Jesus was the Christ, Jesus himself said that this was a moment of great insight and understanding for him, and finally at that moment Peter saw that Jesus fulfilled the expectations of what the Messiah would be like and what he would do, and Jesus affirms that as being a right response to everything that he's done and said so far in the gospel.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

It's a remarkable confession because it represents a personal confession of faith by Peter, but one that could only be made by one who had been regenerated. And Christ would even say to Peter when he makes the statement that flesh and blood did not reveal that to him, but his Father in heaven. And so, again, it was the Father who had opened the heart of Peter to actually understand and know who Jesus was. Peter's confession in and of itself is a remarkable thing because we see then God the Father at work, you know, regenerating, renewing Peter's heart and making it possible for him to know who Christ truly, truly was. Intellect alone is not enough to know who Christ is. The Father has to reveal and make that known to the individual, and that is only done as they are born again.

Question 5:

What did the Jews' day expect the Messiah to do?

Following Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the second half of Mark's gospel focuses primarily on what it means for Jesus to be the Christ. In these chapters Jesus emphasized that, as the Messiah, he had to suffer and die for his people. And this was a radical idea for his disciples. But why? What did the Jews in Jesus' day expect the Messiah to do?

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

The mainstream expectation was that the Messiah would be a son of David and that he would bring in political peace; that he would drive out the Romans. You can read this today in a book called The Psalms of Solomon. The Psalms of Solomon speak of the wicked who are in Israel, probably thinking of the Romans and some within Israel who compromised with the Romans, and it teaches very clearly that when the Messiah comes, he will come as a military ruler, he will expel the sinners, he will bring in righteousness, and then the people of God will dwell in peace. And it's clear, I think, in reading the New Testament — we think of John 6 for example where the Jews came to make Jesus a king — that this is what the Jews of Jesus' day expected of him as well. And, of course, as you know, Jesus crossed them up again and again.

He seemed to have no interest in this political realm that they were expecting. He surprised the religious leaders again and again with his stance towards the Law, which I think was a right understanding. He focused, of course, on women and tax collectors and sinners. I think the religious establishment believed that the kingdom would come in if Israel would obey the Law, and they actually viewed Jesus as a threat in that regard, because Jesus didn't seem to be advancing obedience to the Law, but transgression of it, at least in their view.

Question 6:

How did Jesus compare to the messianic expectations of his contemporaries?

Jesus' disciples, like most other Jews in his day, didn't expect the Christ or Messiah to do many of things that Jesus did. And this made it hard for many of them to accept his ministry. How did Jesus compare to the messianic expectations of his contemporaries?

Dr. Simon Vibert

In Mark's gospel, in the first half of the gospel, Jesus' kingship is emphasized quite strongly, so Jesus demonstrates that he has power over sickness. He demonstrates that he has power over nature. He demonstrates that he can gather a following around himself. And all the things that you'd expect a God-King amongst us to do. But the surprise that the disciples find difficult to grasp, particularly in Mark's gospel, is that when Jesus announces or affirms that he is King, as is slowly dawning on their minds, he then goes on to say that he will be rejected, that he will suffer and that he will die. And initially, I think, they found it very difficult to grasp the idea that the King should come among them as one who serves, but actually, with the benefit of hindsight, looking back at the predictions of the coming King, you can put together passages like Isaiah 53 which speak about a king who comes, but who also will suffer and who will die, and Jesus believed that he was doing that to pay the ransom price for human sin, and that on the cross he would lay aside his majesty in order that he could atone for the sins of humankind.

Dr. Mark Strauss

Creation was in a fallen state and Jesus came to reverse the fall, to establish, once again to establish God's kingdom on earth. And that kingdom meant the defeat of sin, the defeat of Satan, the defeat of death. So Jesus was looking at something much greater than merely a political victory, merely a military victory. In fact, Jesus' miracles really demonstrate what the kingdom was all about because when Jesus healed the sick, what was he doing? Well, he was obviously demonstrating God's compassion, God's love for people. He cared for people, so he healed them. But really, it's much more significant than that. In the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah, Isaiah predicts that when the kingdom comes, that is when God restores his creation, the lame will walk and the blind will see; the deaf will hear. In other words, sickness is ultimately a result of human fallenness and the fallen state of creation. So

what Jesus is doing, he's doing little snapshots of the kingdom. He's demonstrating what it would look like when God restores his creation. And so the healings are really a demonstration that this is much greater than just a physical defeat of the Romans or physical liberation in Israel. This is a restoration of the world as God had originally intended it to be. The exorcisms, then, have the same significance because what does Jesus do? He casts out demons. Well, that's an act of compassion — freeing someone from Satan's power. But in another sense, it's got a larger purpose. And that larger purpose is to demonstrate that Satan himself is being defeated. This world that's been in the grip of Satan since the fall of Adam and Eve, God is taking back his kingdom, and so, little snapshots by Jesus to demonstrate that by casting out demons, showing his authority over Satan, that with his death on the cross, he's going to defeat sin, Satan, and ultimately death as well.

Question 7:

Why did Jesus perform miracles?

For many of Jesus' disciples, the miracles he performed were an important proof that he really was the Christ. They exhibited his power and authority. And they showed that God approved of his message. But were there other purposes, too? Why did Jesus perform miracles?

Dr. Greg Perry

You know, often times we think about Jesus' miracles only in sort of a spectacular sense, as a demonstration of his identity as the second person of the Trinity, of his deity. And they certainly do testify to his authority. But what we also see is that Jesus heals to restore the people who can't go to the temple to worship, who can't function properly in society because they're a leper, because they have an issue of blood, because they're blind. These things prevent them from going to worship God at the temple. And so we see Jesus having real compassion on people, and by healing them, restoring them to their full membership in the people of God, and to their full functionality, to be able then to work, provide for their family and for themselves. And then we, lastly, see Jesus doing miracles again, particularly with the demonic, in casting out demons, to demonstrate his authority as the Messiah, as the one who is the kingdom of God present in their midst, who can restrict the activity of the devil. And so for these reasons Jesus performs miracles.

Dr. Mark Strauss

I think Jesus performed miracles for several different reasons. One was out of compassion and to meet human needs. He cared for people. At times it says, "He looked at them and had compassion on them," so he performed the miracles. Another reason was to demonstrate who he was, to demonstrate his authority. So when he cast out a demon, or when he healed the sick, or when he performed a nature miracle like walking on the water, it was to demonstrate his divine authority and power. And I think the third reason he performed miracles was to really demonstrate his mission. His mission was to proclaim and to inaugurate, to establish the kingdom of God. And

what does the kingdom of God look like? Well, ultimately the kingdom of God is restoring creation to a right relationship with the Creator. And so, for all of creation, and human beings in particular, to once again submit to the authority of God, and to be the creation that God intended it to be. And so when he heals the sick, he is demonstrating the restoration of human beings through healing. When he casts out demons, he's demonstrating that he is breaking the power of Satan over his creation. When he's raising the dead, he's demonstrating his resurrection power to destroy death once and for all. So these are little snapshots of the coming kingdom that's going to come; demonstrating that his message, the message of the coming of the kingdom of God is, in fact, true, demonstrating it through these mighty miracles; through these powers.

Question 8:

Why does Mark's gospel end with the women responding in fear to the news of Jesus' resurrection?

In Mark's gospel, one of the most common responses to Jesus' miracles is fear. And this is nowhere more evident than at the very end of the gospel. When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices to anoint Jesus' body, they found his tomb empty, and an angel told them that Jesus had risen. But instead of rejoicing at this wonderful news, they ran away terrified. Why does Mark's gospel end with the women responding in fear to the news of Jesus' resurrection?

Dr. Robert Plummer

The Gospel of Mark has an interesting ending. If we look in Mark 16, the angel announces to the women that Jesus has risen from the dead and then it says in verse 8, "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Now first off, we need to mention there's some question as to whether this is really the last verse in the gospel or not. The best and most ancient manuscripts end at verse 8. We have a copy in our library here of *Codex Vaticanus*, one of the most valuable ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, and you can see it ends with the last Greek word there, "*gar*," and then it says "*kata Markon*" — "according to Mark," and there's plenty of space where many more verses could have been written and they were not. Some people think that the earliest ending of Mark was lost and so later on someone summarized the other gospel endings, and so that's what we read in some Bibles in verses 9 and following — in the King James Version and elsewhere.

But there's a growing movement of New Testament scholars that really believe verse 8 is the last. It's the best attested and the question is: "How does this fit in with the rest of Mark's gospel?" If you look at Mark's gospel, there's an interesting theme of the disciples' constant failure and misunderstanding. They're fearful; they're cowardly; they're afraid; they don't understand; they run away. Even the mysterious passage in chapter 14 of the man fleeing naked, you're like, what in the world is this

guy in chapter 14:51-52, doing fleeing naked? Well that was a sign of utter defeat and shame in the 1st century — to run away naked. And so here in the moment of Jesus' arrest is a picture, a visual picture of his followers, naked, shame, and fear. And in spite of constant failure and misunderstandings by the disciples, God's truth and his purpose triumph. Jesus dies on the cross; the gospel goes forth; salvation goes to the ends of world. So I think it's a Markan understatement here that the women have been commanded to go and announce his resurrection, and instead they are fearful and they run away and say nothing to no one.

Dr. Frank Thielman

People are often puzzled about the ending of Mark's gospel. You get to the end, and in some ways it seems very unsatisfying. People flee from the tomb in fear. The women are afraid when they see the tomb empty. I think this is a great illustration of how it's important to read the Gospels in their entirety from beginning to end because that ending to Mark's gospel makes a lot more sense when you see how fear functions in the narrative of Mark's gospel generally. The disciples, Jesus' followers, express fear in the gospel sometimes when they see Jesus doing dramatic things, when he is working amazing miracles. They express fear when God is at work. So when we get to the end of the gospel and Jesus is raised from the dead, the women, I think, are responding in fear because they too don't yet understand what kind of person God is as he is revealed to us in Jesus. Now, Mark's given us lots of hints in the gospel that eventually those who follow Jesus will understand, but he's only telling one part of the story, and he's reminding us there that these early followers of Christ didn't fully understand Jesus, and so that's why they flee in fear.

I actually think probably Mark's gospel was written with a full knowledge that this—he was not telling the whole story, that other people would also tell parts of the story. And so Luke comes along and not only writes a gospel that kind of fills in elements of the story after Jesus is risen from the dead, for us in wonderful and helpful ways, but writes the book of Acts that fills in the story as well and shows us there how many of the women who followed Jesus were faithful to him and did realize who he was. So, Mark's gospel is a very deep gospel. It's the shortest of the Gospels, but in some ways it's the most puzzling of the Gospels because it has lots of levels of meaning, and that ending of Mark's gospel is one of those puzzling elements. But I think Mark is showing us there that the early Christians had a long way to go. They were off to a good start, but they had a long way to go in learning who Jesus was and coming to know him better. Personally, I think it's a great encouragement to those of us who are following Christ today that we too have much to learn about him. We can learn from his Word. We can learn from other Christians. But we always have much more to learn, and we shouldn't be discouraged by the questions we have, the puzzles we may have about who he is, some of the doubts that we come across. We should share that with other believers and learn more about him and stay faithful and persevere just as they did.

Question 9:**Why did Jesus' gospel message focus so strongly on the kingdom of God?**

Although some aspects of Mark's gospel may puzzle readers, everyone should be able to recognize that one of the central themes in Mark's book is the "good news" or "gospel" that Jesus preached. But Jesus' message wasn't limited to individual salvation. The good news he proclaimed heavily emphasized God's kingdom. But what was the relationship between these two ideas? Why did Jesus' gospel message focus so strongly on the kingdom of God?

Dr. Peter Chow (translation)

What is the relationship between the gospel and the kingdom of God? In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, the first recorded words of Jesus are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel." The gospel is the good news proclaiming that the reign of God's kingdom has come into this world. Thus, all the miracles Jesus performed are signs of this coming kingdom. Since the rule and kingdom of God are here, our sins are forgiven. The blind can see, the lame can walk, the lepers are cleansed, demons are cast out, and the dead are raised. That is the good news. The good news of course, at its core, is the cross — the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus did not die and rise again, he would not have won salvation for us. He would not have overcome the power of death. And the kingdom of God would not have come to us. Therefore, the gospel is the best news. The coming of God's kingdom is the greatest blessing and joyfulness for the human race.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

The message of the kingdom is intimately tied to the gospel message of death, burial and resurrection. The kingdom must be understood in terms of the Old Testament. All the way back with Adam's fall into sin, plunging the human race into depravity, affecting all of creation, you have the promise of God that he will bring his saving rule and reign to this world. That's worked out in a whole host of ways in the Old Testament, primarily in the coming of the Lord himself through the Davidic king — these great messianic themes. Christ is the one who is the Lord, who is the King. He is the one who ushers in that saving reign. He ushers in that saving reign by not only his incarnation and his life, and putting to flight his enemies — you think of Satan and his powers — but he does so ultimately in consummation on the cross, in his resurrection. The problem of sin is a relationship with God and all of its effects upon the human race. Sin has to be dealt with before God. And so, the inauguration of the kingdom takes us to the cross, demonstrated then that he has won victory over sin. He has paid our price before God's righteous requirements. Resurrection now has taken place, and the gospel message of death, burial, and resurrection is the very inauguration of that kingdom that is here and then will be consummated in the end. So the relationship between the two is intimately put together in the Scriptures.

Dr. Jeff Lowman

If we start by understanding that the kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God in hearts of men and women, and that rule and reign manifesting itself in every sphere of life in which their lives touch, the way that they come into that rule and reign is through the message of the gospel, the *euangelion*, the good news, that Christ has laid his life down upon the cross for their sins. And through that transforming power of the gospel, then they are called to transform the world around them and bring in God's work of the kingdom to every area of their life.

Question 10:

In what sense did Jesus establish God's kingdom during his earthly ministry, and in what sense are we still waiting for his kingdom to come?

Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was "at hand." But in Mark's gospel, and even today, it's clear that God's kingdom hasn't been fully manifested in the world. In what sense did Jesus establish God's kingdom during his earthly ministry, and in what sense are we still waiting for his kingdom to come?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

One of the most difficult things for people to understand is the relationship of the first and second coming of Jesus the Messiah. It's understandable that people would say, "Well, how could Jesus be the Messiah and have fulfilled messianic expectations when we don't see lions lying down with lambs?" We don't see people beating their swords into plowshares. We don't see peace on earth, good will toward men. So how is it that the Messiah has come? Well, what we had to realize was that there was a first coming of the Messiah, and a second coming of the Messiah. What we call it is "inaugurated eschatology," this idea that end-time realities have been brought into history with the first coming of Jesus. They've been inaugurated, they've been initiated and begun in a decisive way, but they still are being worked out to the point where there will ultimately be a consummation of these realities. It's been called the "now and not yet" of the kingdom. That the kingdom has come, Jesus has brought it; he's delivered the decisive blow in the battle. But the battle still rages and it awaits a future, ultimate fulfillment and coming. And so that's the tension we live in as the people of God now — between Jesus' first and second comings — the now of the kingdom, and the not yet of the kingdom. And this has many broad applications to our lives. So we have power over sin, but we still have a battle to fight over sin. We see demonstrations of end time realities now working themselves out, but we realize that that battle will continue until we see Jesus again, and he finally comes once and for all.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

One of the things that Jesus accomplished during his earthly ministry was to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Now, what that appears to mean is that in an act of divine power, Jesus established a beachhead in hostile territory and inaugurated an

invasion initiative that is destined to restore this planet to its rightful Creator and owner and King. This initial assault on hostile territory manifested itself in a number of dramatic ways: challenging systemic evil, challenging demonic evil, dispelling deception with light and truth. It was a powerful introduction of an alternative allegiance. This campaign is still underway. There remains mopping up operations, cleaning up, last holdouts to be eliminated. And the final enemy that remains to be overcome is death. And so, even as we participate in the power of the Spirit in this ongoing kingdom campaign, we pray, "Your kingdom come; your will be done." There's still something we need supernatural aid to see achieved.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

It's important to ask the question: In what sense did Jesus establish his messianic kingdom in his first coming, and in what way are we awaiting it in the future? The Scripture is very clear that in his first coming he has come as the King. He has announced the kingdom. That kingdom has now arrived. In fulfillment of Old Testament expectation, God's saving rule has broken into this world in Jesus Christ, culminating in his death, his resurrection — his resurrection demonstrating that his death has been victorious. Sin has been dealt with. Death as the consequence of sin has been defeated. And not just in the resurrection. His glorious ascension — he is now seated at God's right hand. Pentecost — he has poured out the Spirit. All of that is part of the coming of the kingdom. The — what we call the "inauguration of the kingdom" — it is now here. Yet, our Lord Jesus Christ has also told us that there is still the future. We still pray. Think of the Lord's Prayer that we pray: "Your kingdom come." Well, the kingdom has come. He has won victory. It is still awaiting its consummation. Why this delay? Well, I think the reason for the delay is for the spread of the gospel. For the gospel to go to the nations, so that all of God's people now come into relationship with him. That is over a period of time; that's how he's chosen to do so. So that the kingdom has now come, victory has been won. Consummation takes place when he comes again, and there is then the restoration of all things. Sometimes the illustration from World War II is used in this regard. "D-Day" — when the Allied troops went, stormed the beaches of Normandy — that brought basically, almost the end of the war, but there were still more battles to be done. That was "V-Day" in terms of the kind of consummation. Well, Christ's first coming is that "D-Day." It is that which has brought with it victory. There's also now the consummation that will take place in the end. Victory, and just a matter of time before he comes again.

Question 11:

What is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church?

Jesus came to establish God's kingdom on earth. But Christians aren't always clear about the ways the church and the kingdom interact and even intersect. How does the church fit into the plan of the kingdom? What is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church?

Dr. William Ury

Both the concepts of the kingdom of God and the church are indispensable for a full Christian understanding of how we are to live in any part of our lives. But I think it's important for there to be a distinction between the two. I think many Christians, including me, for years thought, well, the church is sort of like the climax of the kingdom, so we're kind of the most important thing going. But the kingdom concept in all of Scripture is much larger than the church. So the way I view, and I think the Bible does too, views the church as an irreplaceable part of the kingdom, but it's a sub-part or a piece of the kingdom work. God's kingdom, his rulership, has always been the base of reality. He is the reigning Lord of the universe, of all creation, of us. He is Lord of all peoples, all nations, all kings, all tribes. Now most don't know that, but he is. So the kingdom of God, the reign of God, is an overarching theme in all of Scripture. The church, hopefully, are those people who have submitted to the lordship of Jesus, recognize his sovereign lordship and have submitted themselves to being his agents in the world. It's very important that the church understand its place in the kingdom. When we are going to be with him in the future, when he comes again, I don't think we're going to be referred to as the church. I think that will be the kingdom: the bride will be produced for her bridegroom, that other very important picture in Scripture.

So, why I'm saying it this way, I think that sometimes we as a church have too high a view of ourselves. We think we're the only answer, or God's only purpose. And we're very, very important. He died for the church. He died to offer himself. But he also died for the world. So the best way for me to view myself as a member of the church Jesus Christ is to say, I've got one goal and that's to be the body of Christ. I am called to be his hands, his feet, his arms to the world just like he would be if he were here. That's my king's command to me and to us as the church. The sad thing is I think sometimes the church says, well, we're the climax of the kingdom, therefore we're the end of what he's come to do and therefore we're going to sit and do nothing or just enjoy his presence until he comes again. I think that's a wrong view and we need to correct ourselves, get back into the business of connecting the church's purpose with the kingly purposes of our Lord and Savior.

Dr. Steve Blakemore

This question about the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church is one that's haunted Christians for a long time, at least since the Reformation and probably before. But as I understand it, the relationship between the kingdom of God in the earth now is something like this: Jesus Christ has come, and in his incarnate life, in his ministry in overcoming the power of evil, in his self-sacrificial life to overcome the power of sin, in his resurrection from the dead to overcome the power of death, he has renewed creation, and there is now at work in creation the reign of God. The kingdom of God has now been launched, so to speak, into the world through Jesus Christ. The church is not that kingdom. The church is meant to be by God's design the visible manifestation of the reality that the kingdom of God has come upon the earth in Jesus Christ. The church is not inconsequential to the kingdom then. The church is meant to be the visible evidence in our lives of worship,

our lives of obedience to the gospel, our lives of self-giving love and reflecting the character of Christ in how we treat one another and how we relate to the world. Those lives are meant to reveal to an unbelieving world that the kingdom has come and that the promise of God is certain. So the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God is the relationship of the reality to a sign, much like the bread and the wine in Holy Communion are signs of the reality of the self-sacrificial, broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Question 12:

What is the relationship between God's plan for our lives as individuals and his plan for his kingdom?

Mark's gospel strongly emphasizes Jesus' kingdom mission, and encourages the church to participate actively in building the kingdom. But what about our individual lives? Aren't they important? Doesn't God have blessings in store for people that obey him? What is the relationship between God's plan for our lives as individuals and his plan for his kingdom?

Dr. Steve Harper

Jesus understands us better than we understand ourselves. And he understands where we fit into the grand scheme of things better than we do at the time that we're experiencing the call. Jesus comes to us with a kingdom vision and we come with a personal vision. And I think what that means is that sometimes Jesus' words seem very harsh. For example, in Matthew 8:22, he says, "...let the dead bury the dead." It's almost like the man can't even go back home to say goodbye. He just has to drop everything. But then he turns right around in Mark 5 and he says, "Go home, and tell your friends," your neighbors, your family, "everything that God's done for you." And I take that to mean that Jesus is at work in our lives to position us to fit into the kingdom where God wills for us to fit into it. Our call is not a matter of compromising our faith, but it's a matter of contextualizing our faith. And so I think we're free to go to Jesus and say to him, for example, "Lord, where do you want me to fit into your grand scheme of things?" When you deal in Mark where he calls the apostles for the first time, and he wants them to be with him so that he can send him out in order to preach and to heal, but then at the very end is this list of the apostles. And I used to read that and I would think to myself, you know, this is more than Bible trivia. There is a reason why those names are given there. And if we go into church history, you know, tradition says that each of those apostles went to a different place for a different purpose. And I think that's the way God's call works in our lives. Jesus knows where we're to fit in long before we do, but we have the freedom and the liberty to know that he is going to send us to a place where we will fit and where our call will be part of the kingdom vision.

Dr. John Oswalt

Many people through the centuries have argued about the nature of the kingdom of God. It's a clear description that we find in the Bible, and yet just exactly what it

means has been a source of a lot of controversy. I think we can say, though, that in its essence, at the bottom, the kingdom of God describes God's rule in the world, in the church and in the individual human heart, so that if you and I are living God's life according to the Scriptures, we can say that we are participating in the kingdom of God.

Question 13:

How can we identify and employ the Holy Spirit's power in our lives?

In order to ensure the successful building of his kingdom, Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to empower the members of his church for kingdom service. We don't all have the same gifts and calling. But every one of us has a special appointment from the Spirit. So, how can we identify and employ the Holy Spirit's power in our lives?

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

The New Testament, particularly, emphasizes that the Holy Spirit strengthens us in our everyday lives to please Jesus Christ and God the Father. In other words, where does the strength come from day by day to put our trust in God and to obey him? What the Scripture teaches is that that strength does not come from ourselves. We must be filled with the Spirit. We must call upon the Holy Spirit to strengthen us. I think this is enormously practical because we sense as believers that in and of ourselves, we have no strength. In and of ourselves we cannot please God. We face each day recognizing that we have no strength from the day before. I need a fresh empowering for the Spirit of God. I need a fresh endowment from on high. And the Scriptures teach us we receive that from the Holy Spirit. He gifts us. He sanctifies us. He strengthens us. He helps us put our trust in Christ every day.

Dr. Steve Harper

God's power is really not something that comes along to sort of, you know, "help me out." It's not like God saying, "You do 80% and I'll cover the last 20%." God's power really is the means of our accomplishment. The prophet Zechariah said, "It's not by might, it's not by power, it's by my spirit saith the Lord." And I think the more we're able to do as human beings, and we really are able to do a lot (it's amazing), the harder it is to believe that. Jesus said in John 15, "Apart from me you can do nothing." You step back from that and you think about putting a man on the moon, or maybe eradicating malaria in our lifetime — or something Bill Gates and others are working hard to try to do — it seems that there's just a lot of things that human beings can do. But Jesus talks about power, not just in the sense of being able to do something, but in the sense of John saying all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. I think that's what Jesus means in John 15. He doesn't mean, you know, that without Jesus you can't lift a chair from one room to another. But what Jesus means in John 15 is that even the ability to do the most routine things is something that was given to us in a very act of creation. It may be a natural talent, it may be a natural ability, or it may be spiritual gift, but there's

nothing that we do that's independent of the one who created us to be able to do those kinds of things.

Jesus is talking about it in a different way in Acts when he says in 1:8, you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That's another kind of power, power to witness. And so the practical ways I think in which that works itself out, as I often tell people, is that we go back to Jesus' three words: ask, seek, and knock. We ask for power. And by that I mean saying, "Lord, where do you want me to use the power that you've given me?" I don't want to be three miles wide and a half an inch deep. I want my life to be invested in something, and I want it to count for something. So we ask, "Where do you want me to invest my life?" That's just a legitimate question. Most of us have talents and capacities and I.Q.s. We could be more than one thing. But sooner or later we have to ask God, "Where do you want to use me?" And once we get some sense of that, then our power gets distributed through that kind of ministry.

Seeking, I think, is the way in which we come to realize that there are nuances of power. You know, an orchestra is made up of many different instruments. Even if you ask, "Where do you want to use me?" and God says, "I want to use you in the orchestra," then you've got to seek for that particular place. Am I going to be a cello? Am I going to be a violin? Am I going to be an oboe? Once you get your territory sort of mapped out, then you get to explore that. You get to seek it out. And some of that comes through trial and error. Some of that comes through experimentation until you begin to sense that fit for your life. And so your power begins to flow through your particular manifestation.

Then, I think, when Jesus was talking about knocking, he's actually talking about expressing — you're right there at the door, the door opens, and so you begin to use the power that God has given you, and the way that you believe that God wants you to use it, and in the knocking, you get to discover whether that power is being used in the most fulfilling and productive ways that it could be. But God's power is really the source, the system, and the supply for everything that we want to do as followers of Jesus.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The Holy Spirit determines to whom he will give spiritual gifts. And we are dependent upon him and those gifts to function as his instruments in this world. We need to rely on him to do just that. There are miraculous demonstrations of his power that God's people recognize, but we depend most of all on the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control as the definitive recognition of God's work in our lives.

Question 14:**How can church leaders guard themselves against sin?**

Despite the Holy Spirit's empowerment, Christians still struggle with temptation and sin. The church is called to be holy, and to build God's righteous kingdom throughout the world. But our sins often hinder our work. And when our leaders fall into sin, the negative impact is even greater. How can church leaders guard themselves against sin?

Rev. Youssef Ourahmane (translation)

We know as the Scripture teaches us that Satan's intention is to strike the shepherd. The Bible says so. The sheep will be scattered. Satan targets powerfully to strike the shepherd or the servant in the church. Based on that, the leader or the servant ought to be cautious. He needs to be cautious from Satan who wants in one way or other to defeat him, whether through sexual sin, financial sin, or pride, or many other things. We need the servant to have one of the brothers or sisters in the church or group to shepherd him. He needs to have a certain fellowship, a relationship with brothers and sisters in the ministry so he can share with them his weaknesses and things that bother him, to share with them the weak points in his life. We need each other. We need to know that Satan wants to see us fall. We need to have a relationship and be open with each other. But we need to pray and pray a lot so God can protect us and watch over us and ask others to pray for us.

We should not give Satan a place in our lives to fool us. We need to be cautious in the way we act and how to behave in our lives and in our relationship with our brothers and sisters in the church. We should not give Satan a chance. We need to know that we all care for each other. When I see a brother or a sister, for example, as a leader in a service, and there are improper thing going on in his or her life, or there is some kind of danger, we should warn each other, and talk to each other. We should not ignore things and just say, "This is our pastor and that's it." We shouldn't say that he doesn't need any advice or any teaching or any help in the ministry. On the contrary, we need to care for each other. Unfortunately there are many servants who fell in sin and drifted away from the ministry. We need to know that God alone is the one to protect us and sustain us. We should not rely on our abilities, our lives with God, our testimonies, but to stay firm in our relationship with God, in our conduct, in our walk with him in our ministry.

Dr. Steve Harper

In the experiences of life, whether they happen to us when we are riding down the road in the car, by ourselves, or whether we are in a Billy Graham crusade with fifty thousand other people, we get convicted. God's Word encounters our spirit in such a way, that we realize that we are out of alignment. We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We realize that we are not saying the things we should be saying, doing the things we should be doing, and on and on and on. That is a "*kairos*" moment, not just a "*kronos*" moment, that's not just the ticking of the clock, that's the beating of a heart, that's the forming of a soul. And, procrastination is dangerous. To

say, as some people even did in Scripture when Paul was preaching, “We heard you, but we’ll call you back, and go into that more later on.” That kind of procrastination is dangerous. And the most obvious reason it is dangerous, is that we think, “You know, I’ll work on that tomorrow,” or next week, or whatever. We don’t know that we have tomorrow, or next week. I don’t want to make this response to sound threatening or ominous, but it’s really true. We presume that because we are healthy today, we’ll be healthy tomorrow, or because we are alive today, we will be alive tomorrow. So, I want to say first of all, that it is dangerous because we can’t presume that we have tomorrow. If God is addressing us in the present moment, we need to deal with that. We need to ask, “Why now? Why not yesterday?” You know, why now? Take the present moment seriously.

The other reason that I think its dangerous is that it really does contribute — procrastination really does contribute to the development of a hardened heart. Because, we get convicted about something in the present, we don’t do anything with it. We begin to think to ourselves, “Well, that wasn’t so bad. You know, I don’t guess I really need to worry about that a whole lot right now because I didn’t repent, I didn’t make any changes, and my life is still rolling on pretty much like it always did.” The danger is that we begin to just layer over that God moment, our rationalizations, our assumptions, and way down the line we are actually living a lie, we’re living 180 degrees away from what it was God was trying to get our attention about in the first place. And that is a dangerous thing.

Dr. Simon Vibert

In our worship services we’re encouraged to begin by repenting of our sins, and that’s not because we think we need to become Christians all over again, but there is a sense in which, in becoming a Christian you believe for the first time the direction of your life changes, but repentance means change of mind leading to change of conduct, and in a sense we regularly need to do that because all of us continue to be sinful and all of us need to continue to repent of our sins. So, ongoingly we say sorry to God for our sins as we repent daily of the things that we do wrong.

Question 15:

Do the failures of the disciples undercut the authority and respectability of the church and its leadership?

One way Mark’s gospel encourages believers in every age is by pointing out that the disciples were fallen and weak people just like the rest of us. Jesus didn’t expect them to live perfect lives, and he gave them his Spirit so that they could succeed in ministry. And we need that same help, too. Even so, some people wonder if the disciples’ failures somehow harm or even invalidate the church’s ministry. **Do the failures of the disciples undercut the authority and respectability of the church and its leadership?**

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the fascinating things about the gospel writers is that they are so honest about the failings of Jesus' disciples, the twelve apostles. You see this particularly in Mark's gospel, where it's a very honest account, and the disciples are asking ridiculous questions, and Jesus had to be very stern with them in correcting them. And Peter puts his foot in it lots of times. It's slightly less true in Matthew's gospel, where some of that's been slightly airbrushed out, but it's still a very honest account of their failings. Is this a problem? Well, if you expect the leaders of the church to be perfect, well, yes, that's a problem. But if actually the leader of the church then and now is Jesus Christ, and he's perfect, it actually isn't a problem because the leaders of the community that follows Jesus again are going to people who make mistakes. And another thing just to remember is that the very word, "disciple," means "learner." And so what we're seeing in the Gospels is these disciples learning. They're lifelong learners, and actually that's a very good example to us of how despite our mistakes and our failings, we too can be Jesus' followers and we too are committed to lifelong learning.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

One of the beautiful things about reading the Gospels is that the people, the characters, are very real. In fact a lot of scholars have observed that a major theme, especially in the Gospel of Mark, but it's in all the Gospels, is the fact that the disciples often fail desperately. You can think of Peter, really clearly the leader of the early church, we can see it in the book of Acts and in the Gospels themselves, and he is the greatest failure of all in many ways. I mean, he even denies Jesus three times, which was something that in the church, as the church develops, becomes a real struggle for understanding what do you do with someone who's denied Jesus? It's clearly a failure of faith. But that's exactly what's beautiful about not only the Gospels, but all of the Bible, that the characters that are there are meant to identify with us, or we are meant to identify with them. Being not perfect, in a vacuum, religious icons of people who aren't real, but real, flawed, fallen people. In fact, one of the beautiful things about the idea of discipleship is that we are to follow and be like Jesus, yet even the disciples, the original disciples, in their following of Jesus show and model for us both faith and hope in Jesus, but also the reality of being broken humans who fail. And to us, rather than undermining the authority of the church and undermining the authority of leaders, it helps us identify with the fact that we too, as redeemed people, are in process. We are being transformed. We are being converted more and more. And in our failures, Jesus and God, three in one, are glad to accept us and transform us and use us as his vessels of the kingdom throughout the world.

Question 16:**What positive examples can we find among Christ's followers in Mark's gospel?**

In contrast to the many failures of the disciples recorded in Mark's gospel, we also find some shining examples of faithfulness to Christ. And just as the disciples' failures give us hope that God can love, accept and use anyone in ministry, these examples of faithfulness give us hope that we can live in ways that please him and that result in his approval and blessing. What positive examples can we find among Christ's followers in Mark's gospel?

Dr. James D. Smith III

I think in our desire to follow Jesus, we need to keep it in mind that all of us are imperfect people pointing to a perfect God. But in Mark's gospel, chapter 14, we have an example of a person that Jesus commended and actually said, "Wherever the gospel is preached, this person should be remembered as an example." It's the woman who anointed him in time for his burial. And what Jesus said about this woman in the middle of a very critical audience around them, was that what this woman had done in anointing him, in honoring him, celebrating generously who he was as Lord, she had done a lovely thing. And there's a word in the original Greek, a word that says, "something morally good" — and that's fine and it's important — but there is a word additionally that says not only morally good but "lovely," and inviting, and winsome, and beautiful; this woman had done something lovely. God leads us to do things that are beautiful for one another. Jesus also said, she has done it prior to my burial. In any culture, there are those of us who say, "Boy, I was too late. I wasn't in time." Isn't it wonderful when God gives us a sense of the right moment to step forward, and just in time to do something in the name of Jesus that blesses? The woman did that and she did that before his burial. And finally, Jesus says, she's done what she could. And that doesn't sound like much to many of us. We're trying hard, and maybe the progress doesn't look the best and we sort of shrug. But in fact, Jesus commends that, when we simply offer our best to the service of the Lord and trust him for the fruitfulness. That's a great deal. And I think that woman is a remarkable example wherever the gospel is preached, as Jesus said.

More than any other gospel writer, Mark emphasized the failures and fears of Jesus' followers. And this should be really encouraging. The people that knew Jesus personally — even his closest friends — still struggled with sin. So, it shouldn't surprise or disappoint us that we do too. Mark's gospel assures us that even though we're weak and sinful, God won't abandon us. He still loves us, and he still calls us to expand his kingdom throughout the earth in the present day, and to enjoy the glory of his consummated kingdom when Christ returns.

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The Gospels

LESSON
FOUR

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE



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The Gospels

Lesson Four

The Gospel According to Luke

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, the news reported that a group of people was trapped in a burning office building. Then a young man burst into the room and they followed his voice to safety. Stories from many survivors throughout the building revealed that he was a volunteer fireman who happened to work in the building. Although he lost his own life in the fire, he saved many others from certain death.

More than any other gospel writer, Luke described Jesus as one who saves. Whether we realize it or not, humanity is lost and desperate, without help or hope. We have no way to escape the judgment of God that threatens us. But the Gospel of Luke reminds us that at the cost of his own life, Jesus came to save us.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *The Gospels*, and we've entitled it "The Gospel According to Luke." In this lesson, we'll explore how to read the New Testament's third gospel with greater understanding, and how to apply its teachings to our lives.

We'll approach Luke's gospel in three steps. First, we'll consider the background of Luke's gospel. Second, we'll explore its structure and content. And third, we'll look at some of its major themes. Let's begin with the background of Luke's gospel.

BACKGROUND

We'll explore the background of Luke's gospel by considering its author, its original audience and the occasion or circumstances of its writing. Let's turn first to its author.

AUTHOR

From the outset, we should mention that the Gospel of Luke is widely recognized as the first volume of a two-volume work. The second volume is the book of Acts. And because of this, questions about the authorship of Luke are wrapped up with questions about the authorship of Acts. Listen to the preface of Luke's gospel in Luke 1:1-4:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from

the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

And compare this to the similar preface in Acts 1:1-2 which says:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven (Acts 1:1-2).

Both these prefaces indicate that the author wrote to someone named Theophilus. And the preface of Acts refers to a former book. This has led most scholars to conclude that the former book was the Gospel of Luke.

There is also other evidence that the same person wrote both of these books. The style of the Greek of Luke is similar to the Greek in Acts, but very different from the style of the other gospels. The books also emphasize similar themes, such as the universal offer of the gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit, the irresistible power of the will and word of God, and the frequent description of Christ's work as "salvation." So, assuming that one writer produced both books, who was he?

We'll investigate the authorship of the third gospel in two stages. First, we'll consider the traditional view that the gospel was written by a man named Luke. And second, we'll explore Luke's personal history. Let's look first at the traditional view that Luke wrote this gospel.

Traditional View

The Gospel of Luke is technically anonymous because it doesn't name its author. But this shouldn't be surprising. Theophilus certainly knew who wrote it, so there was no need for the author to identify himself. There are, however, several sources of information about the author's identity.

At least three types of evidence confirm the traditional view that Luke wrote the third gospel. First, comments from other parts of the New Testament point to his authorship.

The New Testament indicates that the author of the third gospel was with Paul in the later years of his ministry. For instance, in the book of Acts, the author sometimes narrated the story with a third person "they" and other times with a first person "we." The last of these first-person narratives is Acts 27:1–28:16, which describes Paul's trip to Rome.

Beyond this, Paul's epistles indicate that Luke was one of the few co-workers with him during this time. For instance, in 2 Timothy 4:11, when Paul's death was approaching, Paul told Timothy, "Only Luke is with me." Information like this doesn't prove that Luke wrote the third gospel and the book of Acts, but it does make it a strong possibility.

Second, early manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke also point to Luke as the author.

Dating early manuscripts is a highly technical science really, and there's three bits of evidence really, that scholars use to date an ancient manuscript. One, and actually the most important, — this surprises students sometimes — but the most important is paleography. Paleography refers to ancient handwriting; “paleo” is old and “graphy” is writing; so ancient writing. Scholars, experts of paleography can tell within sometimes a few decades, but certainly within fifty years or so when a document was written, simply because handwriting tended to change over time in a particular language. Sometimes the alphabet itself would change of course in terms of its writing, but certainly the way things were written; so that's paleography. The second would be chemical analysis of some kind. There's carbon fourteen dating, for example, or other kinds of testing where they would test either the ink or the animal skin or whatever the document was written on to try to determine its age. The third means to date a manuscript is any actual external comments or statements that were made. The scribes who copied them seldom dated them but sometimes they might actually make some kind of a notation or comment that would help us to identify specifically when that document was copied. So those are the three different ways that manuscripts are dated.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

One of the most reliable early manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke is papyrus number 75, often referred to as “P-75.” This manuscript is dated around A.D. 180. It contains much more of the third gospel than most other early manuscripts, and it bears the title “According to Luke.”

Many other ancient manuscripts also identify Luke as the author of the gospel, and no early manuscripts ascribe it to anyone else. Third, the writings of the early church also identify Luke as the author.

Important documents from the early church consistently assign authorship of the third gospel to Luke. The Muratorian fragment, dated around A.D. 170 to 180, is the earliest known document listing the New Testament books that the early church considered to be canonical, and it clearly affirms Luke's authorship of the third gospel.

Another ancient witness is the so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Gospel of Luke, written around A.D. 160 to 180 to refute the heretic Marcion. It introduces the third gospel this way:

Luke, an Antiochian of Syria, a physician by profession, was a disciple of the apostles. At a later date he accompanied Paul ... Luke, under the impulse of the Spirit, composed his entire gospel in the region of Achaia.

Moreover, many church leaders from the second and third centuries recognized Luke as the author of the third gospel. For example, Luke's authorship was asserted by

Irenaeus, who lived around A.D. 130 to 202; Clement of Alexandria, who lived from around A.D. 150 to 215; and Tertullian, who lived from A.D. 155 to 230.

I think we can have every confidence that Luke is the writer of the third gospel. We know from the book of Acts that Luke was a doctor, actually, whom Paul met as he's coming across the top of Asia Minor to a place called Troas. He meets Luke, and they travel together to Philippi and quite likely Luke then stays in Philippi as a doctor there, and then he rejoins Paul on his travels from Philippi as they go up to Jerusalem in A.D. 57. So the picture we have from the New Testament is of Luke as being someone who knows Paul well, travels with him, and there's every evidence that this Luke is one and the same person that writes Luke's gospel.

— Dr. Peter Walker

If you were simply guessing the name of a companion of Paul, you probably wouldn't come up with Luke. He's not a very prominent figure in Paul's letters. You might more likely come up with Titus or someone else. So the mere fact that he's not a very prominent figure in Paul's letters suggests that the attribution to Luke, of both the gospel and the Acts, is likely to be right. But I also think there is good reason for thinking that the names of the persons to whom the gospels are attributed go back to a very early stage when the Gospels were first circulating. So I think the combination of the ascription to Luke and the fact that the same author in Acts appears to be a companion of Paul, make it very likely that the author of both works is the Luke who accompanied Paul on some of his travels, who is one of Paul's coworkers.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

Now that we've affirmed the traditional view that Luke wrote this gospel, let's look at Luke's personal history.

Personal History

The New Testament tells us at least four things about Luke's personal history. First, he was not an apostle. In fact, Luke doesn't seem to have been an eyewitness to any of the events he reported in his gospel. Listen to these details from the Gospel of Luke 1:1-2:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those

who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word (Luke 1:1-2).

Luke's gospel is the only one of the four that has the sort of preface that a historian would often write to introduce a work of history. So it rather implies that Luke was particularly kind of self-conscious about following historical method of the time. And he talks about his sources in the preface. He doesn't claim to be an eyewitness himself, but he does claim to be taking up eyewitness testimony and recording it. So we have his claim to eyewitness testimony. But then there's the period after Paul gets to Jerusalem, on his last journey to Jerusalem and Luke is with him, Paul is in prison for a period of about 2 years. And it looks very much as though Luke is hanging around in Jerusalem and other places in Palestine for that period. So he has ample opportunity, actually, 2 years, when he could interview — as a good ancient historian was expected to do — he could interview the eyewitnesses who were members of the Jerusalem church, people like James the Lord's brother, who was certainly around. Some of the twelve apostles were probably around either in Jerusalem or in other parts of Palestine. So Luke was actually in a very good position to have interviewed eyewitnesses. And then, of course, he accompanies Paul to Rome where there might well have been other people who had their own stories to tell of what they remembered of the story of Jesus. So I think what we can say is that Luke was in a very good position to have had first-hand contact with the eyewitnesses.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

Second, Luke also appears to have been a Gentile convert to Christianity. When Paul wrote to the Colossians from prison, he sent them greetings from Luke who was with Paul at the time. Listen to what Paul wrote in 4:14 of Colossians,

Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings (Colossians 4:14).

This is significant because in verses 10-11, Paul had said that Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus were the only Jews who were working with him at the time. So, it's reasonable to conclude that Luke was a Gentile. This is confirmed by the fact that in Acts 1:19, Luke described Aramaic as "their language." Aramaic was the Jews' language, but it wasn't his.

Third, Luke also appears to have been well-educated. Many of the books in the New Testament are written in a fairly common style of Greek. But the Gospel of Luke shows more sophistication in its use of the language.

The fact that Luke was well-educated is also reflected in Paul's identification of him as "the doctor" in Colossians 4:14. While medicine wasn't as formal a discipline in

the days of the New Testament as it is today, it still required a person with skill, aptitude, and a degree of learning.

The fourth thing we know about Luke's personal history is that he was Paul's partner in ministry for many of the episodes reported in the book of Acts.

As Paul described him in Philemon verse 24, Luke was his "fellow laborer." According to Acts 16:6-10, Luke first joined Paul in Troas and went with him as he responded to the missionary call to go to Macedonia. From that point on Luke was often with Paul, except for a lengthy stay in Philippi recorded in Acts 16:40–20:5. Luke's faithfulness was particularly displayed in Acts 27:1 where he joined Paul's perilous journey to Rome.

I think of all the people in the New Testament, I'd like to meet Luke. At one time I thought that I'd be a physician, so he's always intrigued me. And when it comes to him qualifying to write one of the gospels, there are several things, I think, that fit into my view of that. The first is just the personal. At Acts 16 Luke begins to talk about "we." Suddenly he's in the picture; he's not just getting a secondhand report. But Luke joins the company of the people who were actually part of what was going on, and they were getting a chance to experience early Christianity firsthand. And I think that's an exciting thing. The second thing is just the fact that he was a physician. Thinking about training to become one myself, I know that that's the kind of person who wants to get the diagnosis correct. They're going to be very careful to get their facts straight, you know, they want their details to be accurate, because whatever they conclude is going to be for the good of the patient so to speak. Probably the third thing that strikes me about Luke is the perspective that he had in traveling in the Greco-Roman world. His perspective on the gospel narrative is not even limited to Israel or Palestine. It's a global perspective. In a day when we're concerned about the Christian gospel being globalized, we can read Luke with some real understanding because he had an opportunity in Greece and in Rome and in other parts of the Greco-Roman world. He had the opportunity to see how the message of Jesus was going to be applied to the culture in which the message was being given.

— Dr. Steve Harper

Now that we've explored the authorship of the third gospel, let's look at the identity of Luke's original audience.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

We'll explore the original audience of Luke in two ways. First, we'll look at the book's explicit dedication to Theophilus. And second, we'll consider the possibility that

the book was also intended for a broader audience. Let's begin with Theophilus as Luke's first reader.

Theophilus

There's been a great deal of debate over the centuries as to who Theophilus was and what it refers to in Luke 1:1-4 and he is mentioned also, of course and in Acts 1:1-2. Theophilus, the word "Theophilus" does mean "lover of God," and for that reason, many have thought that perhaps Theophilus was not an actual individual, but represents the readership of Luke's gospel which would be the lovers of God in the church. The other major possibility, of course, is that Theophilus was an individual. Most scholars, and for what it's worth I would agree with this second view, hold to the second view because Luke describes him as "most excellent," "*kratista*," there, and Luke later uses that very word, "*kratista*," to refer to Roman officials, to Felix and to Agrippa. And so it was apparently in Luke's mind a rather technical expression referring to a person of high standing, and perhaps especially a person of high standing in the Roman government. Beyond that, Luke 1:1-4 does seem to be a dedication. It just fits in terms of the genre of introductory dedications. And historical works were often dedicated using this kind of language to a patron, someone who actually paid for the production of the work. And so, it really fits into what we know of dedicatory statements and for that reason, as I say, almost certainly Theophilus was an actual person.

— Dr. David Bauer

Luke's preface implies that Theophilus was his patron, the one who commissioned and financially supported his writing. In Luke 1:3, Luke addressed his work to "most excellent Theophilus," or *kratiste Theophile*. The term *kratiste* was an expression of high honor. In fact, it's used to describe only two other people in the whole New Testament: the Roman governors Felix and Festus. If Theophilus was not a high-ranking Roman official, he was certainly a person of prestige and significance.

But the relationship between Luke and Theophilus was more complex than mere patronage. In some sense, Theophilus was also Luke's student. In Luke 1:3-4, we read these words:

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

Theophilus already knew about Jesus. But Luke wrote this fuller and more orderly account of Jesus' life in order to give Theophilus confidence in what he'd been taught.

Having seen that Luke explicitly cited Theophilus as his first reader, it's also helpful to think of Luke writing to a broader audience.

Broader Audience

There are many reasons to think that Luke wrote for a broader audience than just Theophilus. For one thing, early Christians tended to share letters and other writings with each other. As just one example, listen to what Paul wrote in Colossians 4:16:

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

Since early Christians tended to share their writings, it seems reasonable to assume that Theophilus would have been eager to share Luke's books.

Beyond this, the gospel's highly literary character makes it almost certain that Luke also had a broader audience in mind. The style simply is not that of a private note intended only for one person. The extensive historical research Luke referred to in Luke 1:3 also implies a more extended audience. And beyond this, the great length of the gospel and Acts suggests that Luke was producing a major work that he intended for a larger audience. But who was this larger audience?

It seems most likely that Luke wrote primarily for Gentile Christians. For example, his style of Greek was that of the Gentiles. And his emphasis on the universal offer of the gospel of the kingdom of God stressed that salvation was for all nations. Of course, Luke's gospel would have been valuable to Jewish Christians, too. But it wasn't directed to them the way Matthew's gospel was.

In a general sense, God always intends the whole Bible to be read and understood by all his people throughout history. But it's important to recognize that when the Holy Spirit inspired particular authors to write particular books, he worked through their individual personality and interests. In this primary sense, Luke designed his gospel to speak rather directly to the needs of Theophilus and other first-century Gentile Christians. By contrast, modern audiences are overhearing what Luke wrote to them. But if we keep Luke and his original audience in mind as we read his gospel, we'll be better prepared to understand what he wrote, and to apply it to our own lives.

Knowing who the author and audience of the gospel are, we're ready to examine its occasion.

OCCASION

We'll explore the occasion of Luke's gospel in two ways. First, we'll consider its date of composition. And second, we will look at Luke's purpose for writing. Let's begin with the date of Luke's gospel.

Date

At least two factors point to a date between A.D. 65 and 67. First, comparisons between Luke's gospel and Mark's gospel have led most New Testament scholars to agree that Luke used Mark's gospel as one of his sources of research. In our earlier lesson on Mark, we concluded that the earliest likely date for Mark was A.D. 64. If Luke used Mark as a source, then the earliest likely date for his gospel must be sometime after this, probably around A.D. 65.

Second, the book of Acts points to a date certainly no later than A.D. 69, and probably no later than A.D. 67. Acts doesn't record important events, like Paul's martyrdom, which took place around A.D. 65; the Neronian persecutions that ended in A.D. 68; or the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. These significant omissions suggest Luke wrote Acts before these events took place, or at least before he became aware of them. And according to Acts 1:1, Luke's gospel was completed even before he wrote the book of Acts. So it seems most likely that Luke completed his gospel by A.D. 67. And he almost certainly finished it by A.D. 69, before the fall of Jerusalem.

Now that we've considered the date when Luke wrote, let's turn to his purpose.

Purpose

In Luke 1:3-4, Luke gave the following reason for researching and writing this gospel:

It seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

Luke wrote for Theophilus, and for the Gentile Christians like him, in order to strengthen their young faith in the Jewish Messiah Jesus.

When Luke was writing, Gentile Christians like Theophilus faced significant challenges to their faith. These challenges came from at least two sources. First, Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome created widespread fear that persecution might spread throughout the Empire. And this fear caused some people to doubt the Christian claim that Jesus had brought the kingdom of God.

Second, Christians were arguing over the status of Gentile converts to the largely Jewish church. And this prejudice and division raised doubts about the claim that Jesus offered salvation to every family of the human race.

In response to these challenges and doubts, Luke wrote to assure Gentile believers that they had made the right choice in following Jesus. Jesus really had inaugurated God's kingdom. And Gentile Christians really were full members of God's household. If they remained faithful to Jesus, they could be confident that they would receive all the blessings of salvation.

Now that we've surveyed the background of Luke's gospel, let's turn to our second major topic: its structure and content.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

You'll recall from earlier lessons in this series that, on a large scale, all four gospels deal with Jesus' life chronologically. But, on a smaller scale, they sometimes organize their stories about Jesus according to different principles. For instance, we saw that Matthew and Mark sometimes arranged their materials according to certain themes. By comparison, Luke arranged much of his gospel according to geography.

For our purposes in this lesson, we will divide Luke's gospel into six sections: a short preface in 1:1-4, followed by five major groups of stories:

- The first major division of the gospel describes Jesus' beginnings and focuses on the region of Judea and the Jordan River. This section runs from 1:5–4:13.
- The second major division is the narrative of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, which extends from 4:14–9:50.
- The third major division reports Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in 9:51–19:27.
- The fourth major division is the narrative of Jesus' ministry in and near Jerusalem in 19:28–21:38.
- Finally, the fifth and last major division of Luke's gospel is the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection outside Jerusalem, found in 22:1–24:53.

Since we've already looked at Luke's preface, we'll focus our attention on the five major divisions of his narrative, starting with Jesus' beginnings in Luke 1:5–4:13.

JESUS' BEGINNINGS

Luke's account of Jesus' beginnings starts shortly before Jesus' birth, and spans his entire life prior to his public ministry.

Luke's main concern in these chapters was to show that Jesus was both the Son of God and the son of David, making him both fully divine and fully human. Moreover, as the son of David, Jesus was also the Messiah or Christ, the one who would provide salvation to the world by bringing God's kingdom to earth.

Throughout this narrative, Luke regularly referred to God's promises in the Old Testament, in order to show that God was fulfilling these promises through Jesus. And therefore, the only way to be faithful to God and to inherit his kingdom blessings was to receive Jesus as King and Savior.

These chapters can be divided into four main sections: birth announcements for John the Baptist and Jesus; their corresponding births and childhoods; John's identification of Jesus; and three confirmations of Jesus as the Son of God. Let's begin with the birth announcements in Luke 1:5-56.

Birth Announcements

It's significant that Luke opened his gospel with an appearance of the angel Gabriel. Hundreds of years earlier, Daniel 9 stated that Gabriel had announced that Israel's exile would last for hundreds of years. So long as they remained under God's judgment, Israel would be in bondage. But in Luke's gospel, Gabriel announced that the period of judgment was about to end.

In Luke 1:5-25, Gabriel foretold the birth of John the Baptist. Gabriel visited the priest Zechariah in Judea, and told him that his barren wife Elizabeth would miraculously have a son. They were to name the boy John. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, and would serve in the spirit of the great prophet Elijah to prepare the way for God's salvation. At first, Zechariah doubted Gabriel's message, so he was struck mute until his son was born.

Luke paired the announcement of John's birth with Gabriel's greater announcement of Jesus' birth in Luke 1:26-38. Gabriel told Mary that God would miraculously generate a son in her womb, making God himself the child's father. God's son was to be named Jesus, meaning "Savior." Moreover, he would inherit the throne of his ancestor David, meaning that he would be the Messiah, the great son of David who would bring the salvation of God's everlasting kingdom to earth.

Since Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth in Judea to tell her she was pregnant with God's son. We read about this visit in Luke 1:39-56. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, John leapt for joy in his mother's womb, and Elizabeth was immediately filled with the Spirit so that she understood the significance of her baby's reaction. Elizabeth blessed Mary, calling Mary's son her own Lord. And in response, Mary sang her famous song of praise, often called the Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55, expressing her great joy at the salvation that was coming through her child.

Following the birth announcements, Luke compared the births and childhoods of John and Jesus in Luke 1:57-2:52.

Births and Childhoods

Luke's account of John's birth and childhood can be found in Luke 1:57-80. John was born to aging parents. And when they presented him at the temple on the eighth day for circumcision, his father's voice returned to him. At that time, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied that his son would prepare the way for the Messiah, the great son of David.

Listen to how Zechariah described the Messiah's role in Luke 1:69-76:

[God] has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago) ... to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham ... And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him (Luke 1:69-76).

In the Old Testament, God had made covenant promises of salvation to Abraham and David. And Zechariah prophesied that God was about to fulfill these promises, and that his son John, would be the prophet who prepared the way.

Next, in Luke 2:1-52, Luke reported the birth and early childhood of Jesus. There are several parallels between this account and his previous narrative of John's birth, but Luke's record of Jesus' birth and childhood is much longer and more elaborate. It begins with Jesus' birth in the city of David, the Judean town of Bethlehem, which is recorded in Luke 2:1-20.

Jesus' birth was very humble. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough. But the angelic announcement that proclaimed his birth to nearby shepherds was nothing short of majestic. Listen to what the angel said to the shepherds in Luke 2:10-11:

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).

The angel proclaimed the good news or "gospel" that the messianic King would save God's people from God's judgment.

This angelic messenger was then joined by the heavenly army of angels who sang praises to God for the birth of Jesus. Luke made it clear that despite Jesus' humble birth, Mary's son really was God's chosen Messiah and King.

Next, Luke described Jesus' circumcision and presentation at the temple in Jerusalem in Luke 2:21-40. At the temple, the Holy Spirit filled and moved Simeon, as well as the holy prophetess Anna, to announce that Jesus was the Messiah who would bring salvation to the world. Listen to Simeon's praise to God in Luke 2:30-32:

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:30-32).

This was in fulfillment of Isaiah 49:6, where God had spoken these words:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

Through Simeon, God revealed that Jesus was the Messiah who would bring salvation and glory to Israel. And more than this, he would even extend the gospel of God's kingdom to the Gentile nations, so that they might also be saved.

Finally, Luke returned to the theme of Jesus' sonship with a brief story of Jesus at the temple in Luke 2:41-52. When Jesus was twelve years old, he accompanied his parents to the Passover in Jerusalem, but he was separated from them when they returned home. His parents found him several days later in the temple courts, talking with the teachers. Everyone at the temple was amazed with Jesus' knowledge and understanding.

When Mary confronted Jesus, his reply revealed how special he was. Listen to what Jesus told Mary in Luke 2:49:

Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house? (Luke 2:49).

The temple was the house of his father because Jesus was the Son of God.

Following the births and childhoods of John and Jesus, Luke reported John's identification of Jesus in Luke 3:1-20.

John's Identification of Jesus

In this narrative, John prepared the way for God's salvation by formally identifying Jesus as the Messiah. In his preaching ministry in the region of the Jordan River, John proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, exhorted people to repent of their sins, and baptized those who repented. But when Jesus came to him to be baptized, John identified him as the Messiah, and plainly declared that he wasn't even worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals. John said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit, as prophesied in Old Testament passages like Isaiah 44:3 and Ezekiel 39:29. And this meant that the final age of history had arrived, the time when God's salvation would be fully realized.

It's interesting to note that in the Old Testament, that in Exodus 19, when the Israelites were going to hear from God, or God was going to descend on Mount Sinai, that they are told before that to wash their clothes and purify themselves. And so, it turns out that cleansing was really something that people would do in preparation for God's coming, or God's appearance. And if we look at John the Baptist's proclamation, he's basically saying that God is going to come in judgment and that people need to prepare themselves by repentance, and then, of course, by baptism.

— Dr. David Redelings

In the Gospels, we have John baptizing people. And then we have Jesus coming to be baptized of John. Why would he do this? I mean, John is saying, repent and be prepared for the kingdom. Does Jesus have to repent? Obviously, he doesn't. He is the sinless Son of God. Why then does he get baptized by John? Well, it's important to realize that John's baptism is in preparation for the coming of the kingdom. As he is calling people to repent, believe, it's not the same as Christian baptism in that he is announcing that the kingdom is coming; the King is arriving. They are to be prepared for it. Jesus, in coming to be baptized by John, now comes to begin his ministry. All of the baptism begins at the start of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels. He is identifying

with us — think of, in terms of Matthew — to fulfill all righteousness. It's not because he has to repent. It's not because he is a sinner. It's because he's identifying with his people. He's beginning his public ministry. He is acting as our representative in his life, which will then culminate in his death, resurrection, ascension. So that, that is the reason why he comes and is baptized by John to, in some sense, inaugurate his ministry, to begin what he is doing, to announce that what John has looked forward to is now coming in him. He is the one that now is bringing the kingdom to pass.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

Now that we've considered John's identification of Jesus, let's turn to the fourth and final section of this narrative: the confirmation of Jesus as the Son of God in Luke 3:21–4:13.

Confirmations of the Son of God

Luke provided three separate confirmations of Jesus as the Son of God, beginning with a divine confirmation in Luke 3:21-22. Listen to this description of Jesus' baptism from Luke 3:22:

The Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

At Jesus' baptism, God himself publicly confirmed that Jesus was his son through the visible appearance of the Spirit and his voice from heaven.

Next, Luke provided a genealogical confirmation that Jesus was the Son of God in Luke 3:23-38.

Like Matthew, Luke traced Jesus' genealogy through the righteous line of David and Abraham. But unlike Matthew, Luke extended his record to include the righteous line of humanity all the way to Adam. To understand the significance of this genealogy, listen to the way it ends in Luke 3:38:

The son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God (Luke 3:38).

Luke called Adam "the son of God" — the same title given to Jesus throughout these chapters. In this way, Luke pointed out something that other portions of the New Testament teach plainly. As the Son of God, Jesus was destined to fulfill the purpose of the first son of God, Adam. Or as the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15:45, Jesus was the "last Adam." Adam was God's servant king on earth who was supposed to do God's will. But he failed miserably. But Jesus is the great Son of God who succeeded where Adam had failed, thereby extending salvation to every nation on earth.

The last confirmation of Jesus as the Son of God was a personal confirmation from Jesus himself in Luke 4:1-13.

This is the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. As Luke noted in Luke 4:1, the Holy Spirit filled Jesus and led him into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan. The Devil tempted Jesus to turn stone into bread, to receive authority over the nations from the Devil, and to throw himself off the top of the temple. And the Devil began two of these temptations with the mocking words "If you are the Son of God." In response, Jesus strongly rejected all three of Satan's temptations, and even quoted Old Testament passages that described what a faithful son of God should do.

Jesus quotes the Bible when he's encountered by the Devil in the wilderness for several reasons. First of all part of what the gospel writers are doing are depicting, portraying Jesus as the true Son of God. And so, one reason that we see him quoting the Scriptures is because of his covenant relationship with God. He is going to the Scriptures and quoting from that expression of his covenant relationship to keep things in order, to keep the proper view of his own authority in relation to God the Father, and also to the Devil's limited authority as well. And so he says that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, just to remind himself of the priority of that covenant relationship, and that assists him in resisting these temptations from the Devil. But we see him quoting from a particular portion of Scripture, from Deuteronomy 6 to 8 in particular, because there we have Moses talking about the wilderness experience of God's people, and how that wilderness experience of the Exodus community tested what was in their hearts, to see what was in their hearts. And we have something very similar happening, this test of sonship in Jesus' temptation encounter, where Israel failed the test, Jesus passes the test. And so we see that sort of comparison in the use of the Old Testament by the gospel writers and by Jesus in the temptation narrative as well.

— Dr. Greg Perry

Because it follows Jesus' genealogy that ends with Adam as the son of God, Luke's account of Jesus' temptation should be viewed in contrast with the account of Adam's temptation in Genesis chapter 3. In that story, the Devil tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden and when Adam sinned, God cursed creation and cast all of humanity into the wilderness. By contrast, Jesus resisted temptation in the wilderness, and this confirmed that he really was the faithful son of God who would bring God's faithful people back into paradise.

After Jesus' beginnings in Judea and the region of the Jordan, the next major section of the Gospel of Luke reports Jesus' ministry in Galilee. This section extends from 4:14–9:50.

JESUS' MINISTRY IN GALILEE

In this section of his gospel, Luke reported many examples of Jesus' miraculous power and gospel preaching in order to prove that Jesus was the Spirit-anointed Savior promised by the Old Testament.

Luke's narrative describing Jesus' ministry in Galilee can be divided into five parts: first, Jesus' sermon at Nazareth; second, his teaching and miracles; third, the distinction between the roles of Jesus and John the Baptist; fourth, additional teaching and miracles from Jesus; and fifth, Jesus' preparation of the twelve apostles for ministry. We'll look at each of these sections, beginning with Jesus' first sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4:14-30.

Sermon at Nazareth

All three Synoptic Gospels emphasize Jesus' miraculous power and gospel proclamation during his Galilean ministry. But Luke's presentation is distinct from the others because he introduced this stage of Jesus' ministry with the Lord's first sermon in his hometown Nazareth. Luke reported that Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and that he was given the scroll of Isaiah. So, he read Isaiah 61:1-2, and then made an astonishing proclamation. Listen to what Jesus read and said in Luke 4:18-21:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:18-21).

When he said, "this scripture is now fulfilled in your hearing," what Jesus was saying was that something the Old Testament had provided for and anticipated was now being realized. And that was the whole idea of jubilee, that in the 49th or 50th year, depending on how you calculate it, Old Testament Israel was to release people from debts and restore them to their ancestral homelands, their tribal allotments, the land that their families had been given back during the days of Moses and Joshua. If we think of the Exodus as the big, important Old Testament event for redemption, we also need to understand the Jubilee was an important provision of God for restoration. Because, as long as we live in a fallen world, redemption is going to save us, but restoration is part of God's redemption. And so Jesus sets about to show the signs of this jubilee. He's freeing people from the oppression of demons, freeing them from social stigmatization, or social classification, and he's restoring them to God their Maker and their Father.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

Isaiah had prophesied that the coming of the kingdom of God would result in salvation for all God's faithful people. And Jesus proclaimed that that day had arrived. This quotation expresses Luke's basic model for interpreting Jesus' entire ministry: Jesus was the messiah or Christ, the Savior prophesied by the Old Testament who would manifest God's kingdom on earth by bringing salvation to his people.

After relating Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, Luke reported several examples of Jesus' powerful teaching and miracles in Luke 4:31–7:17.

Teaching and Miracles

In this section, Luke demonstrated that Jesus really was the Messiah because he was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2. Jesus provided freedom from an evil spirit in Luke 4:31-36. He healed many other people in 4:38-42. And he called the disciples Peter, James, and John in Luke 5:1-11.

And we find a similar pattern in the verses that follow, where the healings of the leper in 5:12-15, and the paralytic in 5:17-26 are followed by the calling of the disciple Levi or Matthew in 5:27-32.

The same sort of pattern is repeated in the next verses, too. But instead of healings, Luke recorded Jesus' teachings. In 5:33-39, Jesus taught that his physical presence ought to end fasting and bring rejoicing. In 6:1-11, Jesus taught that the Sabbath is for healing and saving lives. And in 6:12-16, he selected twelve of his many disciples to become his special apostles, who were assigned the task of establishing a new order for Israel.

Through these miracles and teachings, Jesus demonstrated that he really was the Messiah prophesied by Isaiah, because he brought the Lord's favor in the form of freedom, healing, and release from oppression.

Next, Luke reported a fairly lengthy sermon that Jesus delivered in Luke 6:17-49. This sermon is often referred to as Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, and it has many similarities to his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7.

One of the interesting contrasts between Matthew and Luke is that we have a Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, and what's known as the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6. And this causes no end of discussion and debate. Are these one and the same thing, or are they separate? I think two things need to be said. Firstly, we know that we're dealing with just a very small extract of whatever it was that Jesus said on that occasion. I mean, read Matthew 5–7 and it takes, what, perhaps forty minutes to read it out loud. Jesus is talking for hours and for hours and his teaching cannot be so compressed. So, we're dealing with extracts. So, are we talking about the same extracts? Well, I think we probably are. The other thing to say is that if you know the geography of that area, it is fascinating — there's hills just behind Capernaum, and so you can look at those hills and say, well, Jesus sat down, and people were on a hill. But in another sense,

if you look at it, it's actually a slow descent of volcanic rock, coming down from three thousand feet above, down to the sea level. And when you look at it from a distance, it's actually got tons of what you and I might refer to as plains. They're sloping, and they're on a hill. And I would have my cake and eat it. I would say the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is sitting on the mount, and the Sermon on the Plain, it's the same thing, it's a flat place. And I think there's a final point here which is fascinating — Luke wants to give us the impression of Jesus being accessible, so he describes it as being Jesus on the plain, he's with us. Matthew's wanting to have us see that Jesus is authoritative, Jesus on the mountain like Moses on Mount Sinai. And I think we can have both answers.

— Dr. Peter Walker

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus emphasized the same great reversal that Isaiah had prophesied. The poor will be blessed. The hungry will be satisfied. Those who weep will laugh. And God will bless those who are helpless. But the good news also went a step further. Jesus called those who are blessed to follow him and to live by the standards and values of God's kingdom, which are often very different from earthly standards. For example, he called them to love strangers and even their enemies, in contrast to worldly values which tell us to be wary of strangers and to hate our enemies. So, the message of the kingdom is not just one of blessing, but also one of ethical responsibility.

After the Sermon on the Plain, Luke concluded this section with still more evidences that Jesus was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus healed a centurion's servant in Luke 7:1-10. And in 7:11-16, he even raised the dead son of a widow at Nain.

Luke's next account from Jesus' ministry in Galilee is a group of stories revolving around John the Baptist in Luke 7:18-50.

John the Baptist

After John the Baptist was imprisoned, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was really the Messiah. And Jesus replied by reminding them of what he had done. Jesus' miracles and preaching clearly fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah 61:1-2, and therefore they proved that Jesus really was the Messiah. Listen to what Jesus told John's messengers in Luke 7:22:

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor (Luke 7:22).

Jesus continued by affirming that John was the greatest of the prophets. But even John didn't measure up to the least person in the kingdom of God. And Luke punctuated this point in 7:47-50 by explaining that Jesus actually forgave the sin of the immoral

woman who washed his feet. John had baptized people in repentance as an appeal to God for forgiveness, but Jesus brought the kingdom into people's present experience by forgiving sinners, healing the sick, and preaching the gospel to the poor.

After the stories revolving around John the Baptist, Luke reported more of Jesus' teaching and miracles in Luke 8:1-56.

Teachings and Miracles

In these additional teachings and miracles, Jesus focused on the good news of the kingdom. The parable of the sower in Luke 8:1-15, and the parable of the lamp stand in Luke 8:16-18, described the importance of responding to the message of the kingdom in faith and obedience. And he repeated these same themes in Luke 8:19-21, when he said that his true family members are those that hear and obey God's word.

Then, in Luke 8:22-56, Luke reported several miracles that confirmed and demonstrated the salvation Jesus was bringing: Jesus calmed a storm, cast out a demon, healed a sick woman, and raised a girl from the dead.

Finally, Luke closed his account of Jesus ministry in Galilee by reporting Jesus' preparation of the twelve apostles for ministry in Luke 9:1-50.

Preparation of the Twelve Apostles

First, in Luke 9:1-9, Jesus sent his twelve apostles to heal and to preach the gospel. These were the same men he had set apart in Luke 6. Then he demonstrated his power by feeding 5,000 people in 9:10-17, teaching his apostles to trust in his power and provision. And these preparations culminated in Luke 9:18-27, where the apostles' confessed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, or Christ.

Luke concluded this section with several stories about Jesus continuing to prepare his apostles for ministry, especially the ministry they would have after he ascended into heaven. Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John in Luke 9:28-36, where the Father spoke from heaven to confirm their commitment to Jesus. Then Jesus' performed an extremely difficult exorcism in 9:37-45, and taught on greatness in the kingdom in 9:46-50. In all these accounts, Jesus prepared his disciples to recognize his authority, to rely on his power, and to minister as humble servants in his name, so that they would be effective leaders of his kingdom on earth.

After Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the next major section of the Gospel of Luke describes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. This portion extends from Luke 9:51–19:27.

JESUS' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

Luke mentioned Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem five times in this section: in 9:51, 13:22, 17:11, 18:31, and 19:28. As one example, listen to Luke 18:31-32:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him” (Luke 18:31-32).

Through passages like this, Luke made it clear that Jesus was committed to God’s plan to save his people, even though it required him to die in Jerusalem.

We’ll divide Luke’s discussion of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem into four main parts: first, Jesus’ teaching on the nature of discipleship; second, Luke’s reports of the increasing conflict between Jesus and his opponents; third, Jesus’ teaching on the cost of discipleship; and fourth, Jesus’ commitment to God’s plan to save his people. Let’s begin with the nature of discipleship in Luke 9:51–11:13.

Nature of Discipleship

Jesus’ commitment to build God’s kingdom and save his people led him to select and train his special apostles for servant leadership. In Luke 9:51–10:24, he taught them how to evangelize and warned them that life would be difficult for them. But he also empowered them with the Holy Spirit. After this preparation, he sent them to preach the gospel to the cities he planned to visit.

Following this, in Luke 10:25–11:13, Jesus provided a broad worldview for them by teaching on three topics related to discipleship: love for neighbor, love for God, and prayer.

Jesus began in Luke 10:27 by summarizing his teaching about love in this way:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

Here, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 in order to explain that the whole Old Testament law teaches us how to love God and our neighbor.

The next two paragraphs illustrate the two parts of this law of love. The parable of the “Good Samaritan” in Luke 10:29-37 illustrates how to love one’s neighbor. This is the well-known story about a Samaritan who showed his neighborly love for an injured Israelite, even though there was tension between their two people groups. Next, in Luke 10:38-42, Jesus’ encounter with Mary provides an example of how to love God. By sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to his teaching, Mary showed that we should love God by making him the first priority in our lives, and by listening to him obediently.

Lastly, Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Luke 11:1-13 concluded his instruction to the apostles by teaching them to pray genuinely and persistently for the gifts and blessings of God’s kingdom.

Prayer is very important for the Christian. It was an important part of Jesus’ life, and we can see its significance through the example of

his life. We find that the greater his work-load, the more he prayed, and he sought God's strength while he rested. He realized that he needed to commune with the Father consistently in order to renew himself spiritually. He prayed all night before he chose his twelve disciples, knowing that one of them would betray him. In fact, when he chose his disciples he was looking ahead to the cross. And that is part of the reason Jesus spent the whole night praying before conducting this very important ministry. Jesus' prayer life is an example for us. Later, when his disciples came back joyfully because of their marvelous works, Jesus praised the Father, saying, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." Jesus praised the Father, so we should praise him too. If even Jesus needed to pray and give praise, we need to even more. Before he was arrested, he prayed earnestly in the Garden of Gethsemane, and said finally, "My Father, if it's possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." So we see that Jesus was in complete submission to the Father. Jesus prayed because of his relationship with the Father, and wanted to complete the plan of salvation for humanity. His example teaches us that as children of God, our prayer and submission to the will of the Father are critical to our lives.

— Dr. Peter Chow, translation

Well, I would say the main reason it's important for Christians to pray is because every time we pray, it's an expression of our belief in Christ, our resting in the gospel. The only reason we can pray is because Jesus died for our sins; Jesus gave us access before the throne of God. We can boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence in prayer because Jesus has made a way for us to get there. And so, the first reason we pray is because it's an exercise of the gospel. The second reason we pray is because it's ongoing expression of dependence on God for everything. We come to him as our father who loves to bless his children, asking for our daily bread. But it's also a way we worship God, we express his worth, we adore him, we commune with him. There's this reality, being in constant prayer, the Bible talks about, where we walk around with a daily sense of God's presence, the consciousness that he is God and he carries weight in our lives.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

John Wesley called prayer the grand means of drawing near to God, the chief means of grace. In fact, when you look at the history of Christianity, reading Scripture and praying are the two primary spiritual disciplines. I think the reason why prayer is so important is that it creates the very kind of relationship with God that Christianity is intended to foster. When we pray, we are talking with God, listening to what God has to say to us, and then responding to what we hear. And that's the basis for the relationship. And that's really what God wants for us, is to have a relationship. You go all the way back into Genesis where God actually walks in the garden and seeks out Adam and Eve to have fellowship with them. Prayer becomes our way of walking and talking with God. That old hymn, "He walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own." I mean, you're getting to the heart of what Christianity is intended to be when you pray, because it's relational.

— Dr. Steve Harper

After Jesus' teaching on the nature of discipleship, Luke stressed the increasing conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Luke 11:14–15:32.

Increasing Conflict

During this part of his journey, Jesus purposefully antagonized the Jewish leadership for at least three reasons. First, he wanted to rebuke their poor leadership of God's people. Second, he wanted to call people into his own kingdom. And third, he wanted them to crucify him in Jerusalem, so that he could render saving atonement for the sins of his people, and be rewarded with kingship over them.

For instance, in Luke 11:14-28, the Jews claimed that Jesus was the "prince of demons." And Jesus responded in verses 29-53 by condemning their wickedness and pronouncing woes on them.

In Luke 12:1-3, Jesus warned the crowds not to be hypocrites like the Pharisees. In verses 4-21, he attacked the practices of the Jewish synagogues, rulers and authorities. In verses 22-32, he stressed that God would meet the needs of everyone that sought the kingdom of God, so that they didn't need to pursue worldly wealth like the Jewish leadership. And in verses 33-59, Jesus warned that his followers would certainly come into conflict with those who did not embrace God's kingdom.

In Luke 13:1-9, Jesus continued to antagonize the Jewish leadership by calling all Israel to repent of their sins. Then in verses 10-17, he increased the conflict by healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath, which greatly angered the ruler of the synagogue. And in verses 18-30, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God would not be entered by many who thought they would be admitted, clearly condemning the mainstream Jewish leadership and their followers. Finally, in verses 31-35, Luke reported that tensions were mounting between Jesus and the Jewish king Herod, who was now planning to kill him.

In Luke 14, Jesus provoked the Jewish leadership even further. In verses 1-24, he healed a man on the Sabbath, and then criticized the worldly values of the Jewish leaders — even suggesting that not one of them would inherit the kingdom of God. Then in verses 25-34, Jesus warned his followers that they might lose everything in this life as a result of the conflict they would encounter from those who opposed him.

After an introduction in 15:1-2, Jesus again pursued conflict with the Jewish leaders through his parables about things that were lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In each story Jesus called on his people to reject the hypocritical exclusiveness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and to rejoice when God finds his children among the lost sinners of the world.

After reporting Jesus' teaching on the nature of discipleship and his increasing conflict with the Jewish leaders, Luke focused his account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem on the cost of discipleship in Luke 16:1–18:30.

Cost of Discipleship

Jesus wanted his followers to understand that their own lives in his kingdom would be patterned after his own. They would be persecuted by worldly leaders, and would struggle to remain faithful to God. From 16:1–17:10, Jesus taught that discipleship involves viewing everything we own as God's possession, which he has entrusted to us as his stewards, to be used entirely for his purposes. He also warned that earthly blessings can be a stumbling block, even preventing the rich from recognizing and receiving the true gospel. Lastly, he encouraged faith and repentance, assuring us that no matter how much good we do, our very best is still no more than God requires.

In 17:11–18:8, Jesus focused on the eventual judgment on this world. The good things we receive in this life; including, health, possessions, and justice should cause us to see God's goodness, and we should pray that he will bless us with them in this life. But they're still destined to perish at the final judgment. True wealth, health and justice come only as rewards in God's everlasting kingdom, so that's where our hope should be.

In line with these ideas, Jesus ended this section in Luke 18:9-30 by emphasizing the need for humility, because only the humble will receive God's forgiveness and blessing, and inherit eternal life.

Luke concluded his record of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem by emphasizing his commitment to God's plan to save his people in Luke 18:31–19:27.

Jesus' Commitment

The first way Jesus showed his commitment to God's plan was by predicting his own death in Luke 18:31-34. Jesus knew he needed to die to save his people, and he was determined to follow through with his Father's plan.

Following this, Jesus demonstrated his commitment to God's plan of salvation by blessing the people he came to save, such as the blind man he healed in Luke 18:35-43, and the tax collector Zacchaeus that he called in Luke 19:1-10. These people were

typically rejected by society. But in line with the promises of Isaiah 61:1-2, they were going to receive a great inheritance in God's kingdom. As Jesus said of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:9-10,

Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost (Luke 19:9-10).

Lastly, in Luke 19:11-27, Jesus told the parable of servants of the king that were entrusted with his money while he was away. This parable demonstrated that if we want an inheritance in God's kingdom, we have to be committed to God's plan just like Jesus is.

After describing Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, Luke reported Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem. This is the fifth major section of the Gospel of Luke, and it extends from 19:28–21:38.

JESUS' MINISTRY IN AND NEAR JERUSALEM

Luke's report of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem begins in Luke 19:28-44, with Jesus entering Jerusalem while the crowds welcomed him with shouts and praises.

Following his entry into the city, Jesus' first act was to cleanse the temple by driving out the merchants. This event appears in Luke 19:45-46. This cleansing condemned the sinful practices that had corrupted Jewish worship and life, and thereby greatly insulted the Jewish leadership.

We need the Old Testament historical background to understand the events of Jesus' temple cleansing, just as we need it to understand many teachings in the New Testament. We need to refer back to the Old Testament. The Book of 1 Kings, chapter 8, records the dedication of the temple. The temple had been under construction for several years. When it was finished, King Solomon and the Israelites came to dedicate the temple. King Solomon prayed to God, "Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive." In addition, King Solomon also prayed that when foreigners, who heard God's great name, came from a distant land to pray toward the temple, God would hear their prayers so that all the people of the earth might know God's name and fear Him, and know that the temple was built for God's namesake. So, in Jesus' time, when the religious authorities made the temple a den of robbers, it disgraced the name of God, because the temple is associated with God's name. Furthermore, when Jesus cleansed the temple, there was symbolic meaning. The temple pointed to Jesus himself because he is the true and final temple. Jesus is the reality of the temple for all

nations coming to pray, since we pray in the name of Jesus to our Father. So, if we understand the temple from the Old Testament, we can see the significance of Jesus cleansing the temple and its relationship to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

— Dr. Peter Chow, translation

What seems to be the thing that Jesus is most upset about is that the area of the temple, the court of the Gentiles, where they are having access to come and be in the presence of the Creator of the universe, the nations can come. They can't go into the inner part of the temple which is only for the Jews, but the outer court is for the nations, is for the Gentiles. They can come and they can pray there. And what we see is that there is no place to pray. There's no place for the Gentiles in terms of the real purpose of that space. And so what we see is Jesus is restoring the temple, and restoring the function of that space by clearing out that space for the nations to be able to come and pray.

— Dr. Greg Perry

As we read in Luke 19:47–21:38, Jesus spent the next several days teaching in the temple courts, speaking about the kingdom of God. During this time, his conflict with the Jewish leaders intensified, as he continued to condemn their practices and as they continued to challenge his authority. Listen to what the teachers of the law and the chief priests did in Luke 20:20:

They sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor (Luke 20:20).

But Jesus didn't stop preaching the truth just because evil men were trying to trap him. Instead, he openly rebuked them. As he told the crowds in Luke 20:46-47:

Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widow's houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely (Luke 20:46-47).

As Jesus neared Jerusalem, Israel's refusal to accept him as their saving Messiah led him to prophesy the city's destruction. But even this catastrophe would be only a foretaste of greater judgment. On the last day, when Jesus returns in glory, everyone will give an account before him. And for this reason, Jesus calls his disciples in every age to obey him diligently, and to watch carefully for his return.

After reporting Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, we find the last major section of Luke's gospel: the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection outside Jerusalem in Luke 22:1–24:53.

JESUS' CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

In this section of his gospel, Luke explained how Jesus actually accomplished salvation for his people. He fulfilled his heavenly Father's plan by offering himself as an atoning sacrifice. And he was rewarded with the throne of his father David, so that he now rules over his people as their king.

Luke's report of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection can be divided into two parts: Jesus' arrest, trial, and death and his resurrection and ascension. Let's look first at Jesus' arrest, trial, and death in Luke 22:1–23:56.

Arrest, Trial, and Death

The record of Jesus' arrest, trial, and death begins in Luke 22:1-6 with the plot to betray Jesus. Then, during the Last Supper, recorded in verses 7-38, Jesus prophesied the betrayal by Judas, as well as the fact that Peter would deny that he followed Jesus. But in the middle of these dark predictions, he assured the disciples of their place in his kingdom, and of his control over all these events.

Following the Last Supper, we find Jesus' prayer on the Mount of Olives in Luke 22:39-46. Jesus was in great anguish during this prayer, as we can see by the fact that he sweat blood, and by his desire that the Father would somehow allow him to avoid crucifixion, if it were possible. But through it all, Jesus never wavered in his strong trust in the heavenly Father, or in his commitment to the Father's plan.

Jesus' arrest in Luke 22:47-53 set in motion the events of Peter's denial in verses 54-62, as well as of Jesus' trials before the Jewish leaders, Pilate, and Herod in 22:63–23:25. Herod and Pilate both found Jesus innocent of any crimes against Rome that might have deserved death. Pilate, however, gave in to the pressure of the Jewish leaders and the crowd, and condemned the innocent Jesus to be crucified.

People are sometimes puzzled when they read the Gospels about the response that the crowds have to Jesus at his trial and his death, as he's before the crowds and with Pilate, the crowds call for his death and the release of Barabbas. One answer is that we have to keep in mind the depths of human sin, that people are very sinful, and we are prone to injustice. And we're prone to being carried away with the sentiments of the crowd and doing what's wrong just because it seems like at the time it's the thing that will make us most comfortable or most popular or — we just get carried away and do the wrong thing. And I think there was perhaps an element of that at Jesus' trial. I think something else to keep in mind is that the crowds who were

there were probably crowds of people that really agreed with the Pharisees, who were very set against Jesus. The chief priests, who were afraid of Jesus; they were afraid that the Romans would take away their power; they would get in trouble with the Romans politically if they didn't do something to Jesus. So, you have their very cowardly actions on one hand. You have the misguided actions of the Pharisees who were not uncourageous people, but who just were theologically misguided in opposing Jesus and wanted to get rid of him for that reason. And so the crowds assembled were not all of the people, but they were a select group of the people that probably agreed with those who were opposed to Jesus. It's very important for us to remember that all of the early Christians, in the earliest days of the church really, were Jews, and that the apostles were Jews, that Jesus himself was a Jew, and that there were many Jews that were positively disposed toward Jesus. And those who shouted for his death at the cross were probably a small subset of those who, with whom Jesus came into contact during his ministry.

— Dr. Frank Thielman

Interestingly, Luke's narrative of Jesus' arrest and trials doesn't focus on Jesus' coming death, but on his identity as the Christ. Listen to this exchange between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in Luke 22:67-70:

"If you are the Christ," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me... But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am" (Luke 22:67-70).

In this passage, Jesus identified himself as the Christ, the Son of Man, and the Son of God. All of these terms referred to the fact that he was the Messiah that had been prophesied in the Old Testament.

Following his trials, Jesus' crucifixion is described in Luke 23:26-49. In verses 43 and 46, Luke twice quoted words that Jesus spoke from the cross that none of the other gospel writers preserved for us. These words emphasize two of the points Luke had made repeatedly in his gospel: first, that Jesus was filled with compassion for the helpless; and second, that Jesus trusted his Father who was in control of all these events. In Luke 23:43, Jesus responded in compassion to the thief on the cross beside him, comforting him with these words:

I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43).

And in verse 46, Jesus cried out in trust to his Father, saying:

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46).

Luke made it clear that our Lord's final moments before his death were filled with compassion for others and trust in his Father. Then, in Luke 23:50-56, Luke provided the account of Jesus' burial in a tomb of cut rock, his body unprepared for burial because the Sabbath was about to begin.

It's not hard to see how Luke's persecuted readers might have identified with Jesus' sufferings. Whatever persecution they were enduring, Jesus had endured worse. And what's more, he had done it for them. If their Lord had been willing to suffer and even to die for their sake, certainly they should be willing to suffer and die for him. But this wasn't a mere debt. Just as Jesus was rewarded for his obedience and suffering, his obedient followers would also be rewarded for their suffering.

Lastly, after describing the events of Jesus' arrest, trial, and death, Luke concluded his gospel with the account of Jesus' resurrection and ascension in Luke 24:1-53.

Resurrection and Ascension

In 24:1-12 Luke reported the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb, the angelic messenger, and the bewildered disbelief of his disciples. Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he had foretold. He had conquered death for himself, and for all those who have faith in him.

Luke 24:13-35 picks up the story later that same day, when Jesus joined two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He taught them to read the Old Testament in light of his own ministry and resurrection. Everything the Bible had ever recorded pointed to Jesus and his saving mission.

Then, in Luke 24:36-49, Jesus appeared to his disciples and encouraged them to testify to these events. He told them to continue his mission by preaching the good news of repentance and forgiveness to all nations. Then Luke set the stage for his second volume, the book of Acts, by reporting Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit to empower them for this task.

Luke concluded his gospel in 24:50-53 with Jesus' bodily ascension into heaven. In response to this miracle, the disciples worshipped, rejoiced, and praised God. The good news of great joy that the angel had announced in Luke 2:10 had finally come to God's people. Jesus the risen, victorious Lord was their Savior.

Luke wrote to assure Gentile believers that they had made the right choice in following Jesus. Through the structure and content of his gospel, Luke demonstrated that every aspect of Jesus' life was part of God's plan to establish his kingdom. He was the son of God and the son of David who came to fulfill Isaiah's prophecies of salvation. Jesus was an unstoppable force of grace and mercy, who would bring all nations under his rule. He really had inaugurated the kingdom of God. He really was offering salvation to all families of the human race. And he really would save everyone that was faithful to him.

Having considered the background and the structure and content of Luke's gospel, we're now ready to address our last main topic. In this section of our lesson, we'll explore some of the major themes that Luke emphasized.

MAJOR THEMES

In general, we can say that all three of the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — share the same central theme: Jesus is the Christ who brings the kingdom of God. But each of these gospels deals with this central concept in different ways. So, as we explore this idea in Luke's gospel, we'll focus on Luke's description of the kingdom of God as salvation.

Luke used the words save, saving, salvation, and savior at least 25 times — more often than any of the other gospel writers. He stressed our desperate condition without Christ, and our need to be rescued. And he taught that the kingdom of God is our greatest salvation.

The term salvation is deeply rooted in the messianic hopes of the Old Testament. We can define it as deliverance from the tyranny of evil, and from God's judgment against sin. Throughout the Old Testament, and especially in the prophets, God taught his people that a messiah would eventually bring salvation from the effects of sin, and even from its presence.

In line with Luke's emphasis on salvation, we'll divide our discussion of the major themes of Luke's gospel into three parts that correspond to different aspects of Christ's saving work. First, we'll consider Luke's description of personal salvation. Second, we'll consider his portrayal of God as our Savior. And third, we'll survey the types of people that are saved. Let's begin with Luke's description of salvation.

DESCRIPTION OF SALVATION

Throughout his gospel, Luke showed that personal salvation is primarily a matter of reversing people's conditions. It changes their persons and standing before God, and alters their fate so that they're blessed instead of cursed.

We are all born as sinners. And as a result, we're condemned by God and heading toward everlasting destruction. But the gospel offers us forgiveness of sins, so that God no longer has a reason to condemn us. As Luke often put it, salvation results in peace between us and God. And with our newly favored status, we receive everlasting blessings in God's kingdom, which we'll inherit when Jesus returns and perfects the earth. In that new earth, there will be no more sickness or death or disability or pain. And no matter what our lives are like right now, we'll be wealthy and privileged in the world to come.

Readers of the Gospel of Luke often note that Jesus pays particular attention to groups that lack influence: women, Gentiles, children, for that matter, in the social context of Jesus' life and ministry. There is, I

think, a profound theological reason for this, and it stems from the fact that Luke understands God's end-time rule in terms of advantaging the powerless. And, corollary that, disadvantaging the powerful, the reversal of roles actually. Now, in fact of course, this reversal of roles is not unique to the gospels or to the New Testament or to the notion of end-time or eschatological, you know, "kingdom of heaven is at hand" sort of reality. You find it all the way through biblical revelation. The book of Genesis, of course, repeatedly we note that second-born sons, for example, tend to be chosen over against first-born sons. This is a reversal of expectations. That's just one example of the reversal of expectations that you have in the Old Testament which, as far as Luke is concerned, I think, comes to culmination, to a climax, to fulfillment in the great celebrated reversal of expectations that we have in the New Testament, especially, as I say, a reversal of the powerful and the powerless.

— Dr. David Bauer

You'll recall that in Luke 7, John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah. And Jesus replied by paraphrasing Isaiah 61:1-2 — the same passage he had read in the synagogue at the start of his public ministry. Listen once more to Jesus' reply in Luke 7:22:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor (Luke 7:22).

Everything Jesus mentioned here was a form of salvation, a reversal from bad conditions to good conditions.

In the new earth, these bad conditions will be completely eliminated. And even now, salvation gives us a foretaste of those everlasting blessings. But the great reversals of salvation aren't limited to our outward circumstances. They also change us on the inside. As Jesus said in Luke 6:27-36:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:27-36).

The blessings of the kingdom don't just reverse external circumstances. They also reverse the character and perspectives of those who are saved. As with external reversals, these internal reversals are manifested partially in the present world, and fully in the next world. Right now, we begin to think and act differently because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and we see the world through new eyes. These changes will continue in

heaven, where we'll be totally free from the presence, corruption and consequences of sin. And they will be completed when Jesus returns and gives us our new bodies in the new earth.

These blessings of salvation explain why time after time in Luke's gospel the proper response to salvation is joy. One way that we see this is through the many songs Luke included, such as Zechariah's song in Luke 1:68-79, Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55, and Simeon's song in Luke 2:29-32. Joy in salvation is also mentioned in angelic announcements, such as the message given to Zechariah in Luke 1:14, and the good news of great joy delivered to the shepherds in Luke 2:10-11. And joy is the consistent theme of Jesus' parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son in Luke 15. Jesus summarized the response of joy in this way in Luke 6:21-23:

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh... Rejoice in that day and leap for joy (Luke 6:21-23).

God intends salvation to give us joy. He wants us to rejoice because our sins have been wiped away — and because we have a peaceful relationship with him — and because we are inheriting the blessings of his kingdom. This theme was so important to Luke that he even closed his gospel with it. Listen to Luke 24:52-53, where he reported what the disciples did after Jesus ascended into heaven:

They ... returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24:52-53).

When we see God for who he is, when we taste and see that the Lord is good, it should lead to joy, it should lead to delight. If I brought my wife flowers and I said to her, "here's some flowers, honey, because I'm supposed to give these to you," well, that won't be quite what she's after. It needs to be done with delight and joy because I adore her. And so, our delight in God becomes a fundamental expression of knowing God as he really is. And so delighting in God, joy in God, a sense of being satisfied in him is at the very core of the Christian life.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

With this description of salvation in mind, let's turn to our second major theme: Luke's emphasis on God as our Savior.

GOD AS SAVIOR

We'll consider God as our Savior in three steps. We'll see that salvation comes by God's power, according to God's plan, and through God's Son. Let's look first at the fact that salvation comes by God's power.

God's Power

The Gospel of Luke regularly echoes the Old Testament idea that God is the Savior of his people. For example, this is a dominant theme in Luke's opening chapters, which set the tone for the entire book. Mary rejoiced because God was her Savior in Luke 1:47. Zechariah sang of the salvation God is bringing in Luke 1:68-79. And listen to what Simeon said when he held the baby Jesus in Luke 2:29-30:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation (Luke 2:29-30).

Simeon referred to God as the Sovereign Lord — or *despota* in Greek — ascribing to God power and authority over all creation. And with the term “your salvation,” Simeon indicated that God is using his power to bring salvation.

And this same theme continues throughout the rest of Luke's gospel. For example, John the Baptist proclaimed God's salvation in the context of his powerful renewal of the entire earth in Luke 3:6. And in Luke 18:26-27, Jesus taught that salvation is impossible with men, but that everything is possible with God.

Luke wanted his readers to understand that God is in control of everything. And therefore, salvation can't be accomplished by a human being's strength, intelligence, determination, or wealth. Salvation belongs to God. It's his work, accomplished by his power. Only God has the authority to release people from his judgment. Only God has the power to change people on the inside. Only God has the might required to bring his kingdom to earth. And only God has the ability to reward his people with the blessings of that kingdom.

Besides emphasizing that salvation results from God's power, Luke taught that salvation is part of God's plan.

God's Plan

For example, when Jesus began his public ministry in Luke 4, he read from Isaiah 61:1-2. And he astonished the crowd by claiming that he was fulfilling that prophecy at that very time and place. And throughout the rest of his gospel, Luke continued to demonstrate that salvation is God's plan by showing that the dramatic events of Jesus' life fulfilled God's promises in the Old Testament. Listen to Jesus' words near the end his public ministry in Luke 24:44:

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44).

The entire Old Testament talks about the salvation that God is accomplishing through Jesus. It has always been God's plan to save his people in this way.

Another way Luke showed that salvation fulfills God's plan was by regularly pointing out that the things Jesus did were necessary because God had required or even appointed them to happen. As just one example, listen to the way Jesus described his suffering and death in Luke 9:22:

The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Luke 9:22).

Notice that when Jesus explained what was going to happen, he used the word "must," which translates the Greek word *dei*, meaning "it is necessary." Why was it necessary? Because God required it. Everything that happened to Jesus was part of God's ancient plan to save his people.

The third point we'll mention to demonstrate that God is our Savior is that salvation comes through God's Son Jesus Christ.

God's Son

Luke's gospel repeatedly affirms that Jesus is the Son of God. Sometimes Jesus' sonship identifies him as God incarnate, as in the angelic announcement of his birth in Luke 1:32-35. At other times, it emphasizes his authority. We see this at his baptism in Luke 3:22, where God spoke his approval from heaven, and during his transfiguration in Luke 9:35, when God instructed people to listen to his Son. Still at other times it refers to his role as God's messianic vassal king, as during the Last Supper in Luke 22:29.

But all these references to Jesus as God's Son share at least one thing in common: they all indicate that Jesus is the one through whom God is accomplishing salvation. Jesus is God's Son that was sent into the world in order to rescue his people from condemnation by dying in their place, and by bringing God's kingdom to earth.

Sometimes Christians wrongly think that the Father is an angry God that hates us, and that Jesus is his rebel Son that came to stand up for us. But nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus only came to save us because his Father sent him. Yes, Jesus really is our Savior. And he really does save us from the Father's judgment. But it's critical to understand that the salvation he brings originates with the Father. As God's Son, Jesus only does what the Father commands. He uses God's power in order to fulfill God's plan. And in this way, Jesus' saving work is proof that God the Father is our ultimate Savior.

Now that we've looked at Luke's description of salvation and at God as our Savior, let's turn to a third major theme in Luke's gospel: the variety of people that are saved.

PEOPLE THAT ARE SAVED

In Jesus' day, no one would have been surprised if he had offered salvation to those that held places of honor or power within society. No one would have wondered

why he saved the ones who strictly conformed to the letter of God's law. And no one would have marveled if he had condemned the people that Jewish society already despised, people that God had apparently passed over for blessing, because of some failing on their part. But that's not what Jesus did. And one of the major themes of Luke's gospel is to call attention to the surprising people that Jesus did save, and to the surprising honor and status he gave them.

One of the things that is notable about Luke's narrative is that he is interested in the least, the last, and the lost and in fact one of his major themes is the theme of reversal. The least, the last, and the lost are going to become the first, the most, and the found in the kingdom of God. Luke is really interested in, if you will, the ethical side of the gospel. He's interested in what was distinctive about the ministry of Jesus that would be seen as commendable or virtuous and so one of the things that we certainly do see in both Luke and Acts which is a two volume work, Luke/Acts, is a concern for the poor, and for women and for the diseased and for the elderly. There's no question that there's more emphasis in Luke/Acts than in the other gospels about these kinds of things. I mean, so much so that when we deal with the beatitudes of Jesus, instead of Matthew's, "blessed are the poor in spirit" in Luke it's simply "blessed are the poor." And this is a real concern of Luke. He is concerned about this because he believes that not only does redemption come through Jesus, but also justice. A rectifying of the wrongs of society, of the fallenness of humanity is brought about by Jesus and he really wants to emphasize that Jesus is the Savior of the world. He's, if you will, the Savior for everybody. It's one stop shopping in Jesus whether you're one of the most or the most elite persons or well educated persons or the most well-known persons in society, or the very least of the least, Jesus is for everyone and Luke certainly wants to emphasize that.

— Dr. Ben Witherington

For our purposes in this lesson, we'll limit ourselves to looking at just four surprising types of people to whom Luke frequently called attention, beginning with the Gentiles.

The Old Testament speaks of Gentiles eventually being brought into God's kingdom and receiving its salvation and blessings. But the Jews in Israel's day typically looked down on Gentiles as being excluded from the primary blessings of God's kingdom.

By the time Luke wrote his gospel, the Christian church throughout the world consisted largely of Gentile converts. Through history, God had clearly demonstrated his intention to bless the Gentiles in astounding ways. And as we saw earlier in this lesson, one of Luke's reasons for writing was to assure the Gentiles that they hadn't made a mistake by becoming Christians. So, throughout his gospel, he called attention to those

places where salvation had been extended to the Gentiles, in fulfillment of the hopes and ideals of the Old Testament.

For example, in Luke 2:10-14, the angels announced that the joy of the gospel would be for “all the people” and for “men on earth.” Rather than saying that Israel’s new king had been born to save the Jews, the angels spoke in much more global terms. And in Luke 2:32, Simeon proclaimed that the baby Jesus would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” And while all four gospels quote Isaiah 40 in the story of John the Baptist, only Luke 3:6 extended the quotation to include the words “all mankind will see God’s salvation.”

Luke also noted that the Samaritans, whom the Jews counted as their enemies, could also be saved. For instance, in Luke 17:11-19, Jesus healed ten lepers, but the only leper to return and thank him was a Samaritan. And only Luke recorded the parable of the Good Samaritan, found in Luke 10:30-37, in which the Samaritan was an example of neighborly love.

Beyond this, Luke recorded times when Gentiles demonstrated real faith in Jesus as the Savior. For example, in Luke 7:9, Jesus said of a Roman centurion:

I have not found such great faith even in Israel (Luke 7:9).

And as we saw earlier in this lesson, Luke traced Jesus’ genealogy all the way back to Adam, implying that Jesus came to save Adam’s entire race, including both Jews and Gentiles.

The second surprising type of people that received salvation in Luke’s gospel was sinners. Now, in an important sense, all human beings are sinners. But there were some people in Jesus’ day whose sins were so great and so public that these people were essentially ostracized by Jewish society, like the immoral woman in Luke 7:36-50, and Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke 19:1-9. Tax collectors were sinners because they made their living by charging their countrymen exorbitant tax rates that were not required by the government. But Jesus came to save even them. He was eager to grant salvation to anyone who repented in faith.

As just one example, listen to this story from Luke 5:29-32:

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:29-32).

The third surprising group of people that are saved in Luke’s gospel is women. In the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world where Jesus lived, women didn’t have many rights in society, and they weren’t highly valued. But Luke gave attention to the way that Jesus brought salvation to them. In Luke 8:41-53, Jesus healed Jairus’ daughter and the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. He also showed great compassion

toward widows, who in the ancient patriarchal society had no help and virtually no hope. Luke 7:11-17 and 18:1-8 illustrate Jesus' concern and care for these most needy people.

One of Luke's most dramatic teaching techniques that highlighted the salvation of women was contrasting humble women with proud male religious leaders. For instance, in Luke 13:14-15, Jesus called the ruler of the synagogue a hypocrite, while in the very next verse he called a crippled woman "a daughter of Abraham." We find a similar contrast in Luke 7:37-50, where Jesus accepted the adoration of an immoral woman while condemning the proud Pharisee Simon.

And for his ultimate example of what it means to love God, Luke related the story of Jesus' friend Mary. In Luke 10:27, Jesus taught that the two great commandments were to love God and to love our neighbor. Then, in verses 38-42, Mary exemplified how to love God, specifically, by listening obediently to his teachings. Not Peter, not John, and certainly not the Jewish leadership, but a woman was the model of godly piety.

Finally, the fourth surprising type of people that are saved in Luke's gospel is the poor. Luke began his gospel by pointing out that the family of Mary and Joseph was poor. We know this because in Luke 2:24, the offering they brought to the temple was the offering of the poor prescribed in Leviticus 12:8.

Luke also showed that Jesus favored the poor in places like the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21, and in his story about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. And listen once again to Luke 4:18, where Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18).

Luke was the only gospel writer to report this event. And he included it as a model for Jesus' entire ministry. His point was that part of bringing the kingdom of God is proclaiming the good news of salvation to the poor. Luke took special care to point out that the God of the universe had become incarnate to save even those that society despised. Gentiles, sinners, women, and the poor had very few rights in Jewish society and weren't expected to inherit the greatest blessings of God's kingdom. But Jesus rejected that value system. He offered full acceptance and endless blessings to everyone that received him as Savior and Lord.

Of all the gospel writers Luke has a particular emphasis on marginal groups in Palestinian society of his day. We see him constantly pairing up accounts of men with accounts with women. We see him also paying particular attention to the Samaritans, paying attention to the poor. We see this parable for example that's indicative of Luke's gospel, only found in Luke's gospel, about Lazarus and the rich man. And we see again, a parable only in Luke, the Good Samaritan parable. And so these accounts of Jesus' teaching fit very well with his programmatic sermon in Nazareth. It says that, I have come, today the Scripture is fulfilled; the Spirit is upon me to declare good news to the poor and to the captives, to the oppressed. And Jesus tells his disciples that when they're going to have a banquet they should invite the lame and the poor as well. And so Jesus is illustrating something

very important, that in our relationship with other people who bear God's image, we aren't to sort of think of ourselves better than we ought, is the way Paul put it. But we should see that Jesus reached out in grace to every aspect of society. He called his disciples to do that. And we are to do that as well. Jesus is ridiculed for spending time with the prostitutes and the sinners and the way that he responds is that, I have come, not for the righteous, but for the sinners. And so it's not only a reflection of Jesus' mission to reach every aspect of the people of God, of his society of that day, but it's also a sense of who we really are, of our real need as well. That we all need the grace of God, that we cannot merit God's favor on our own good works or our own station in society, and therefore we're all on equal ground before God and should be gracious to one another and reach out to each other because we have the same sort of need.

— Dr. Greg Perry

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored the Gospel of Luke by considering its background in terms of its author and original audience, and the occasion of its writing; its structure and content; and its major themes that revolve around the topic of salvation. If we keep these ideas in mind as we read Luke's gospel, we'll have a better understanding of his meaning, and be more prepared to apply it to our lives in the church and in the world.

The Gospel of Luke presents Jesus as the glorious Son of God who came to earth as the loving Savior of the world. He extends the good news of God's salvation to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, wealth or status. In his own day, Luke's gospel assured Gentile Christians that they hadn't made a mistake by following a Jewish Messiah. And the same is true in every age. Since the first century, the vast majority of the church has been Gentile. And we haven't made a mistake either. And as followers of Christ, it's our responsibility to keep preaching that same good news of repentance and faith to everyone in the world, knowing that we have the only message that can bring real salvation.

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The Gospels

LESSON
FOUR

The Gospel According to Luke Faculty Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson Four: The Gospel According to Luke

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Richard Bauckham
Dr. David Bauer
Dr. Peter Chow
Dr. Steven Cowan
Dr. Brandon Crowe
Dr. Saul Cruz

Dr. Dan Doriani
Dr. Matt Friedeman
Rev. Mike Glodo
Dr. Steve Harper
Dr. Greg Perry
Dr. Robert Plummer

Dr. David Redelings
Mr. Emad Sami
Dr. Thomas Schreiner
Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. William Ury
Dr. Peter Walker

Question 1:

How do scholars determine the date of early manuscripts?

In serious studies of New Testament writings, it's common to consider early manuscripts of the books. Examining the content of early manuscripts helps interpreters verify that the process of copying and transmitting the book over time hasn't altered the book in significant ways. In studies on the Gospel of Luke, looking at early manuscripts can be particularly helpful because they confirm that the book has consistently been attributed to Luke. But is the process for dating manuscripts reliable? How do scholars determine the date of early manuscripts?

Dr. Robert Plummer

The New Testament has more ancient manuscript evidence than any other piece of ancient literature, shockingly more. There are more than five thousand manuscripts or portions of manuscripts to testify to the contents of the New Testament. Now it's interesting that if you pick up an edition of the Greek New Testament, scholars have categorized these manuscripts based on where they were written, at what time they were written, and how reliably they were transmitted. There's an entire field of people who devote their lives to reading these manuscripts, or even portions of these manuscripts, and specializing in them. Now, these manuscripts are written on one of two things usually — ancient manuscripts on leather — vellum — or on parchment, which is from a plant fiber, papyrus. So of course, this material can be carbon dated. Also, people who spend their lives studying these, there are very specific styles of writing that changed over time, so through the kind of ink used, through the style of writing, through the preparation of the manuscript, one can arrive at a very high precision of confidence at what time that manuscript was dated. So, for example, the earliest portion of a manuscript of the New Testament is the "John Ryland's Fragment," which scholars agree is somewhere around 120 to 135. So even though you have scholars with all kinds of presuppositions and different views, you've got them narrowing it down to 15 years. And so, sometimes people who are unfamiliar with textual issues and the transmission of the New Testament in ancient times have some fear that, "If I really look into this, my faith will be weakened as to the authority

and trustworthiness of the Word of God.” But I have found that teaching students Greek and getting down to level where we’re actually doing some text criticism, students have only a growing value for God’s Word and how faithfully it has been transmitted through time.

Dr. Richard Bauckham

The experts who try to determine the dates of early manuscripts are a very specialized group of people who have become very expert in identifying ancient handwriting styles. I think this is the main key to it, that they can plot the way ancient handwriting styles changed over a period so that, you know, one way of writing was common at a certain period and then be succeeded, and so forth. So that it is really by locating the style of handwriting of a particular manuscript within the kind of reconstructed sequence of changes in handwriting. That’s the basic tool they use. Of course, it does depend on the fact that we have some manuscripts that date themselves, you know, who tell us they were written in the 6th year of Augustus, or whatever. So with some manuscripts dating themselves, you can then relate the others to those dates by handwriting styles. It’s not, of course, a very precise dating. A particular scribe, you know, who learned his handwriting at a certain stage of his life would go on using that same style probably when other scribes were beginning to use a slightly different one. So it can’t date more precisely within, I think, about 20 or 30 years, but that’s a pretty good rough indication. I think that’s the main way it’s done. I mean, sometimes they have used carbon dating. I think the Qumran documents, some of them have been carbon dated and, interestingly, confirmed the datings that have been based on study of handwriting before that. So it’s a very expert skill, but happily, there are some people who devote their lives to it and are very good at it.

Question 2:

How confident can we be that Luke wrote the third gospel?

Besides manuscript evidence, there are many other reasons to confirm that Luke wrote the gospel that bears his name. Of course, Luke never identified himself as the author of the third gospel, so we don’t have infallible proof that he wrote it. But we still have a lot of evidence for his authorship. Overall, how confident can we be that Luke wrote the third gospel?

Dr. Steven Cowan

I think we can be fairly confident that Luke wrote the third gospel. For one thing, we know from church history that the early church fathers were strongly opposed to accepting works that were forgeries as being inspired by God. They wouldn’t have accepted this work as canonical, as belonging to the canon of Scripture, if there was any doubt about its authorship in their minds. We have plenty of evidence that they would have just dismissed forgeries out of hand as being disingenuous, inauthentic works. Secondly, there’s no competing tradition regarding the authorship of Luke’s gospel. The only tradition we find in the writings of the church fathers is that Luke, this disciple and follower of the apostle Paul, was the author of Luke’s gospel. If they

had just simply picked this name out of a hat to attach to Luke's gospel, then we might expect there to be competing voices or people saying, "No, it wasn't Luke. It was so-and-so." There's no competing tradition on this, so there's no reason to deny this tradition, given that fact. And thirdly, if they had just picked Luke's name out of hat or attached Luke's name to this gospel arbitrarily, or for non-historical reasons, then their choice of Luke is kind of strange, because who is Luke? Luke is a rather obscure figure. He's mentioned a couple of times in Paul's letters. We know virtually nothing about him. He was probably a physician, we learn from Paul's letters, but he is a fairly obscure, almost unknown figure, and so, why pick this man? If the early church were going to make up a name to attach to Luke's gospel and persuade readers to accept this work as authoritative, they might have chosen somebody more prominent like Thaddeus or Bartholomew or Peter or somebody. But no, they choose this very obscure person named Luke. Seems to me the only reason why they would attach Luke's name to the Gospel of Luke is if they had strong historical reason to think that Luke actually wrote it.

Dr. Richard Bauckham

I think we are quite dependent on the fact that the author of the third gospel was also the author of the Acts of the Apostles. And the Acts of the Apostles, in its accounts of Paul's missionary travels, has a number of passages where the author switches from saying, "Paul and his companions" to saying, "we," meaning, evidently, the group of people, including Paul, of whom the author formed a part for those bits of the narrative. And there have been other suggestions as to how to interpret that. But I think, in the end, the most plausible explanation is the obvious one, that the author of the Acts of the Apostles was present with Paul for those bits of the narrative. So that identifies him as a companion of Paul. It doesn't yet give us the name Luke, but we do know that a Luke was one of Paul's companions. But I also think there is good reason for thinking that the names of the persons to whom the Gospels are attributed go back to a very early stage when the Gospels were first circulating. So I think the combination of the ascription to Luke and the fact that the same author in Acts appears to be a companion of Paul, make it very likely that the author of both works is the Luke who accompanied Paul on some of his travels who is one of Paul's coworkers.

Question 3:**How do we know Luke's gospel is true?**

There are compelling reasons to believe that Luke wrote the third gospel. But his authorship raises legitimate questions. Luke wasn't an apostle or even an eyewitness to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. So, how do we know Luke's gospel is true?

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

Luke tells us right at the beginning of his gospel that he was not an eyewitness, but he did research, and he consulted eyewitnesses in compiling his gospel, and I think that's true of the book of Acts as well. I think Luke talked to people like Mary, the mother

of Jesus, and, of course, the apostles. They accurately conveyed to Luke what had happened. They represented the events in which they were participants. But Luke did not just check it with one person. We have good evidence, as he says in chapter 1, that he researched everything carefully. Incidentally, if we look at the book of Acts where we can test Luke in terms of talking about political leaders, he is shown again and again to be amazingly accurate. Yes, Luke's gospel was written to edify the church, and it has a certain perspective and a certain point of view. Luke was not a neutral history writer. No gospel writer was writing history from a neutral, unbiased point of view. But no history writer writes from a neutral unbiased point of view. There is always a perspective. To have such a perspective, to have a theological agenda, which Luke certainly has, does not preclude the accuracy of the accounts. And in the ancient world, everyone still believed that it was important to accurately represent what had happened as well. So we have an inspired account that is historically reliable and theologically edifying at the same time.

Dr. Peter Chow (translation)

Archaeology helps us ascertain the accuracy of Luke's historical accounts. For example, archaeology confirms the kings, governors and Roman officials that he recorded, as well as the different places that he traveled to in the book of Acts. In this way, archaeology helps us verify the historicity of Luke. We also believe that the Holy Spirit led biblical authors to write the Canon, so we believe that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Luke's gospel carries the highest authority; it's God's Word.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Luke was in the entourage of Paul. So, he had access to an apostle who would know what happened because Paul was talking to the other apostles. Paul had the outline to the life of Christ. Paul might have seen some things, might not, but he certainly knew what happened, and more importantly, he knew what it meant and could pass that on to Luke. Now, Luke clearly had a lot of skills. He was — we call him “the beloved physician” — he was a trained man, he was an observer, he has a great eye for detail, but maybe most importantly, he says, “Hey, I worked at this. I carefully consulted all the eyewitnesses from the beginning. I made a careful investigation.” He's implying that some investigations were not so careful. And, in fact, there are extant fragments or quotations or whole documents that purport to give maybe more detail about Jesus' birth and how he came to this life, or his death, or something of that nature, and we look at them, and they're often fantastic. They're often incredible. They have Jesus doing very strange things, and pointless things, like making clay birds on the Sabbath one day, and a Pharisee — surprise, surprise — comes up and says to Mary and Joseph, “What kind of a son do you have? He's making clay birds. He's laboring on the Sabbath day.” And Jesus claps his hands and says, “Be off with you!” and the birds come to life and fly away. Now this is the kind of thing we don't find in the Gospels. We have something that's implausible — why would Pharisees be questioning the activity of a child? Something that is a mere wonder, an empty miracle, if you will. Something that doesn't point anywhere or signify anything. Maybe even corrupt activity — destroying the evidence, disrespect — which is all

through the non-canonical infancy narratives — so-called infancy narratives — in other gospels.

Luke is sober-minded. He interviewed people. People ask questions like, “How do we know what Mary was thinking?” “How do we know what happened in the temple when Jesus was dedicated?” Well, the answer is, Luke interviewed her. Now, was Luke infallible? Was Mary infallible? Did she remember everything? Well, the Bible does say she treasured up things in her heart, and so, she was probably working hard to remember things, and there were people there to help her if she forgot. God equipped Luke as well. We all make mistakes. Every human is fallible, but God can take our fallible activities and make something infallible out of it. It happens to us routinely. We say something, not exactly like Luke, of course, we say something that’s almost true, but somebody knows exactly what we meant. So, an error is purged by the good listener. God the Holy Spirit has the power to purge the errors that Luke, or for that matter, Matthew, John, Mark, might have been prone to commit. The Holy Spirit superintended. So, we have a man who has skills, who worked hard, who maybe wrote multiple drafts even, for all we know, and prayed over what he did, we assume, and God kept the errors out so it could be a reliable work, even though he didn’t see it all, or maybe even didn’t see anything with his own eyes.

Question 4:

Are there distinctly Gentile aspects of Luke’s gospel?

Unlike the other gospel writers, Luke wasn’t Jewish. In fact, he was probably the only Gentile whose books we have in the New Testament. And his audience was probably Gentile, too. But how did Luke’s ethnicity and the ethnicity of his audience impact what he wrote? Are there distinctly Gentile aspects of Luke’s gospel?

Dr. Peter Walker

Luke, himself a Gentile, writing the gospel for Gentiles like himself who had very little understanding perhaps of Judaism but have been brought into the story of Jesus, and so it’s written for the whole world, if you like. Luke’s gospel — well, because he’s trying to include people from all the world, and Gentiles like himself — has a very much more inclusive feel, and this is the gospel where you get a real sense of the human Jesus, God’s love and compassion for all people, slightly more a feeling gospel, perhaps, whereas Matthew’s gospel feels a little more truth and analysis, that kind of thing.

Dr. Peter Chow (translation)

The first point of difference in comparing Luke with the other gospels is that its original readers were not Jewish people, and so it was adjusted to be more fitting to the Greek culture. For example, its genealogy begins with Adam instead of Abraham. It also uses Greek phrases. For example, when the four friends lowered a paralytic from the ceiling to be healed by Jesus, the roof that Luke described with his verbiage was a Greek-styled roof, not a Hebrew-styled mud roof.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The church of his day is made up of Jews and Gentiles, and from a historical perspective, the synagogue. The Jews in the synagogue would say, “What is this? God’s people is the nation, Israel.” And so, part of his purpose is to demonstrate that, in fact, the mission to the Gentiles was all along part of God’s purpose and plan. So throughout both Luke and Acts you see this vision, this global vision, that the gospel isn’t just for the Jews, that all along the Jews were meant to be a light for the Gentiles, and that one day this gospel — it starts in Israel — is going to go forth to all nations. And so very much central to Luke’s purpose, to demonstrate that the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, are the people of God in the present age.

Question 5:

Was “Theophilus” a real person, or was the name just a symbolic reference to anyone who loved God?

Most scholars agree that Luke wrote primarily for Gentiles. But not everyone agrees on the precise identity of his original audience: the man Luke called “Theophilus.” Many interpreters have noticed that the name “Theophilus” means “one who loves God” or “friend of God.” And this has led to speculation that Luke wrote generically to all Christians. Was “Theophilus” a real person, or was the name just a symbolic reference to anyone who loved God?

Dr. Peter Walker

Theophilus, as a name, does just mean “lover of God,” and so it’s possible that it’s a reference just to an imaginary figure. I think that’s a little bit unlikely. I think it’s more likely that this is actually a real person who’s come to believe in Christ. He says, “I’m trying to give you the assurance of the things which you yourself have believed.” And so, I imagine this to be a Roman patron of Luke. I mean, Luke is possibly in Rome for two years, writing up his gospel researches, writing the book of Acts as well, and therefore it makes every sense for him to be, as it were, writing it for someone who’s perhaps supporting him financially, encouraging him. And it’s very helpful for Luke, I think, also to have a real Gentile believer in his mind as he writes because then that acts as a kind of way of selecting his material. What would be most helpful for Theophilus, to write? And any of us, when we are writing, it’s really useful to have a real audience in mind, and I think Theophilus was his real audience.

Dr. David Bauer

Many have thought that perhaps Theophilus was not an actual individual, but represents the readership of Luke’s gospel, which would be the lovers of God in the church, that Luke’s gospel is directed towards a church, the so-called “Lukan” church. Or some have suggested more recently that Luke, as well as the other gospels, was not directed to a specific church, but to the whole church. And so, “Theophilus” then might refer to the church as a lover of God. And insofar as the church is a lover

of God then this gospel relates to the church in that existence, in that aspiration. An argument in favor of seeing Theophilus as a figurative representation, is the fact that Luke — and remember when I say Luke-Acts because Luke 1:1-4, I think, introduces not just the Gospel of Luke, but the whole work, including the book of Acts — is concerned with issues that go beyond the interests or the challenges of just one person. There is a great deal of material in Luke-Acts that is clearly meant to be edifying to the entire church. The other major possibility, of course, is that Theophilus was an individual.

Most scholars, and for what it's worth I would agree with this second view, hold to the second view because Luke describes him as “most excellent,” “*kratista*,” there, and Luke later uses that very word, “*kratista*,” to refer to Roman officials, to Felix and to Agrippa. And so it was apparently in Luke's mind a rather technical expression referring to a person of high standing, and perhaps especially a person of high standing in the Roman government. Beyond that, Luke 1:1-4 does seem to be a dedication. It just fits in terms of the genre of introductory dedications. And historical works were often dedicated using this kind of language to a patron, someone who actually paid for the production of the work. And so, it really fits into what we know of dedicatory statements, and for that reason, as I say, almost certainly Theophilus was an actual person.

Now, that does not mean that the Gospel of Luke, or Luke-Acts, was addressed solely to him, but I think it does mean that one purpose of Luke-Acts — not the only purpose, but one purpose of Luke-Acts — is to fulfill the purpose statement that is mentioned in connection with Theophilus there in Luke 1:1-4, “That you may know” — it's often translated — “the truth of the things about which you have been informed.” The word for “truth” there is actually in Greek, “*asphaleia*.” It's the word from which we get our English word “asphalt,” which is heuristic, or suggestive of its meaning in Greek, that is something upon which you can confidently stand, something that you can build your life upon. So, if that is the case, then Theophilus was probably a person who either had heard the gospel, was interested, but was not fully convinced, so that there would be something of an evangelistic or apologetics aspect to Luke-Acts, particularly directed toward Theophilus and those like him, significant officials in the Roman government, persons of high standing. Or Theophilus may have been a catechumen, someone who was going through the process of Christian instruction which would ideally lead to baptism and incorporation of the Christian community, still had some questions, and so if that is in fact the case, there'd be almost a catechetical, catechesis, sort of aspect to the purpose of Luke or Luke-Acts.

Question 6:**What was the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century?**

At the time that Luke wrote his gospel, the church was sometimes identified as a Jewish sect, and sometimes sharply distinguished from Judaism. And some scholars have suggested that the tension between Judaism and Christianity influenced Luke's work. So, what was the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century?

Dr. Greg Perry

The relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century is complicated. It starts off where Christians are really a part of Judaism. We see in the book of Acts, for example, that Christianity is described as "The Way," as sort of a sect within Judaism, a messianic sect within Judaism of these people who worshipped Jesus as the Messiah. But we can see in Acts and in the other New Testament books that right away the claim that Jesus is the Messiah begins to divide synagogues, for example. And Paul is a great example of someone who is put out of the synagogue. For example in Ephesus he goes and teaches in a school hall, or we begin to see Christians who are meeting in households instead of in synagogue gatherings. One of the things that puts a lot of pressure on that relationship early on is, of course, the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, but also the influx of Gentiles. We began to see that those who are preaching Christianity are preaching Jesus as the Lord over all the nations. And we began to see Gentiles responding. And so the various sensibilities about the food laws, about circumcision, began to add more pressure. And we see these sort of disputes break out like at Galatia, over whether or not these Gentiles are to keep the Law.

The other thing that is putting a lot of pressure on this relationship is the way that both of them are relating to Rome and Rome's power. We know, of course, for example, that the temple is destroyed in A.D. 70. And even before that — that's because of Jewish revolution against Caesar — and so, in the wake of that, we see Jews trying to reestablish their identity. And they begin to discuss that, and what that should look like. And that adds further to the separation between Christians and Jews. But even before that in Rome itself in the lead up to the revolt, we see that Christian Jews in particular are expelled from Rome. People like Priscilla and Aquila are again claiming Jesus is the Messiah, and so there is this civil disturbance over "*Chrestus*," as what Suetonius says as he's writing the life of Claudius, and we think that probably refers to *Christos*, to Jesus. So we see then that the relationship is complicated, and we see divisions taking place because of the claim "Jesus is Messiah," because of the influx of Gentiles, and also because of the relationship with Rome. All these pressures began to divide Christians and Jews in the first century.

Question 7:

Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Luke paid attention to many Gentile concerns. But he also wanted his readers to understand that the gospel is the story of a Jewish Messiah. God chose the Jews as the special people that would produce the Savior of the world. And the Messiah wouldn't bring salvation by rejecting his Jewish heritage, but by embracing and fulfilling it. One way Jesus did this was through the Jewish rite of baptism. So, Luke reported this event even though its association with repentance raised questions like, why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Dr. David Redelings

Yeah, the question is often raised as to why Jesus had to be baptized, and the concern generally is that if Jesus is the sinless sacrifice for our sins, as the New Testament teaches elsewhere, why does he have to repent? And that's the sort of concern. And I think the problem arises from joining a little too closely the idea of baptism and repentance. It's helpful to understand the Jewish background, to understanding how Jews would have viewed baptism in the first century. In John 3:25, there's a reference to an argument about baptism and it's referred to as "purification" or "cleansing." And so we understand that Jews thought of baptism as a kind of cleansing in the 1st century. And this is also seen in Jewish writings. For example, in the *Mishna*, which was written about 200 A.D., there's a chapter called "*Mikvaot*." And in *Mikvaot*, it basically gives laws about cleansing for various situations that are required by Mosaic Law. And the Mosaic Law did require cleansing, and it would be the kind of thing that would occur when people are perhaps sick or so on, then they would have to follow the cleansing requirements of the law. And so, this would be part of, actually, daily life. And we find also that archaeologists have found in first century Judea, *Mikvaot*. They've discovered them. For example, there are pools in the Qumran area, which are widely regarded as *Mikvaot*, and there are other areas as well, I believe, in Jerusalem and so on. And so, for Jews to think of baptism as purification is an important concept. They would think of it in those terms.

Now, beyond that, it's interesting to note that in the Old Testament, that in Exodus 19, when the Israelites were going to hear from God, or God was going to descend on Mount Sinai, that they are told before that to wash their clothes and purify themselves. And so, so it turns out that cleansing was really something that people would do in preparation for God's coming, or God's appearance. And if we look at John the Baptist's proclamation, he's basically saying that God is going to come in judgment and that people need to prepare themselves by repentance, and then, of course, by baptism. And so, it's very natural to the Jewish mind to think that baptism would accompany repentance, especially of course, if Jews were actually unclean at the time, but even, perhaps, just to make sure, and so, we could also understand how Jesus would think of this as being appropriate for himself because he is one who obeys the Jewish law as a good Jew. The period when Gentiles are not under the Mosaic law is later and so that even in Acts 10 when Peter says that he has never eaten anything which was not clean food under Mosaic law, that's something new and

that happens later. But at this time, and the time of the Gospels, it's very understandable, natural, for Jews to obey the laws of cleanness and to have regard for that as part of their piety towards God. And one of the difficulties I think we have often as Gentiles is that we think that, we'll think, well then, is it a sin to be unclean? If you look at Numbers, I believe it's chapter 19, there's an interesting example where the priests are required by law to carry off the ashes of a sacrifice, and they do become unclean by that act, even though it's commanded. So, being unclean is not the same as being sinful, and for Jesus to participate in a purification of baptism is not an admission of sin on his part.

Question 8: **Why did the Jews hate Jesus so much?**

At a variety of points in his gospel, Luke pointed out that Jesus strongly opposed the Jewish leaders, and that they strongly opposed him. Even the Jewish people eventually turned against Jesus and demanded his death. Now, it's not hard to understand why the Jewish Messiah would stand against the abuses and errors of his people. But why didn't the Jews accept their own Messiah? Why did the Jews hate Jesus so much?

Rev. Mike Glodo

First of all, those in authority had the most to lose. And we can see there is a general orientation to power and authority. It's just human nature, and Jewish authorities were no different than any other human beings. Those who have power want to hold on to it, and Jesus came as a threat to their power. They understood the kingdom of God in a narrow way, in a nationalistic way, in an ethnocentric way, in a tribal way, and they had the most to lose. And just as it was told to Mary in Luke's gospel, this child shall be the cause of the rise and fall of many in Israel and a sign to be opposed. John's gospel begins with the anticipation that this is the Light, which came into the world and the darkness did not, some translations say, "comprehend it," but I think, rather, we should understand, "overpower it." Jesus came as the light of the world, and the darkness had everything to lose. And so the religious authorities manifest that.

But we also should remember that it's not very long, it's late in "Holy Week," as we call it, where everyone, even the crowds that had followed Jesus, cried out for the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus. That Jesus came not fulfilling people's expectations of what they wanted God to do. Instead, he came manifesting what God was determined to do, and that means a threat to our own independence, a threat to our own autonomy. And we don't like to die to self, and so Jesus brought a threat of overturning our human wills, and that's why he was ultimately, from a human level, rejected. But we also have to look at it on the divine level, too. It was God's purpose and plan that Jesus came to redeem fallen humanity and that he would destroy death by himself dying. And so it was, as Peter says in his sermon in Acts 4, that according to the predetermined and foreordained plan of God, this Jesus was crucified. So what becomes the worst thing to ever happen in the history of the human race is also the

most glorious thing that happens in the history of the human race. The way it comes to us individually is we see Jesus challenges our autonomy. Jesus challenges our self-authority. And just like Peter wrestled with this question, do I follow the way of the cross? Do I follow the way of the sword? Do I follow the way of death to self so that I may life in Christ? Or do I follow the way of living in my own power and strength? We feel that very dilemma that Jesus encountered in the crowds on the day he rode in and throughout the following week until he was crucified.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Well, people hated Jesus for a variety of reasons, and we could list them in, we might say, spiritual and non-spiritual every day sorts of reasons. On one level people hated Jesus because he upset them. The Pharisees did not like the way he conducted himself. I mean, he's obviously a teacher, he's obviously somebody vaguely like themselves, and yet, he's unlike them. He doesn't keep their rules about the Sabbath, about who to associate with, about the way you eat, the way you wash. So many things were so upsetting to them. Essentially you could say they had a religion of Law, and they believed you got right with God by keeping Law, and they were the keepers of that law. They were the ones who knew what the Law meant, how it should be interpreted, how it should be practiced. And, you know, if Jesus were just an ordinary sinner, if he were just a...what, a tax collector? They would say, "well, a tax collector..." and written him off. Or if he were just an ignorant farmer, they would have written him off. But he looked like them. He was a teacher, he gathered disciples to himself, and he didn't do it the way they did it, and for that reason, they found him troubling. Not just distasteful. It's not just they hated him for personal reasons. They almost certainly thought he was what the Old Testament calls a "*mesith*," a beguiler of the people, because he could perform miracles, mighty deeds. There was no question he had certain powers. He was charismatic, he gathered followers, and he was misleading people. For example, something we all know, that Jesus talked to women freely. And, you know, the rabbis at that time actually said, "You shouldn't even talk to your own wife too much because it will drag you down. It will corrupt you. A woman can't learn the Law, can't study the Law effectively. It goes in one ear and out the other. Why are you bothering?" Now, that's trivial compared to the fact that he spent time with prostitutes, tax collectors, notorious sinners of all kinds. A holy man does not associate with such people. And the fact that he had disciples was what made him so dangerous in their mind.

And so they hated him, probably partially for, now go horizontal, you know partially for very human and very mundane reasons: he was more popular than they were. He seemed to criticize them. In fact, he did criticize them. He walked — now leaving the Pharisees for a moment, going over to the priests — he walked into their turf. He cleansed the temple. That's what we call it. Really more like a protest, more like a partial or representative overthrow of the temple when Jesus cast out the moneychangers that the priests had said could operate there. And, you know, they asked him the question, "Who gave you the authority to do this?" Well, of course, that's a loaded question. It's mostly loaded because they're the authorities, and they're saying in part, "We didn't give you the authority to do this. God gave us the

responsibility to care for the temple. How dare you walk into our temple, God's temple — God gave us the rules. How dare you walk in here and overthrow legitimate businessmen going about their affairs." They were jealous of Jesus. He stepped in their turf. But there are also some aspects of self-righteousness that may be in a not wholly evil sense of the word. They really thought they were the guardians of God's Word. They were finding Jesus disagreeing with them.

Now, there are other reasons, very different sorts of reasons. We don't really know all. We can't fathom all of them. Why did Judas turn against Jesus? Maybe Judas wanted Jesus to do more. Maybe he was hoping for a nationalistic hero, which so many other people hoped for. We don't know about Judas, but certainly there were some people that wanted a Jewish leader to rise up and to unseat the Romans. And a lot of people followed Jesus for his signs, and thinking, "If he can do all this, he can do more." And maybe that turned into disappointment during the final week so that they turned on Jesus. There's an interesting use, various folks have noticed, of the word "*paradidomi*" which means "to hand over" or "betray." And it goes like this, it says, "Judas," in one place, "handed Jesus over, or betrayed him, to the Jews, to the priests, out of greed for thirty pieces of silver." Boy, is that mundane. He just wanted money. We can't minimize that. The priests — same verb, *paradidomi* — delivered Jesus over, betrayed Jesus over to Pilate out of envy and self-righteousness. That's in Mark 15. Pilate handed Jesus over for execution out of fear of the crowds, fear of what the — or maybe not fear of the crowds, but accountability, shall we say, and fear of what the Jewish leaders might say to the Romans if he didn't come through and kill this seditious man. And then of course behind it all we have the eternal perspective that God delivered his Son over for us all. So, there are many answers to the question, "Why was Jesus hated?" And many answers to the question, "Why did he die?" And I think we're best off if we look at the sort of horizontal, the misguided spiritual, and also the divine, God-centered spiritual answers.

Question 9:

Why didn't the Jews recognize that Jesus was the Messiah?

Many of the Jewish leaders and people probably wouldn't have hated Jesus so much if they had only recognized that he was the Messiah. And for Christians reading Luke's gospel, it seems fairly obvious that Jesus really was the long-awaited Son of David. Did the Jews in Jesus' day have mistaken ideas about who the Messiah would be and what he would do? Why didn't the Jews recognize that Jesus was the Messiah?

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the best texts in the Old Testament to discover the role of the Messiah is Psalm 2, which speaks about the way in which God has established this particular King, this Anointed One, this Messiah, on his holy hill, in Zion, in Jerusalem, and how he's going to be the one who's going to ... well, he's going to be Lord over the whole world. The ends of the earth are going to be his possession. The obedience of

the nations is going to be his. And that Psalm ends with the rulers of the earth being called to kiss the Son, or to bow down and to worship him. This sets up an incredible picture of what the role of the Messiah is, and over the centuries as the Jewish people reflect on that, they're expecting someone to come who's going to be like David was, who was the king before, but who's going to be a ruler. Now, in Jesus' day, there were other expectations as well, that the Messiah would come and restore the temple, and that the Messiah would redeem Israel, and they began to understand this in a more political sense, that "surely if the kingdom was going to be restored to Israel, then we're going to be lord over the whole world." But that wasn't the way it was going to be.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

We look at the Old Testament, the Old Testament especially emphasizes that the Messiah is first of all a son of David. Of course David was that great king of Israel who trusted in the Lord so significantly, won powerful victories, in many, many ways obeyed the Lord. Of course, he had some significant failings as well, but David becomes the paradigm of what the Messiah will be. He will be a ruler who brings peace to the nation. And so we see in the latter part of the Old Testament after David has died there is an expectation that a son of David will come, and that's especially aligned with the idea that there will be peace and righteousness and joy. Of course this plays right into the New Testament, doesn't it? When we read even before the New Testament there's a little book called The Psalms of Solomon. And there's this strong expectation of a son of David who would come. He would rescue the nation from their oppressors. He would roust out the Romans and defeat them. There would be peace with this ruler upon the throne. And of course that's a central part of what we find in the Old Testament expectation. But mixed in with this is this expectation as well in Isaiah 53 and some other passages that the Messiah would suffer.

Now, interestingly enough, from all the evidence we have, the Jewish people did not understand that as well. We even see that in the New Testament when Jesus begins to explain to his disciples that he is the son of David and he's the Messiah, they agree and they confess him as such, but their expectation is that he would bring in an age of peace and righteousness. He would destroy their enemies. But then Jesus shifts gears on them a little bit, helping them understand the fullness of what the Old Testament teaches about the Messiah, indeed, in terms of the suffering servant and immediately the disciples are quite perplexed. That strand of the Old Testament teaching they hadn't integrated well into their thinking. Indeed we don't know what they thought exactly about Isaiah 53 at all, but apparently they didn't clearly understand that to refer to the Messiah. So it was quite an education for the disciples to begin to understand that the Messiah would suffer and he would die and he would be crucified. Their notion was the Messiah was pleasing to God and anyone who was pleasing to God would not end up being crucified. So we have to take these two strands together and what we actually see in the Scriptures is that the victory predicted for the son of David would not come by him destroying his enemies, but by taking suffering upon himself, by absorbing the sins of human kind upon himself. So it was quite a radical idea, which virtually no one understood.

Question 10:**What characterizes the kingdom of God in Luke's gospel?**

One of the main messages in all four gospels is that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah that brought the kingdom of God to earth. But each of the gospels emphasizes different aspects of that kingdom. And Luke's approach differs from the others in significant ways. What characterizes the kingdom of God in Luke's gospel?

Dr. Peter Chow (translation)

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is the King, the ruler of the kingdom of heaven. And Luke emphasized that when Jesus came into the world, he brought the kingdom of heaven with him. When he was just an infant, a host of angels showed themselves to the shepherds because the ruler of the kingdom of heaven had arrived on earth. The armies of heaven came to earth and praised God, saying: "Glory to God in the Highest, and peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased." The arrival of the kingdom signifies the arrival of God's reign. Jesus is the ruler of the kingdom of heaven, and his arrival on earth gives a clear picture of God's kingdom. He sets the oppressed free; he forgives sins; he drives out demons; the blind can see; the lame can walk; the lepers are cleansed. And people experience the righteousness of God. But most importantly, the coming of the kingdom means the defeat of death and sin. Through the kingdom, we have eternal life.

Rev. Mike Glodo

In Luke's gospel, what characterizes the kingdom of God? One important place to look is in Luke 4 when Jesus inaugurated his public ministry. He stood up in the synagogue on the Sabbath and he read from Isaiah 61, which declared the favorable year of the Lord, the recovery of sight to the blind, the binding up of the brokenhearted, and so forth. And when he said, "This Scripture is now fulfilled in your hearing," what Jesus was saying was that something the Old Testament had provided for and anticipated was now being realized. He was announcing that the Year of Jubilee, the year of restoration, had come. And so that is a distinctive of the kingdom of God as Luke's presents it. Luke presents many things that Matthew and Mark do as well, but this was unique to Luke. Luke's gospel begins with an announcement very similar to the kind of announcement that Caesar Augustus would have sent when he sent an announcement throughout the empire that he had conquered the western territories. And it presents Jesus really in that kind of light, but yet much, much greater. Luke's gospel tells us that only Christ is the Lord, no civil authority is the Lord, and that Jesus comes as the fulfillment of God's restoration promises. And so we are restored. We're restored to God, and God then becomes our Father as he provides for us, and then, through his community, through those who follow Jesus, people find restoration and redemption through the generosity of God's people, through the humility of God's people, through the peace that is supposed to prevail among the followers of Jesus as they are united to one another by virtue of being united to him. And so, Jesus sets about to show the signs of this Jubilee. He's freeing people from the oppression of demons, freeing them from social

stigmatization, or social classification, and he's restoring them to God their maker and their Father.

Question 11:

How should the kingdom of God impact the lives of Christians?

When we think about Jesus' work in bringing the kingdom of God, it's important to ask what his work and his kingdom imply about the Christian life. Did Jesus do everything that needs to be done for the kingdom? Or do Christians have an obligation to apply the reality of the kingdom to their lives? How should the kingdom of God impact the lives of Christians?

Dr. Brandon Crowe

We see the kingdom of God very prominently in the teaching of Jesus. And what we find in the New Testament is Jesus, is that King who is powerfully bringing the kingdom of God into our world. The technical term is "eruption." There's an in-breaking; there's a very powerful entrance of God into our world by means of his messianic King. A great way to say what the kingdom is comes from Geerhardus Vos, and he says, the kingdom comes where the gospel is spread, hearts are changed, sin and error overcome, righteousness cultivated, and a living communion with God established. And so the kingdom of God is a supernatural thing. It is not something that we work for. It's something that God brings. And this leads to the cultivation of righteousness. God's priorities come to be realized on earth. So the kingdom comes in both word and deed. It comes with a powerful gospel message telling the world who Jesus is as the King and how he implements his kingdom through faith and repentance and trusting in him and following him. And as we do that, as we follow him through that gospel message, it leads to the deeds, to the works of the kingdom. And these are not just any good works that someone might do, but these are the good works that arise out of the regenerated life of the believing church, and these are works that lead back into the praise of God's glory. And these are works then that are unique to the church as those who have been overcome in a sense with the grace of the kingdom. And as we follow Christ, we manifest the kingdom today through both the message, which can never be left out, and the works of the kingdom. And these two things go hand-in-hand to spread the kingdom of God today.

Question 12:

Why did Jesus demonstrate mercy during his earthly ministry?

One of the aspects of the kingdom of God that Luke emphasized was that Jesus had come as a king to judge the world and to conquer sin and death. But how did Jesus' ministry of grace and blessing relate to his role as King? Why did Jesus demonstrate mercy during his earthly ministry?

Dr. William Ury

I think the showing of mercy is not just because the Lord feels sorry for us, which I'm sure he does, but I think it's because he's trying to reveal something about the inner life of God. Mercy has got to be connected to the triune life, and the Trinity, from my perspective from eternity, the King himself, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the King of all the universe, is a God who, three-in-one, is giving himself one to another, Father to Son, Son, Father, Spirit to the other two, in this self-giving. So that when Jesus comes to show mercy to sinners, he's expressing that self-giving love, which is the King's self-revelation. He will judge. He will eventually condemn those that don't love him. But when he comes to the earth, he comes to people who have been abused, who have been warped by all kinds of wrong powers and the Devil himself, and this King comes, and he says, "I'm not going to demand anything of you. First, I'm going to come and give myself to you." So, all of his acts of mercy are acts of the triune God's heart in the world to give oneself away. He comes with a self-giving. And I think mercy is a marvelous expression of that self-giving love that starts in the heart of God, in the incarnation offered to people wherever Jesus went. And, of course, his climax is on the cross, his mercy to us; the King who would die, giving his life away that we might receive the mercy of God for salvation. So he is the only truly merciful King, and he describes what that mercy is in his kingship.

Dr. Mark Strauss

All that God was, Jesus revealed. And that's not just his authority and power and sovereignty. It's also what we call his communicable attributes like his love and mercy and care for others. And so he's demonstrating God's love, reaching out to those throughout the biblical testimony, throughout the Old and New Testament, God's compassion on people, particularly the outcast, particularly the oppressed, and so Jesus' mercy is a demonstration of that. Then there's the larger issue of, the whole purpose of Jesus' coming is to save us, and so it's an act of grace, it's an act of mercy, and so we would expect Jesus to be demonstrating individual acts of mercy and grace — to demonstrate what his larger purpose is in coming to earth.

Question 13:

Why did Luke pay so much attention to people that lacked influence in Israel in Jesus' day?

In Luke's gospel, one of the ways Jesus revealed the mercy of the kingdom was through his concern for the weak and the oppressed. In particular, Luke focused on Jesus' care for women, the poor, the sick, and other marginalized groups. Why did Luke pay so much attention to people that lacked influence in Israel in Jesus' day?

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the attractive and most beautiful things about Luke's gospel is the way in which he tells the story of Jesus, who has welcomed all people, and in particular some of the groups in his own day that might have not felt they were worthy of Jesus' attention — the women, the Gentiles, the Samaritans, the poor. It's a great feature of

Luke's gospel that he's so inclusive and reaches out to them. And when we ask the question, well why has Luke done that? Apart from the fact that it's true, I think Luke has an extra reason. He himself is a Gentile, he's the only Gentile writer of the New Testament, so I understand it, and he himself was someone who was so delighted to have been brought into Jesus' kingdom. Gentiles were actually often on the edge, looking into Judaism. There was a group of people known as "the God-fearers" who really wanted to be Jewish, but perhaps because they didn't want to get circumcised, or for other reasons, they stood on the edge. Now, through Jesus, they've got the opportunity to come into God's people, and they don't have to become Jewish, they are welcomed as they are, as Gentiles. I think this is such good news for Luke himself, that he then tells how Jesus, in his own life, had been welcoming to all those who might have thought of themselves as outcasts, and I think it's just a beautiful story.

Dr. Peter Chow (translation)

The other gospels discuss the relationship between Jesus and the poor as well, but the Gospel of Luke expounds on this even more clearly. In Luke 4, Jesus entered the synagogue and proclaimed that the Year of Jubilee had arrived, making it clear that the coming of the kingdom is the fulfillment of the Year of Jubilee. In the Year of Jubilee, the poor receive good news and the oppressed are set free. Of course, Jesus doesn't just free the poor on an economic basis, but he also saves them from their sins. This is what the angel had announced to Mary. At that time, many of the people were poor, and most of the common folks were heavily oppressed. And the arrival of the kingdom was very important to those who were dispossessed. God is just. God's grace is sufficient. And Luke emphasized Jesus' relationship with the poor because he connected the arrival of God's kingdom with the fulfillment of the Year of Jubilee.

Question 14:

How should Christians respond to Luke's emphasis on socially disenfranchised groups?

Given Luke's emphasis on disenfranchised groups like women and the poor, many modern Christians wonder if that should be one of our emphases, too. Should we do more than proclaim the good news of Christ? What social implications does the gospel have? How should Christians respond to Luke's emphasis on socially disenfranchised groups?

Mr. Emad Sami (translation)

When we talk about the Great Commission we realize that it involves merciful acts, social work. And the Bible teaches that this is not optional; this cannot be separated from the gospel's message. All this existed in the Old Testament, and God has revealed his love through his care and faithfulness in our daily lives. When Jesus came to offer himself, to reveal the Father, to redeem and bring salvation to the whole world, he showed mercy, fed the people, filled the hungry, healed the sick, and satisfied the people's needs. Doing merciful acts and social work was always part of

the Great Commission. In fact, one way to fulfill the Great Commission is by first meeting and satisfying human needs, so that from there we can help people discover God's love.

Dr. Matt Friedeman

When God takes on human flesh and he comes here, he looks around about his world and he sees things that make him sad. And instead of just crying, he says, "Not only will I shed a tear but I'll move towards those situations mercifully." It's interesting that Barclay would suggest that the word "mercy" in the New Testament Greek means, "to get inside the skin of." So this whole understanding of compassion means that I can feel something of what they're feeling right now. And instead of just saying, "I'm glad I'm not there," I'm going to be there. I'm going to move towards them, and I'm going to be to them what I believe God the Father wants me to be for them in this moment and this time. Now, should the believers today do the same sort of thing? Again, Jesus says, "Follow me." We're to be the merciful ones that belong and act on behalf of the merciful One.

Dr. Saul Cruz (translation)

We must always think that the gospel is not only the verbal proclamation of God's message. The gospel is all of God's actions through his people, through his Spirit, through his church, and in all the ways he uses to reach mankind. God is not only trying to heal his people or trying to teach his people, but also trying to save his people. And all of this is a unified process. The multifaceted unity of the gospel is vital. We do the gospel a great disservice when we separate these parts. And we have separated them. I believe that our words and our work should remain unified.

Question 15:

Why is it important for Christians to pray?

God has called Christians to participate with him in his extraordinary plan for redemption. And he has given us a tremendous amount of help for our endeavors. We have Jesus as our king and example. We're empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit. And we have God's ear in prayer, even though we sometimes forget to rely on that tremendous blessing. Why is it important for Christians to pray?

Dr. Steve Harper

I think the reason why prayer is so important is that it creates the very kind of relationship with God that Christianity is intended to foster. When we pray, we are talking with God, listening to what God has to say to us, and then responding to what we hear. And that's the basis for the relationship. And that's really what God wants for us, is to have relationship. As we get closer to God through prayer, we also find ourselves closer to each other at the same time. So, prayer is a great enhancement to that kind of fellowship and community. Prayer is also important for us as believers because it's through prayer that we discern the will of God. Jesus, in the Gospel of John, about ten times, not literally but in principle, talks about the difference between

his work and his works. His works are the things that we all have to do, the things we've written down in our P.D.A.s or "day-timers," those are the things we're going to do at 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, 1:00, 2:00, 3:00, 4:00, and then we go home at the end of the day. But his work was to pay attention to the Father. About 10 times he says, you know, "I only do what I see the Father doing." "I only say what the Father tells me to say." Where did he get that? Well, I believe he got that in prayer. It was in that communion with the Father where he saw the Father's will and he heard the Father's words, and that then became his discernment out of which he spoke and acted. So, prayer is that way of knowing that what we say and do is connected to something more than just, you know, our latest good idea or whatever it happens to be.

Prayer is the means of power. The prophet Zechariah said, "It's not by might or by power but by my Spirit saith the Lord." And I think that's so important for us. Prayer is the way that when I say "help" or when I say "thanks" — which are the two primary forms of prayer, you know, need help or express gratitude — when I do either of those two things, then that's an acknowledgment that I'm not at the center anymore. Someone else is at the center empowering me, directing me, guiding me, teaching me, helping me, preserving me, protecting, whatever it may be. Prayer is very important for us because it takes us out of the center. It puts God at the center and helps us to discern what it is that God wants us to do. And all of that, that we've just said, leads us to, really, a time of humility, when we give thanks to God that we're not the masters of our fate, and we're not the captains of our soul, that God is. E. Stanley Jones once said, "Yourself in your own hands is a problem and a pain, but yourself in God's hands is a power and a potential." And so God gives us prayer to get ourselves out of our own hands and into God's hands.

Although the gospel of Luke contains much of the same content as the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke's gospel is distinctive in many ways. The fact that Luke was a Gentile and not a Jew led him to focus primarily on people that weren't always the "chosen ones" of society. And the fact that he wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus' earthly life prompted him to "investigate everything from the beginning," giving him a unique perspective. Through the eyes of Luke, we see Jesus' great mercy and love for his people, and through prayer and dependence on Christ we are called to respond with compassion, bringing the kingdom of God to a world in need.

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The Gospels

LESSON
FIVE

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN



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The Gospels

Lesson Five

The Gospel According to John

INTRODUCTION

Her name is Sophia. Well, it isn't her real name. It's the name she uses to hide from friends and family members who threaten to kill her because she now believes in Jesus. Sophia comes from a background where believing in Jesus sometimes brings persecution. That's true today in many parts of the world, and it was also true in the first century. In the days of the apostle John, Jewish believers were being thrown out of the synagogues because they believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to their forefathers. They were being cut off from their families, their history and their religion. John wrote to assure these persecuted believers that Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of God. He wanted to make sure that even in their harsh circumstances they would remain faithful to Jesus and enjoy abundant life in him.

This is the fifth lesson in our series *The Gospels*. In this series, we're exploring the four books of the Bible that tell us how Jesus brought God's kingdom and glory into earth's history. This lesson is entitled "The Gospel According to John." In this lesson, we'll study John's gospel in a way that helps us read it with greater understanding, love God more deeply, and enjoy our lives in Christ more fully.

In our lesson, we'll study John's gospel in three important ways. First, we'll consider the background of John's gospel. Second, we'll explore the structure and content of John's gospel. Third, we will look at the major themes of John's gospel. We'll begin by studying the background of John's gospel.

BACKGROUND

We'll explore the background of John's gospel by considering the author and the occasion of writing. Let us begin with the authorship of John's gospel.

AUTHOR

Throughout church history, Christians have consistently attributed this gospel to Jesus' disciple John, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee. John was one of the inner circle of Jesus' most trusted companions, and a pillar of faith in the early Christian community. His New Testament writings include not only the fourth gospel, but also the letters 1, 2 and 3 John, and the book of Revelation.

We'll study the authorship of John's gospel in two stages. First, we'll see that the traditional view that the apostle John wrote this gospel is reliable. And second, we'll

explore John's personal history. Let's start by looking at the traditional view that the apostle John was the author of the fourth gospel.

Traditional View

The Gospel of John is one of the books in the Bible that simply doesn't say who wrote it. And that's where we start, I think. As Bible-believing Christians, we just acknowledge the fact we don't have a definitive statement as to who authored the book. By the second century, Tertullian and Irenaeus and some others were definitely attributing it to the apostle John. So you have to ask the question why did they believe it so close to the time that they either had contact with some of the last living apostles or at least the next generation for them to come out as strongly as they did. And there were others who did as well. Then you go inside the gospel. You have to look at the internal evidence in the book, and there, of course, you've got the eyewitness accounts where whoever is writing the book is writing about a story that they were present when it happened. For example, in the Lord's Supper, the person is at the table, the beloved disciple is sitting at the table with Jesus and that's a very powerful thing.

— Dr. Steve Harper

We can affirm that John most likely wrote the fourth gospel because of three types of early evidence. First, we will consider the ancient manuscripts of John's gospel.

Manuscripts. Many ancient manuscripts of the fourth gospel list the author's name as John. For example, *Papyrus 66* and *Papyrus 75*, both dated around A.D. 200, call the gospel *euangelion kata Iōannēn*, meaning "Gospel According to John." And *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*, both written in the middle of the fourth century A.D., call it simply *kata Iōannēn*, meaning "according to John."

Of course, John wasn't an uncommon name. But it's clear from the writings of the early church that this attribution was intended to refer to the most significant "John" mentioned in the Scriptures, namely the apostle John.

Not only do the ancient manuscripts indicate that John wrote the fourth gospel, but the internal evidence from the gospel itself leads to the conclusion that John is its most likely author.

Internal Evidence. The writer of the gospel reported debates between Jesus and the Jewish leadership on particular points of Jewish law. These debates show that the author had a strong understanding of Jewish law just as John, the apostle, would have had as a Palestinian Jew.

Going a step further, there is strong evidence that the author of this gospel actually was a Palestinian Jew. The Palestinian character of the gospel is seen in the

descriptions of Jesus' ministry. For example, in 7:15 he noted the importance of religious training in the eyes of Palestinian Jewish leaders.

The author of the fourth gospel also mentioned religious themes and used vocabulary that was similar to other writings from first century Palestinian Judaism. For example, a number of scholars have pointed out similarities in language between John's gospel and the writings at Qumran, commonly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. For instance, the expression "the sons of light" appears both in the Qumran documents and in John 12:36. And the phrase "the light of life" appears both in the writings from Qumran and in John 8:12. Similarities like these indicate that the author of the fourth gospel was very much at home in the religious conversation of first century Palestine.

Not only does the text of the gospel give the impression that it was written by a Palestinian Jew, but it also gives the impression that it was written by an eyewitness. This fits the profile of John the apostle, because he himself was an eyewitness to the life of Jesus. We see evidence that the writer was an eyewitness in many places. For example, after Jesus' death, John 19:35 says this:

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe (John 19:35).

Here the author clearly indicated that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' death. And we find a similar claim in John 21:20-24, which identifies this eyewitness by calling him "the disciple whom Jesus loved," indicating that the writer had a close personal relationship with Jesus.

Think about what it was like for John at the Last Supper when he laid his head on the bosom of Jesus. Think about that closeness that had to exist between those two men. And even on the cross when Jesus is dying, he gives the care of his mother not to his brothers and sisters but to the apostle John. Again, there had to be a very deep, intimate relationship between those two men. And even in the self-description, John describes himself, again, not in arrogance, not in pride, as the disciple whom Jesus loved.

— Rev. Thad James

This "disciple whom Jesus loved" is mentioned several times in John's gospel. For example, according to John 13:23, the beloved disciple reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper. In 19:26-27, Jesus spoke to this beloved disciple from the cross, and entrusted the care of his mother to him. This same disciple ran to the tomb with Peter on the resurrection morning in 20:2-8. And in 21:7, the beloved disciple was the first to recognize Jesus on the shore.

The apostle John is never mentioned by name in the gospel that he wrote because he prefers to identify himself as the one whom Jesus loves. And in doing that, he pretty much articulates, or reveals his

humility in one sense, and then a celebration of his relationship with his Lord in another sense. As you read the gospel, it's kind of interesting and telling while he would make mention of all the other disciples, he never refers to, you know, his own name.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Not once in the gospel is John referred to by name. And it's surprising that a person who is mentioned so often in the other gospels is never named in this one. The most likely explanation is that John was the beloved disciple that wrote this gospel, and that out of humility he refrained from even mentioning his own name. Instead, he focused on the fact that he never would have been a follower of Jesus except for the amazing divine love the Savior had for him.

Not only does the fourth gospel itself lend great support to the belief that John is its most likely author but the writings of the early church confirmed that conclusion.

Early Church. By A.D. 170 to 190 the conviction that the fourth gospel had been written by the apostle John was firmly established in the church. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus all affirmed that John, the son of Zebedee, was the author. Around A.D. 325 the church historian Eusebius provided the following quote from Irenaeus in his work *Ecclesiastical History*, book 5, chapter 8, section 4:

Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who had even rested on his breast, himself also gave forth the gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.

The testimony of Irenaeus is particularly important for at least two reasons. First, according to Eusebius, Irenaeus had been a disciple of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. And according to a letter from the church of Smyrna regarding the martyrdom of their bishop, Polycarp himself had been a disciple of the apostle John. So, Irenaeus could have learned about John's authorship from a trustworthy man that knew John personally. Second, Irenaeus traveled widely in the ancient church, and therefore was familiar with many other bits of information that could have informed his understanding of the authorship of the fourth gospel.

It's also significant that there was no real opposition to John as the author. Nowhere in the writings of the ancient church is there ever any suggestion of an author for the gospel other than John, the son of Zebedee. In fact, history records only two groups that opposed John's gospel: the Alogoi and the Marcionites. And while they rejected the teachings of John's gospel, it's not entirely clear that even they denied his authorship.

Although it might not be possible to prove beyond all doubt that this anonymous gospel was written by John, the most convincing position continues to be the ancient tradition that John the apostle is the author.

Now that we've considered the traditional view that John wrote the fourth gospel, and seen that it's compelling, let's look at John's personal history.

Personal History

We actually know more about John than we do about most of Jesus' other disciples. John is referred to in the Gospels with his brother James as "the sons of Zebedee." John is also mentioned second, implying that he was the younger of the two. According to Mark 1:14-21, the family fishing business was near Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. According to verse 20, the business was prosperous enough to employ others. After Jesus' death, the business was still strong enough for them to go back to it according to John 21:1-14.

A comparison of Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56 indicates that their mother's name was Salome and that she also followed Jesus at least some of the time. At one time she asked Jesus to give her sons preferential treatment in his kingdom, according to Matthew 20:21. Going a step further, a comparison of John 19:25 and Matthew 27:56 may indicate that Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, was actually the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. This would have made John the cousin of Jesus. If this was true it helps explain why Jesus speaking from the cross in John 19:25-27 asked John to take care of his mother.

In Mark 3:17, James and John were called "Sons of Thunder." This seems to be a reference to their fiery temperament. As just one example, Luke reported an occasion when Jesus had tried to find overnight lodging in a Samaritan city. When the residents refused to allow Jesus and his disciples to stay, James and John reacted with strong anger. Listen to Luke 9:54-56.

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village (Luke 9:54-56).

It seems that during his time with Jesus, John's emotions were often close to the surface and only a moment from bursting forth. It's striking that he ultimately became the New Testament writer that, more than any other, focused on the love of God and the love of God's people.

Some critics have thought that the more compassionate nature of the fourth gospel contradicts the portrait of John in the other gospels. But two lines of thinking make it clear that there is no contradiction. First, the story of John is the story of a man changed by the love of God. Being loved by Jesus changed John into the apostle of love. Second, when God changed the intense and emotional John he did not change him into an unemotional shell of a human being. He changed him into an intensely emotional preacher of the gospel of love. God redirected and used the core of his being, but did not eradicate that core.

In the narrative of the gospels, John is a member of the inner circle of disciples along with Peter and James. Only they were with Jesus at critical events like his transfiguration, and his prayers in Gethsemane on the night of his arrest. In the book of Acts, Peter and John are the two leaders of the disciples. And in Galatians 2:9, Paul called John one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem.

In the early Church, Irenaeus and many other sources reported John's lengthy ministry in Ephesus after he left Jerusalem. There is also a strong tradition that John was eventually exiled to the Island of Patmos. According to some sources, he was later freed from his exile and returned to Ephesus, dying there during the reign of Emperor Trajan, near the end of the first century.

Now that we have affirmed the traditional view that John wrote the fourth gospel, and have become familiar with a little of John's personal history, let's explore the occasion for the authorship of John's gospel.

OCCASION

We will explore the occasion of the authorship of John's gospel in four ways. First, we will consider the geographical location of both the audience and the writer. Second, we will look a little more closely at the identity of the original audience. Third, we will consider the date of authorship. And fourth, we'll think about the purpose of the gospel. Let's begin by looking at the location of John's gospel.

Location

It's most likely that John wrote his gospel while he was in Ephesus, and that he wrote it for an audience that lived outside Palestine, perhaps in Asia Minor. We can't know these things for certain, but there are several factors that support these conclusions. For instance, John's comments about Palestinian Jewish customs points to an audience that lived outside Palestine. Listen to what John wrote in John 4:9:

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) (John 4:9).

In this verse, John included a comment to his readers about the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. This hostility would have been well known to everyone in Palestine, so John's comment indicates that his readers lived somewhere else.

The writings of the ancient church also suggest that the gospel was written primarily to people outside Palestine. Earlier we cited Eusebius who quoted Irenaeus saying that John wrote this gospel in Ephesus in Asia Minor. Almost all of the ancient church agreed with this conclusion, including Irenaeus, Polycrates, Clement of Alexandria, and Justin Martyr. Moreover, no ancient source ever suggests that any group other than residents of Asia Minor were its intended recipients.

There is also a close connection between John's gospel and the book of Revelation. John wrote the book of Revelation, and his audience was definitely in Asia Minor — all seven of the churches addressed by the letters in Revelation chapters 2–3 are in Asia Minor. And the striking parallels between John and Revelation create a strong presumption of a similar audience. For example, John's gospel has a powerful strand of

teaching related to the conflict between converts to Christianity and the Jewish synagogues. And the book of Revelation also acknowledges this problem. Listen to what the Lord said to his church in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9.

I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan... I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars — I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you (Revelation 2:9; 3:9).

From a different perspective, we know from Acts 19:1-7 that followers of John the Baptist continued in Ephesus at least until that time. If the apostle John wrote to an audience that included John the Baptist's followers, this might explain the gospel's clear stress that John the Baptist subordinated himself to Jesus.

Although certainty in the matter is impossible, it seems most likely that John was in Ephesus when he wrote his gospel and that it was shaped in part by the circumstances in Asia Minor.

Now that we've suggested that the location where the gospel was written was most likely Ephesus, let's consider more closely the character of that original audience to whom John wrote.

Audience

Like all the gospels, there is a sense in which the Gospel of John was intended for the whole church throughout the ages. It has infinite value for all of God's people. But there are also parts of John's gospel that seem to have had special relevance for the church in a particular place and time. At least in parts of the gospel, John appears to have had in mind members of a Jewish community who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but who had continued to worship in the synagogue, or to have other significant contacts with the Jewish community. In fact, almost the entire central part of the gospel, from chapter 5–12, deals with the intense conflict between Jesus and the Jews.

This conflict is also highlighted by John's use of the phrase "the Jews," which John used more than 70 times, but which appears less than 20 times in the other three gospels combined. In most instances John used this term to refer to the religious leaders who set themselves against Jesus.

By contrast, when John spoke positively about the Old Testament people of God, he typically used words like "Israel" or "Israelite." For instance, in John 1:47, Jesus called Nathanael "a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false."

John also used the Greek word Christ more often than any other gospel writer. The term "Christ" translates both the Greek word *Christos* and the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, both of which mean anointed one. The Christ was God's anointed Redeemer who was to rescue Israel from their sins and free them from foreign rule.

The term "Christ" would have been especially important to Jewish Christians because the focus of the differences between the synagogue and the growing Christian

church was the belief that Jesus was the Christ, the long-awaited savior of God's people that had been prophesied in the Old Testament.

The Jewish Messiah only came to be designated by the term “messiah” much later, but the promise for a seed of the woman who would defeat evil — Satan and his seed — is made in Genesis 3:15. So, from the beginning forward, the seed of the woman, it's later clarified that he's also going to be the seed of Abraham, and then it's clarified that he'll be the seed of Judah, and these promises to the serpent that he's going to be judged, and Abraham that through his descendant all the nations will be blessed, and then to Judah that the ruler staff will never depart from his feet. These promises are eventually woven together in the Balaam oracles, and from what God's program is at the beginning, the Messiah is to defeat evil and ultimately reopen the way to the Garden of Eden and cause the dry lands to be covered with the glory of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea.

— Dr. James Hamilton

The topics addressed by John and the way in which he addressed them shows that his primary readers were Jewish Christians that were struggling as followers of Jesus. But like all Scripture, the Holy Spirit also intended John's book to be used by the entire church throughout the ages. And in fact, in John 1:41 and 4:25, John even translated the Hebrew term “messiah” for the Gentiles in his audience. And of course, history has proven that John's gospel is of great value both to Jewish and Gentile believers.

Now that we've looked at both the location and audience of the gospel, let's consider the date of its composition.

Date

In general, we can say that John most likely wrote between A.D. 85 and 90. Several factors make it likely that the gospel was not written before A.D. 85. First, John is the only gospel that does not include predictions of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which took place in A.D. 70. This is probably because a significant period of time had passed since that cataclysmic event.

Second, the gospel reflects a time when the split between the church and the synagogue was most bitter. After the fall of Jerusalem, Judaism became more rigid. Defending itself against heresy the daily synagogue prayers were revised to include a curse on heretics such as those who believed that Jesus was the Son of God; and formal excommunication became more frequent. This tension is prefigured in passages like John 9, where John reported the excommunication of the blind man Jesus had healed. Listen to John's comment on this situation in John 9:22:

The Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue (John 9:22).

In this passage, to be put out of the synagogue was to be excommunicated, excluded from the life of the Jewish community.

Third, it seems that the Gospel of John was written after the other three gospels. This view goes back at least to the fourth-century historian Eusebius. According to him, John intended his gospel to supplement the others, especially with information on Jesus' ministry prior to the arrest of John the Baptist. Listen to what Eusebius wrote in *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 24, section 12:

John accordingly, in his gospel, records the deeds of Christ which were performed before the Baptist was cast into prison, but the other three evangelists mention the events which happened after that time.

Anyone reading through the four gospels is immediately struck by the fact that you have three gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke that look very similar to each other; many the same stories; same basic structure in terms of the ministry of Jesus. Then you've got the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John, that is radically different. John's gospel appears to be written fairly late in the first century, when the church was facing new challenges from the outside world; from their Jewish opponents; from their secular opponents as well. And those challenges were certainly related in one sense to the person of Jesus, who he was. The deity of Jesus was clearly under fire because John's gospel so strongly stresses that Jesus is, in fact, divine. The Synoptic Gospels, that's not a big issue because evidently it wasn't being challenged. The other thing is there is false teaching arising in the church, and so John's gospel seems to address that issue of false teaching. The other thing, the third thing, is that Jewish opponents, there really clearly has been a clear break by that time between the Christians and the Jews; a break we don't yet see really fully in the Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

All this leads to the conclusion that the ancient tradition of the church was probably correct and that the gospel was written late in John's life, probably after A.D. 85. If John, the son of Zebedee, is the author of this gospel then the latest possible date for John's gospel is determined by his lifespan. John was a young man when he began to follow Jesus, probably around A.D. 30. Even if John had been in his late teens at that time, he would have been almost 80 years old by A.D. 90. Living much longer than that would have been very doubtful.

That A.D. 85 or 90 is the latest date possible for John to have written the gospel agrees with the manuscript evidence. The oldest manuscript containing any portion of the New Testament is designated *Papyrus 52*, also called the *Rylands Papyrus*. This fragment contains a part of John 18.

Papyrus 52 is dated between A.D. 100 and 150. Assuming this small fragment was originally part of a complete gospel, it indicates that the gospel was written early enough to have been distributed fairly widely by the early part of the second century. Other manuscripts of the gospel from later in the second century have also been found. These manuscripts are all Egyptian in origin, and represent different manuscript traditions. It is doubtful that this geographical transport from Asia Minor to Egypt, as well as the diversification of manuscript tradition, could have taken place in less than 40 or 50 years. So, it seems reasonable to set the latest possible date for the writing of John's gospel around A.D. 90 or 100.

Now that we've considered the location, audience, and date of John's gospel, let's focus on John's purpose for writing his gospel.

Purpose

All books of substantial size in the New Testament have complex purposes, and John's gospel is no different. Just as Jesus dealt with a substantial number of themes during his ministry, John's record of Jesus' ministry also addresses many subjects. But it's still possible to describe these purposes in a unified manner. In fact, John himself summarized his purpose for us. Specifically, he said that he wanted to confirm the belief that Jesus was both the Christ and the Son of God. Listen to what he wrote in John 20:30-31.

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).

Simply put, John wrote so that his audience would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, in order that they would receive the benefits that come with believing this gospel message.

John is pretty explicit as to the reason for the writing of the gospel. In John 20:31, he states that these things were written that we may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have eternal life in him. Now that is a twofold, let's say, purpose that's stated there. First and foremost, it has to do with his gospel being evangelistic in nature. Obviously, he has written so that his readers would exercise at some point in time, as the Lord drew them, faith in himself. Then secondly, it is apologetic in nature. He also wanted to convince his readers that Jesus indeed was the incarnate God-man.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

John is saying, I'm writing this gospel so that you may know the identity of Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God. And he explains who the Son of God is, that he's the Word who was with the Father and became flesh, that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and this is not just some abstract information that we assent to, but he says, I want you to have trusting reliance upon this so that you may have the life that the Father's freely giving through him.

— Dr. Robert Plummer

Throughout his gospel, the central focus of John's purpose was to promote belief in Jesus as both the Messiah and the Son of God. These were the two points on which Jewish Christians needed the most support in their conflicts with the synagogue. They had come to believe in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, and they needed to persevere in this belief if they were to receive the blessings of salvation.

Of course there is also a sense in which John's gospel is for all believers. For example, in John 13–17 John tried to nurture the faith of all believers by stressing that even though Jesus was no longer walking on the earth, he was a present reality in the lives of his people through the Holy Spirit. All of John's teaching was aimed at enriching the lives of all believers.

Scholars have said that John's gospel is “a pool in which babes wade and elephants swim.” Its basic message is clear and simple: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But the details of this basic message continue to challenge interpreters who have studied the gospel for years.

The first Christians that read this gospel would have been deeply encouraged by it. It would have taught them to persevere in their Christian faith despite their conflicts with their opponents. And it would have challenged them to grow in their love and awe for the Christ who was their only source for abundant life. And John's gospel provides these same encouragements and challenges to modern Christians, too.

Now that we have studied the background of John's gospel, let's turn to the structure and content of the gospel.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Scholars have described the structure of John's gospel in a variety of ways. In this lesson, we'll follow those that have suggested a connection between John's introductory summary of Jesus' life and ministry, and the content of John's book. Listen to these words from John 1:10-14:

[Jesus] was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children

of God ... We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:10-14).

This passage focuses on four main ideas: Jesus came into the world; he came and was rejected by his own people, namely Israel; those who received and believed in him became children of God; and then those believers became witnesses for Jesus. Following those four main ideas, we'll outline John's gospel in this way:

- First, John opened his gospel with a brief introduction that described Jesus' incarnation in 1:1-18.
- Second, John recorded Jesus' public ministry in 1:19–12:50, where he showed that Jesus came to his own creation and was rejected by the human race he had come to save.
- Third, John included a description of Jesus' private ministry to those who had received and believed in him in 13:1–20:31.
- And fourth, in the conclusion to John's gospel in 21:1-25, John highlighted the role of the apostles and other disciples as witnesses to Jesus' glory.

We'll look at each of these parts of the Gospel According to John, beginning with its introduction.

INTRODUCTION

In 1:1-18 John powerfully and beautifully summarized the whole gospel. He taught that Jesus is the Word of God who created all things and is the source of all life. But more than this, Jesus also came into the world as a true human being of flesh and blood. And as God incarnate, he revealed the Father's glory to the world he had created.

John described this in John 1:4-5 by saying that Jesus is the light who came into a dark world. He conquered that darkness by being the one full revelation of the grace of God. And while the Bible sometimes talks about Jesus' glory being veiled during his incarnation, John highlighted the fact that Jesus' incarnation actually made his glory known in important ways. And far from obscuring Jesus' glory, his incarnation as a human being actually revealed his glory. John wrote in John 1:14:

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).

JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY

Following the introduction, John recorded Jesus' public ministry in John 1:19–12:50. In this section, John focused on the fact that Jesus came to his own people, the nation of Israel, and that the people of Israel rejected Jesus as their Christ and Lord. As we saw in John 1:11, John said that,

[Jesus] came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:11).

Although there are important exceptions to this summary, this is generally how the nation of Israel responded to Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of John.

Our survey of Jesus' public ministry will divide into seven parts, beginning with his preparation for ministry, and continuing with events surrounding six different Jewish feasts. Let's look first at Jesus' preparation for ministry in John 1:19–2:12.

Preparation for Ministry

The section on Jesus' preparation for ministry begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in John 1:19-36. In this passage, John stressed that John the Baptist was an important witness to the fact that Jesus was the Son of God, and that Jesus would be God's sacrificial lamb that would take away the sin of the world.

Following this, John reported the calling of Jesus' first disciples in John 1:37-51. As with the account of John the Baptist, the emphasis in this section is on Jesus' identity. His disciples refer to him as "Rabbi," which means teacher, in verse 38; "Messiah," which means Christ, in verse 41; "the one Moses wrote about," which was a reference to the prophet Moses had foretold, in verse 45; and "the Son of God" and its parallel term "the King of Israel," in verse 49. Finally in verse 51 Jesus identified himself as the "Son of Man" who had been sent to provide access to God's presence.

The last part of Jesus' preparation for ministry was his first miracle, which John recorded in John 2:1-12. This was the occasion when Jesus turned water into wine. But the focus wasn't on the miracle itself. Listen to what John wrote in John 2:11:

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him (John 2:11).

One of the main points John made was that this miracle was a sign that revealed Jesus' glory, and that caused his disciples to trust him.

The term "signs" is used in the book of Exodus in reference to the miracles that Moses performs, I guess specifically the plagues. And so signs are already, or the term "sign" is already used to refer to miracles, and I think that not only is John doing this because he often compares Jesus to Moses, which he does, but also, I think he actually has the same interest as the author of the book of Exodus in showing that the miracles were given to show people something, to give them, you could say, information that they were expected to act upon, and specifically that God is saying something to people, and people need to respond to that.

— Dr. David Redelings

John is unique among the Gospels in consistently calling Jesus' miracles "*semeion*"—"signs" as it is usually translated. The miracles were not intended to draw attention to themselves, but to point beyond themselves to Jesus. Particularly they were intended to identify Jesus as both "the Christ" and "the Son of God," in line with the purpose of the book that John summarized in John 20:30-31.

Many people benefitted from Jesus's miracles, but actually those who had eyes that had been opened were able to see that to which they pointed, namely the identity of Christ. And therefore I think John uses a word that sort of speaks about the miracles, not just as being great miraculous events, but actually as pointing beyond themselves to the identity of Christ. And of course John says that this is why he's written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you might have life in his name and the signs perform that part of that function.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

A sign is something that Jesus does that points to his true identity. And if you'd simply understand it on the material level of a wonderwork, then you've missed the point whether it is changing the water into wine, whether it's feeding the crowd with bread miraculously, whether it's healing the blind man. Throughout John, John sees that these are not just wonderworks, but these are things that if you see through them as God intends, you see the true revelation of Jesus' identity; that he is the Bread of Life. That he's the one who's come to give us sight; that he brings the new wine of the coming age and we celebrate that.

— Dr. Robert Plummer

First Passover

The second section dealing with Jesus' public ministry is oriented around a Passover celebration in Jerusalem. We'll refer to this as the first Passover because it's the first one specifically named in John's gospel. This section extends from John 2:13–4:54.

This section begins with John's account of Jesus cleansing the temple by driving out the merchants in John 2:13-25. And once again, the focus was on Jesus' identity. Listen to what the Jews asked Jesus in John 2:18:

"What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" (John 2:18).

Jesus responded by foretelling his own death and resurrection, which would be the greatest sign in all his ministry that he was the Son of God.

In his comments after this report, found in 2:21-25, John mentioned that Jesus also preformed many other signs, and that as a result many people believed in his name, at least superficially.

Next, John reported Jesus' amazing conversation with Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, in 3:1-21. And again, the emphasis was on Jesus' identity, this time as both the "Son of Man" and the "Son of God," and on the saving role he had been sent to perform.

In John 3:22-36, we find another account of John the Baptist. In this one, John insisted that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. And he said that Jesus had come to testify about God and salvation, but that almost no one was receiving him in faith.

In John 4:1-42, John reported Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well in Samaria. Once again, the emphasis was on Jesus' identity as the Messiah, also called the Christ — the one who would come and explain all things to his people. By insisting that salvation would come through the Jews, and particularly through himself, Jesus challenged her way of thinking, and called her to find in him the life and reality of God that she had always wanted. And many Samaritans responded to this teaching by trusting in Jesus.

Finally, in John 4:43-54, John reported Jesus' second miraculous sign. Like the first sign, this one also took place in Cana. But this time Jesus healed a child without even touching or seeing him. And not surprisingly, the emphasis in this story is on the fact that the miracle was intended to validate Jesus' authority, and that it led to faith in those who witnessed it.

One important theme that runs throughout the section dealing with the first Passover is faith. John reported in 2:11 that after the first sign, the disciples believed in Jesus. In 4:42, the Samaritans believed because of Jesus' teaching. And in 4:53, the family of the healed boy believed. Later, in John 7:50 and 19:39, we find reason to think that Nicodemus also became a believer in Jesus. Jesus' signs and profound teaching were powerful testimonies to his identity and the salvation he offered, and many put their faith in him.

Certainly one of the main themes in the Gospel of John is saving faith; to believe is an emphasis throughout the gospel. And its emphasis is placing in two areas — one is that belief, or becoming a child of God, is a work of God himself, and the other is, is that it is an action, as it were, taken on the part of the individual saving faith is understood certainly as a gift, it's God's grace in our life that we believe — but it is based upon something that we are doing, and so there has to be an aspect of knowledge. There must be an understanding that Christ has died on the cross for our sins. There must also be a sense of assent, that we agree with that. But it goes far more than just knowing and agreeing. There is the sense of trust, and that is the crucial aspect of faith. It's the empty hand of the individual reaching out and receiving all that God has done through his Son Christ.

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

You know, one of the most frustrating things about the world around us is that the word “faith” is used so casually and so carelessly. There are a lot of people who basically talk about faith as if they have faith in faith. That’s not the way Christians talk about faith. There are all kinds of different faith. I’m sitting in a chair right now. I’ve got pretty good confidence that it’s going to hold me up. I’ve got faith in this chair. However, I wouldn’t have any faith in this chair to do anything other than to hold me up. It serves no other purpose. When we talk about the faith that saves, it’s a faith in Christ. It is trusting and resting in that trust, that Christ has done all that is needful for our salvation. The faith that saves is a faith that is faith in Christ knowing that it’s Christ who paid the penalty for our sin, knowing that it is Christ who purchased our salvation, knowing that it is Christ who has made full atonement for our sins, knowing that in him we have full forgiveness of our sins. The faith that saves is simply the confidence to rest and trust in Christ, knowing that he has done this on our behalf, that there is no more that is left to be done, and that he keeps those who come to him by faith, forever. You know, saving faith, the faith that saves, is a faith that is defined by the fact that in its solitary, most essential meaning, we trust Christ. We would have nothing else. We desire nothing else. We know that Christ is sufficient for our salvation.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Sadly, not everyone responded to Jesus in faith. In 2:12-20, Jesus drove out those who had been polluting the temple. In 2:24-25, Jesus didn’t entrust or *commit* himself to many people, because he knew that they didn’t have true faith. And in 3:18-21, we read about the judgment that’s coming against those who refuse to believe.

Unnamed Feast

The third portion of Jesus’ public ministry is associated with an unnamed feast, and is found in John 5:1-47.

In verses 1-15, Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. But since it was the Sabbath day, Jesus was accosted by the Jews for violating the law against working on the Sabbath. John 5:16-47 records Jesus’ response, where he claimed to be the giver of eternal life to all who believe in him.

Second Passover

The fourth section detailing Jesus’ public ministry tells us of his observance of a second feast of Passover in John 6:1-71.

The Passover was the feast where the Jews celebrated Israel's exodus from Egypt. So it's not surprising that this section contains many references to the exodus. In 6:1-15, Jesus miraculously fed five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. This act recalled God's provision of manna to the nation of Israel after they had been released from slavery in Egypt.

In John 6:16-24, Jesus walked on water, showing even greater command over the water than Moses had when he parted the Red Sea. Then, in 6:25-71, after crossing the sea, Jesus presented himself as "true bread from heaven," which far surpasses the manna that God provided in the days of the Exodus. As the true bread, Jesus fulfilled the Passover Feast as the provider of true life for all believers.

Feast of Tabernacles

The fifth section of Jesus' public ministry surrounds his observance of the feast of Tabernacles in John 7:1–10:21.

In John 7:1-52, John recorded how Jesus observed and fulfilled the Feast of Tabernacles.

In John 7:1-52, Jesus fulfilled the intention of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles was a commemoration of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and of his provision of water in the wilderness. It also celebrated God's continuing provision of rain for the harvest. And it looked forward to the day of God's final deliverance of his people. During the feast, the priest illustrated God's gracious provision by pouring out water around the altar of the temple. Using this imagery of water, Jesus boldly claimed that he was the one who could give them "living water."

In John 8:12-59, Jesus addressed true sonship by calling himself the Son of God. Jesus called himself the Son of God. He even denied that unbelieving Jews were legitimate sons of Abraham.

In 9:1-41, Jesus healed a man who had been blind since birth. In response, suspicious Pharisees carefully investigate what Jesus has done. Their unbelief prompted Jesus to claim that the Pharisees were actually the ones who were blind, even though they claimed to see.

And Jesus presented himself as the Good Shepherd in 10:1-21. In contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus was the Good Shepherd because he was willing to lay down his life for his sheep.

Feast of Dedication

The sixth section of Jesus' public ministry records the events surrounding his observance of the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22–11:57. John 10:22-40 reports that Jesus observed and fulfilled the Feast of Dedication.

John 10:22-40 records that Jesus observed the Feast of Dedication. This feast was not instituted in the Old Testament. Its observance began in 165 B.C., after the priestly family the Macabbees led a successful revolt against the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus had taken the title Epiphanes because he believed himself to be a

manifestation of god. He massacred many in Jerusalem, defiled the temple, and ordered the worship of Zeus by the Jews. So the Feast of Dedication celebrated the purifying of the temple by re-consecrating it after it had been reclaimed by the Macabbees. Today, the feast is best known by its Hebrew name, Hanukkah, which means “dedication.”

This passage implicitly contrasts Jesus with Antiochus. On the one hand, Antiochus falsely claimed to be divine as he massacred God’s people and defiled his temple. On the other hand, Jesus really is God’s Son who faithfully does the Father’s work, including giving eternal life to his people. In John 10:36, Jesus even claimed that he had been set apart — or as some translations put it “consecrated” — and sent into the world. And this language recalled the consecration of the temple in the Feast of Dedication. And of course, Jesus had already compared the rebuilding of the temple to the resurrection of his body in John 2:19-21.

These themes are carried into the story of the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-57, which demonstrates Jesus’ divine power over death. And the raising of Lazarus from the dead also foreshadows Jesus’ own resurrection at the end of the gospel, when all the hopes of the Feast of Dedication are finally fulfilled.

Third Passover

The seventh section dealing with Jesus’ public ministry is centered around preparations for a third Passover in John 12:1-50.

Jesus’ preparations for this third Passover that John mentioned set the stage for his ministry to his twelve disciples in John 13–17, as well as for his sacrifice as the Passover lamb in chapter 19. Jesus’ preparations began with him being anointed for burial in 12:1-11. In verses 12-19, John recorded Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In John 12:20-50, Jesus announced publicly that it was the time for him to be glorified through his death and resurrection. Jesus called for those in his hearing to believe in him. But even after performing miracles before them, many Jews believed but many others did not.

The next major portion of John’s gospel deals with Jesus’ private ministry to those who had received and believed in him. This section runs from in John 13:1–20:31.

JESUS’ PRIVATE MINISTRY

This section of the gospel contains John’s account of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples and his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. It is the story of how Jesus revealed his glory to his special people. John taught that Jesus intimately ministered to those who believed in him, and voluntarily gave his life for them. Through these events, Jesus displayed the glory of God in a way it had never been seen before.

This section of John’s gospel unpacks the thought John had expressed in John 1:11-12, where he wrote these words:

[Jesus] came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:11-12).

In the first 12 chapters of John's gospel, Jesus ministered to the world, but even his own did not receive him. Then, beginning in chapter 13, Jesus concentrated on those who did receive him: his disciples.

We will look at this section of John's gospel in two parts. First we will consider the events at the Last Supper. Second, we will look at the hour of Jesus' greatest glory, namely, his death and resurrection. Let's start with the events surrounding the Last Supper.

The Last Supper

Jesus' ministry to his disciples at the Last Supper is described in four distinct parts. In the first part, Jesus served them by washing their feet in John 13:1-30.

Service. Jesus symbolized his whole earthly ministry as he humbly washed his disciples' feet. This event dramatically portrayed both his incarnation and his saving sacrifice on the cross. The creator of the universe bowed before his own people and served them by washing their weary, dirty feet. It was a service that would reach its climax the next day on the cross when he would wash their weary, dirty souls with his cleansing blood. After washing their feet, Jesus announced that one of the disciples would betray him. Then, after Satan entered Judas, Judas left the room to accomplish the betrayal.

After serving his disciples by washing their feet, Jesus comforted them in John 13:31–14:31.

Comfort. After Judas left, Jesus began what is often called his "farewell discourse," in which he prepared his faithful disciples for the fact that he would soon be leaving them.

Even though the apostles are the audience, to be sure, there is some reason why that needed to be preserved for future generations of apostolic ministry. In other words, there can be transferable concepts for any person who wants to live as an apostle and an apprentice, as one who is learning and one who understands that you're sent into the world. If you have the vocational understanding of yourself, then there's a lot of wonderful teachings in the upper room discourse. I do think there are particular applications for leaders in that passage. I think those chapters can be read with great profit by men and women who are called to places of leadership in the body of Christ. But what I normally say is that all Christian motif is really personified by Jesus in John 17, because he divides the prayer, you know, praying for the apostles, but then he says, "But I pray not only for them, but for those

who will believe because of their testimony.” So this whole section in John 14, 15, 16 and 17 is this back-and-forth between the Twelve and the ones who would serve in similar roles after the Twelve were gone. So I see it as a section for all believers.

— Dr. Steve Harper

Jesus began his farewell discourse by saying that the time had come for him to be glorified — meaning that he was going to die, rise from the dead, and ascend to his Father in heaven. His disciples were going to have to live without his bodily presence walking, talking, and living among them. He also predicted that Peter was about to deny him three times. But Jesus knew that these difficult pieces of news troubled his disciples, so he comforted them, and reassured them that he would eventually bring them to the Father, too. And he told them that he wouldn’t leave them alone; he would send the Holy Spirit to minister to them in his place. Listen to Jesus’ promise in John 14:26.

The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).

Jesus promised that his disciples would never be alone. They would be put on trial and persecuted by the world, but they would never need to defend Jesus’ name and themselves alone. The Spirit of truth would empower them to speak and to write infallibly and authoritatively on Jesus’ behalf.

After comforting his disciples, Jesus prepared them for his departure and for their future ministries in John 15:1–16:33.

Preparation. At the end of the previous section, Jesus and his disciples left the place where they had been, and Jesus began a new section of his discourse. He began by describing himself as “the true vine” in John 15:1-8. This metaphor appealed to Psalm 80:8 and Isaiah 5:1-7, where the nation of Israel was pictured as a glorious vine. Because of Israel’s failure and sin she was later called a “corrupt, wild vine” in Jeremiah 2:21. But Jesus used this imagery to assure his disciples that he himself was reconstituting a true and faithful nation for Israel, and that they were part of this grand plan. Listen to what Jesus said in John 15:1-5:

I am the true vine ... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit (John 15:1-5).

By claiming to be the true vine, Jesus was saying that in an important sense, he himself was Israel. Jesus represented Israel, and he fulfilled Israel’s destiny. Israel had failed to establish God’s kingdom on earth, but Jesus was succeeding. And his disciples were the branches of the vine. They were a part of the people of God, and the agents through whom God would carry out his plan for the ages.

But Jesus also knew that the world would hate his disciples, because it already hated him. So, he assured them that he was opening the door of prayer to the Father for

them. They were his ambassadors, his authoritative representatives on earth. And because of this, the Father would heed their prayers as if Jesus himself had prayed them. As he told them in John 16:23-24:

I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:23-24).

After preparing his disciples, Jesus prayed for them in John 17:1-26.

Prayer. Jesus' prayer in John 17 is often called his High Priestly Prayer, because he interceded for his followers in priestly ways. In particular, Jesus prayed that the Father would protect his disciples so that many others might come to faith through them. He prayed that they and their own disciples would be protected from the forces of the world, that their unity would strengthen them, and that their lives would glorify God.

Jesus knows that his time is short, that it's time for him, as he says, to go back to be with the Father when they were one before the beginning of the world. And in this time, Jesus says that I've kept all that you have given me except one, the Son of Perdition, so that Scripture may be fulfilled. So Jesus is really praying to the Father about the disciples. He says, I worked with them for 3 to 3-1/2 years to sanctify them, to bring them to this point. But now, I'm not going to be here with them, so Father, please keep them, continue this sanctification process because they're going to be facing great trials and great persecutions, and now how are they going to get through this? So, again, it's a prayer to God to take care of his disciples in preparation for the work and the trials, the persecutions, the martyrdom that is going to come before them, the things they're going to have to sacrifice to spread the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

— Rev. Thad James

After describing the Last Supper, John reported Jesus' death and resurrection in John 18:1–20:31.

Death and Resurrection

In John's gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection, and their associated events, are often described as the hour of Jesus' glory. In the Old Testament, the word "glory" often referred to the presence of God among his people. Throughout Israel's history, God's glory accompanied Israel. His glory was the cloud that led the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings in Exodus 16:10. It was in the tabernacle of God in Exodus 40:34-35. And God's glory dwelt in Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 8:11. And corresponding to

this, in John's gospel the word "glory" refers to Jesus as God incarnate that dwelled among his people. But when Jesus referred to "the hour of his glory," he was usually referring to the particular point in his life in which his glory would be demonstrated to the world in the most profound way possible. In other words, he was referring to his death and resurrection.

We don't normally think of death as glorious. But Jesus' death and resurrection purchased reconciliation for God's people. His voluntary self-sacrifice and resurrection brought salvation and life to everyone that believed in him and received him as Messiah. They revealed God's love and power to us in ways we never would have realized otherwise. They were tragic, but they were beautiful. And they brought God immeasurable honor and praise. In short, they were the most glorious events ever to take place in human history.

The account of Jesus' death and resurrection divides into three main parts, beginning with his arrest and trials in John 18:1–19:16.

Arrest and Trials. First we read Jesus arrested in 18:1-11. After Judas betrayed Jesus into the hands of the authorities, soldiers and officials from the chief priest and Pharisees came and arrested Jesus. In 18:12-27, Jesus was brought to Caiaphas the high priest to be questioned. During this time, Peter denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus had prophesied.

Next, Jesus was tried by the Roman governor Pilate in 18:28–19:16. Pilate concluded that Jesus was innocent, but didn't release him for fear of the Jews. But the true power behind Jesus' arrest and trials was God himself. Neither Pilate nor Caiaphas was really in control. Everything happened according to God's plan. As we read in John 19:10-11:

Pilate said, "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:10-11).

The second major portion of John's account of Jesus' death and resurrection is the crucifixion in John 19:16-37.

Crucifixion. In his account of Jesus' death, John explained how the particular events of the crucifixion fulfilled several Old Testament expectations for the Messiah. These details demonstrated that Jesus wasn't taken by surprise; everything took place according to God's plan.

Throughout his arrest, trials, and crucifixion, Jesus quietly maintained unbowed dignity. The Son of God laid down his life for his people, and in so doing revealed the glory of God in a way it had never been revealed before. How far would God go to deliver his people? All the way to the cross!

The Bible says that Jesus went to the cross for the joy set before him. The cross was the hardest thing anybody's ever done. There's never been any greater suffering than what the Son of God experienced on the cross, as he not only died a brutally difficult physical death, but he endured the imposition of our sin on him, and the wrath of God on his

shoulders. So it was the hardest thing anybody's ever done, but Jesus did it for the joy set before him. Now, why would he do that? He did it because he knew what it would result in. It would produce a display of God's glory. A display of his love, his justice, his wrath, his holiness, his compassion, his mercy, all beautifully converging on the cross in a way where we see him for who he is, and we're able to worship him for all of eternity as we gather around the Lamb who was slain. His throne is where we worship. So God has displayed his character and his glory, and shown us who he is in the cross, and we worship him. And he brings many sons to glory in this cross. And so that's why he was able to do it joyfully, because of what it ends up producing.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Third, the report of Jesus' death and resurrection ends with the resurrection itself in John 20:1-31.

Resurrection. According to John 20:1-9, Jesus' tomb was a historical fact. Mary, Peter and John himself saw that Jesus was not there. In 20:10-31, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and to Thomas. These reports indicate that Jesus' followers were somewhat skeptical and not easily fooled.

In particular, Thomas had not been present the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples. And Thomas was skeptical. He wanted evidence. He wasn't going to believe some crazy story of a resurrection. And his confession in verse 28 is the climax of John's narrative, where Thomas acknowledged Jesus with the words, "My Lord and my God."

It's quite striking that when Thomas hears from the other disciples, who he's knows personally, has been traveling with for all this time — he knows these guys — and they tell him they've seen Jesus risen, he just can't bring himself to accept that. It's not as though strangers are telling him this, and they all agree. And he just can't bring himself to believe it. And, I think, I would suspect that it has to do with his inability to risk believing and being disappointed again. I think he's afraid to be disappointed again.

— Dr. David Redelings

You have the account of Thomas doubting and saying the famous words that, "Unless I put my fingers in the nail marks and in Jesus' side, I will not believe," and often Thomas is castigated as "Doubting Thomas" because he wouldn't believe Jesus, but I think that we should be slightly less harsh on Thomas. In the first instance, John tells us that Thomas was not there with the Twelve when Jesus came among them and revealed himself to them. And secondly, if we believe that the disciples were selected to be eyewitnesses of Jesus'

resurrection, then there was a sense in which Thomas had to see in order to believe. And thirdly, we should also say that when Jesus did stand among them and he revealed himself to Thomas, Thomas makes the boldest and clearest profession of faith in the whole gospel. He calls Jesus “My Lord and my God.” And so John then actually goes on to explain at the end of John 20, that Jesus said that, you know, because you’ve seen you believed, but from now on, blessed will be those who have not seen and yet believed. And there is a sense in which Thomas had to see in order to believe, but there is a sense in which you and I come to see, not through seeing Jesus before us, but actually coming to appreciate and understand all that they saw and coming to believe it for our self. So, I think we’re a bit unfair on Thomas sometimes because he did have a unique role, and because he is a great model of somebody who when he did see Jesus for who he is, he expressed wonderful faith in him. He actually is a model for us as well, that when we come to apprehend who Jesus is, we too should fall down and worship him as well.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

The last portion of John’s gospel is the conclusion to his account of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry, recorded in John 21:1-25.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion picks up themes from the whole gospel, and then directs readers toward the future. Like the preceding chapter, it reports a resurrection appearance of Jesus in verses 1-14. But the stress of the narrative is not on the fact of the appearance. In both verses 1 and 14, John spoke of this appearance as a revelation, using the same word he used in 2:11 when he said that Jesus “revealed his glory.” So, rather than using this appearance as a simple proof of the resurrection, John intended us to read this account as a completion of the revelation of Jesus and his glory that had begun in the first chapter of his gospel and continued throughout all its reports.

Moreover, the conclusion also confirms the authority of the apostles and other disciples to bear witness to Jesus, despite the fact that the preeminent apostle Peter had denied Jesus three times. In John 21:15-23, Jesus counteracted Peter’s denials by forgiving Peter, and by restoring him three separate times. And in these restorations, Jesus commissioned Peter to care for the flock of God. Jesus himself was the Good Shepherd. But now he appointed Peter to follow him in caring for the people of God.

Each of the other gospels ends with some form of the Great Commission — Jesus command to his apostles and other disciples to build the church. And this story of Peter’s restoration is John’s way of looking to the future of the church. Jesus had promised to be with his people always. And he took this moment to make it clear that one way he would always be with his people was through other shepherds, like Peter. As Peter himself later wrote in 1 Peter 5:1-2:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care (1 Peter 5:1-2).

Most scholars believe that John's gospel was written as the last apostles were dying. John may even have been the very last apostle alive at this point. So, that made it important for God's people to hear that Jesus was still present through the shepherds of his flock. Ultimately it wasn't Peter or any other apostle who led the church. It was Jesus as they followed him. They served only as his ambassadors and helpers. And Jesus promised to return for his people himself, bodily and permanently, to lead them in the future.

Now that we've looked at both the background and the structure and content of John's gospel, we're ready to consider some major themes that John emphasized.

MAJOR THEMES

John listed several important themes in his purpose statement in John 20:30-31, where we read these words:

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).

In this part of our lesson, we'll focus on four closely related themes drawn from John's purpose statement: the act of believing, Jesus' identity as Christ, his parallel identity as the Son of God, and the blessing of life that he brings. Let's begin with John's emphasis on believing.

BELIEVING

John used the Greek word *pisteuo*, meaning "believe," 106 times. The other three gospels all together used it 34 times, only about a third of John's total. This difference in emphasis shows how important the idea of believing is to John's story.

In John's gospel, the concept of believing is closely related to other concepts signified by words like "receive," "come to," and "know." So, to believe in Jesus is to receive him, to come to him, to know him in the sense of interpersonal experience.

This kind of believing, receiving, knowing and coming to Jesus often begins as a moment of personal decision to trust and follow Christ — the same thing modern Christians often call "conversion." When conversion is genuine, it causes us to participate

in God's work and to receive his blessings in a variety of ways. In this part of his gospel, John referred to conversion with terms like becoming children of God, and obtaining eternal life. Listen to John's description of believing in John 1:12:

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

And we find similar language in John 3:36, where we read these words:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life (John 3:36).

In passages like these, believing is the sincere, heart-felt, act of personal reliance and commitment to Jesus that unites us with him. It makes us part of God's work in history. And it will reach its fullness only when Jesus is revealed in all of his glory.

Now, it's important to realize that John didn't always use the word "believe" in the same way. In some passages, John used the word "believe" to signify superficial faith — what theologians have often called "temporary" or "hypocritical" faith. For example, listen to John's report in John 2:23-24:

While [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men (John 2:23-24).

Jesus didn't entrust himself to these people because their belief was only superficial. It wasn't the sincere belief that theologians often call "saving faith."

For the most part, we can tell from the contexts where John spoke of "believing" that he usually had in mind true saving faith — true trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. For John, Jesus — the object of our belief — makes all the difference. It's not the power of our belief that saves us, but the power of the one in whom we believe.

Now that we've looked at the theme of believing in Jesus, let's turn to one of the main things John would have us believe about Jesus, namely, that he's the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to his people Israel.

CHRIST

By calling Jesus "Christ," John clearly identified him as Israel's king. After all, in the first century the term "Christ" or "Messiah" had become the functional equivalent of "king of Israel." This is who the Christ was. But the fact that Jesus was Israel's king had many implications, and John drew attention to several of these.

For instance, John stressed that like the kings of Israel and Judah in the Old Testament, Jesus embodied the people that he ruled. Jesus became everything that Israel had failed to be, and he thereby received all the blessings that Israel had previously failed

to gain. As Israel's king, Jesus represented Israel in every capacity, and served both as their substitute and as the conduit of God's blessings to them.

In John 15:1-8, John demonstrated this truth about Jesus by reporting that Jesus was the true vine, and that his followers were branches in him. Listen to what Jesus said in John 15:5-8:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit ... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:5-8).

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel had been pictured as the vine of God. We find this imagery in places like Psalm 80, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 17, and Hosea 10. Moreover, the royal family of David, and even the future great Messiah, were represented as the branch out of which the entire people of God would grow. We see this in places like Isaiah 11:1. So, against this background, when Jesus claimed to be the true vine and the only route to pleasing and glorifying God, his disciples would have understood that Jesus was the true King of Israel who represented and embodied his people.

But what are the implications of this idea that as king, Jesus is the true or real Israel? For one thing, it means that Jesus was fulfilling everything that Israel was called to be. Israel had failed to be and to do what God had called her to be and do. But where Israel failed because of sin, Jesus perfectly succeeded. He fulfilled Israel's destiny. In his own person, Jesus summed up centuries of Old Testament history and revealed the reality of God's glorious presence as only he could reveal it. And because of this, the true people of Israel aren't identified by membership in the nation of Israel. Instead, they're the people who are branches in the true vine — believers in Christ, who are united to him by faith.

Our discussion of Jesus' representative role as the Christ will focus on three ways Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament expectations for the Messiah that were particularly important in John's gospel. First, Jesus fulfilled the temple. Second, he fulfilled the expectations created by Israel's feasts. And third, he fulfilled God's law. We'll look at each of these ideas, beginning the way that Jesus fulfilled the temple.

Temple

One of the reasons the temple was important in Scripture is that it was a place where God had promised to be present with his people in a special way. Of course, we know that God is omnipresent; he is everywhere all the time. But when we talk about his special presence, we have in mind *manifestations* of his presence — times when God concentrated his presence in particular locations, often in a way that was visibly glorious.

God's presence in the tabernacle and the temple is significant because the tabernacle and the temple are the universe in miniature. They are microcosms of what the world is, and so God's presence there really represents his presence in the world. The world is the temple that he

made in which he would commune with his people. And then, when Adam rebelled, God chose this one line of people that eventually becomes the nation of Israel, and he takes up residence among them, and where he dwells among them is in this miniature replica of what the universe was, and his presence there is unique because that's where Israel goes to be in the presence of God, to the tabernacle, and later to the temple, and it's also something of a foretaste of what God is going to do in the whole world. When God fills the tabernacle at its consecration, when it's completed at the end of Exodus, and later when he fills the temple when it's completed in 1 Kings 8, we're really getting a preview of what's going to happen in the universe when the glory of God is fully known.

— Dr. James Hamilton

The theme of God's special presence among his people is fulfilled in a number of stages in biblical history. In the beginning, the Garden of Eden was the sanctified place on earth where God's central special presence could be found. It was to serve as his throne room on earth, from which humanity was to sanctify the entire earth, turning the whole world into God's holy kingdom.

Later, when God established Israel as his royal priesthood, he associated his special presence first with the tabernacle and later with the temple. The decorations and furnishings of the tabernacle and temple were modeled after the Garden of Eden, and both the tabernacle and the temple served the same function as the garden. Scripture confirms this connection by pointing out that the tabernacle and temple were God's royal throne room on earth — places where he dwelled gloriously in the midst of his people. This fact is made clear in places like 1 Chronicles 28:2, Psalm 11:4, and Isaiah 6:1. These were the most sacred areas on earth. They were places where God's blessings could be readily obtained by his people. And like the Garden of Eden, they were the center of his kingdom, from which his people were to sanctify the earth as his kingdom. And according to John's gospel, a vital way to understand the importance of Jesus is to see that he fulfills the Old Testament theme of God's tabernacle and temple. Listen to what John wrote in John 1:14:

[Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. 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).

When John spoke of Jesus "dwelling among us," he used the Greek verb *skenoō*, which is related to the noun *skēnē*, meaning tent or tabernacle. In fact, this same noun is used for God's sacred tabernacle in the Septuagint — the Greek translation of the Old Testament. By using this verb and associating it with the "glory" of God's presence, John made it clear that Jesus was now providing the same access to God's special presence that had previously be available at the tabernacle.

And John made the same point about the temple in John 2:19-21, where we read this account:

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body (John 2:19-21).

Here, John made it clear that Jesus was the fulfillment of the temple, too.

John also made it clear that even after Jesus was no longer physically present on the earth, his followers would enjoy the special presence of God. This is why, in John 4:21, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that a day was quickly coming when neither the Jerusalem temple nor the Samaritan holy place would have special priority in the worship of God. As Jesus said in John 4:23-24:

A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth ... God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).

Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman should be a great encouragement to the modern church, because we live in the very time Jesus was talking about. In our day, Jesus isn't physically present on earth. According to Hebrews 8:2, and 9:11-12, he physically resides in God's tabernacle in heaven. But he's present with us spiritually, especially when we gather as his church. We see this in places like Matthew 18:20, and 1 Peter 2:4-9. And because Jesus is present with us, we are now the sacred temple of God's special presence on earth.

But even this wonderful fulfillment of the temple in Christ will be surpassed when Jesus returns in glory. Passages like Revelation 21:1-5 teach that when Christ comes back, he'll transform the entire creation into God's dwelling place. At that time, Christ and the Father will always be present with us, and the entire earth will be filled with the glory of God.

A second way that Jesus met Old Testament messianic expectations in John's gospel was by fulfilling the significance of Israel's feasts.

Feasts

As we mentioned earlier, much of John's gospel can be outlined around several feasts that Jesus attended. Among these feasts were various celebrations of Passover, Tabernacles and Dedication. God established these feasts to identify Israel as a royal priesthood, and to give them regular ways to enjoy the blessings of his special presence in the tabernacle and temple. And in his gospel, John made it clear that Jesus fulfilled the significance of these feasts.

The Passover feast was one of Israel's three main annual feasts. It celebrated Israel's exodus from Egypt. In brief, Jesus fulfilled this feast because he was like the Passover lamb, which was slain and eaten on Passover, and whose blood was symbolic of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. All four gospel writers identified Jesus as the true Passover Lamb. But only John highlighted this fact by reporting the words of John the

Baptist who said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” in John 1:29. In John 19:33, John also reported that when Jesus died, the soldiers “did not break his legs,” fulfilling the requirement in Exodus 12:46 that the bones of lambs chosen for the Passover feast shouldn’t be broken. In these and many other ways, John showed that Jesus fulfilled the symbolism and meaning of Passover.

In John 7:2, 37, John also reported Jesus’ celebration of another of Israel’s three annual feasts: the Feast of Tabernacles. One of the most important rituals of this feast involved pouring water in recollection of the way God provided water for Israel in the wilderness, and the way God provided rain for Israel’s crops year after year; and in anticipation of the way God would pour out streams of blessings on his people in the last days. And John drew a strong connection between this ceremony and Jesus by pointing out that Jesus is the conduit of all the blessings God will pour out at the climax of history. Specifically, John reported that on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus announced his power to dispense God’s blessings. Listen to what Jesus told the crowds in John 7:37:

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink (John 7:37).

John reported that the streams of living water of God’s blessing flow from Jesus. Past blessing, present blessing, and future blessing all come through him. In this way, Jesus is the fulfillment of all the hopes for God’s blessings that were pictured in the Feast of Tabernacles.

Finally, in John 10:22-39, Jesus celebrated the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah. The Feast of Dedication wasn’t one of Israel’s major feasts established in the Old Testament. But it was significant to Israel’s life in the first century because it celebrated Israel’s victory over its Greek oppressors in 165 B.C., as well as the rededication of the altar and the temple that took place after this victory. In John 10:30, while Jesus was celebrating the Feast of Dedication, he made the startling claim.

I and the Father are one (John 10:30).

The Jews understood that he was claiming to be God, and responded by trying to stone him. Then Jesus defended himself in John 10:36 by referring to himself as:

The one whom the Father set apart (John 10:36).

When Jesus said that he was “set apart,” he used the common Greek term *hagiazō*, which the Scriptures use many times to refer to dedication and consecration in the ceremonies of the Temple. In this context, *hagiazō* is nearly synonymous with the Greek term *egkainia* — the word translated “dedication” in the expression “Feast of Dedication.”

In these ways, John closely associated Jesus with the celebration of the dedication or consecration of the temple. The feast celebrated the temple being set apart for the presence of God. And in a similar way, Jesus was set apart as the fulfillment of God’s special presence on the earth.

In addition to showing that Jesus fulfilled the expectations for the temple and the feasts, John also demonstrated that Jesus fulfilled God’s law.

The Law

Although Christians are often accustomed to thinking of God's law in negative terms — as something that condemns us — we also need to remember that the law was given to true believers as a guide toward God's blessings.

When you look at the law in the Bible, it's clear that the people who read it didn't simply believe that they were reading a list of rules and regulations. It was a life orientation. And so they could read it knowing that, if they kept the law, they would be blessed in the keeping of it, and I think there are several reasons for that. One is that the law is God's revelation. The law tells us how God wants us to live. And the psalmist in 40:8 says, "I delight to do Thy will, O God." So when we align ourselves with the will of God, when we understand what the will of God is, then we find great joy and blessing in doing whatever it is that we are supposed to do, or not doing what we're told to not to do. So the mere fact that it's revelation is a sign of God's blessing, a sign of God's favor. But more than that, I think it's a blessing because it's actually, the law is actually an invitation for us to participate in what God wants to bring about on the earth.

— Dr. Steve Harper

The predominant use of law in the Old Testament is positive because God's law is a reflection of God's character. And so the Psalms, for instance, speak of God's law as a light to our path and a lamp to our feet. David in the Psalms described it as sweeter than the honeycomb, more precious than gold, in keeping them his servant is warned, and there is great reward in them. In fact, the whole Psalms begin that way — "Blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord" — then Psalm 1 goes on to paint an image that the one who fears God and keeps his commands is like a tree planted by a stream that never ceases to bear fruit. And so the law is a place of blessedness. But it's only a place of blessedness for those for whom God has first granted forgiveness, that forgiveness which comes through Christ. But the law then is a guide to how to live life under Christ as a life of blessing. And so the one who loves Christ fulfills the law, Paul says, that Christ is the goal or the purpose of the law. So the law teaches us our sin, but it also shows us what Jesus has done for us and then ultimately provides us a guide for living. So that the whole law, Jesus said, is summed up in two commands: love God, heart, soul, mind, strength and love neighbor as self. So anyone who has known someone who loves God heart, soul, mind and strength,

knows the blessing of that kind of a person. And anyone who has known somebody who loves neighbor as that person loves himself, they know there's great blessing in that. There's generosity, there's mercy, there's provision, there's blessedness in being around and even in the presence of those who are faithful to God's commands.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

In the Old Testament, God's Law was portrayed as a special gift to his people. Psalm 119 and many other passages celebrate it as Israel's guide to the blessings of God. And in the New Testament, James called the law of God the perfect law that gives freedom in James 1:25, and Paul called it Christ's law in 1 Corinthians 9:21. And Jesus himself affirmed the Law's importance and value in John 10:35 when he said:

The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35).

Here, Jesus taught that the entire Old Testament, including the law, is God's perpetual and abiding word to his people.

Even so, John made it clear that the law wasn't an end in itself. In an important sense, it always pointed beyond itself to Jesus. In John 5:46-47 Jesus told the unbelieving Jews,

If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (John 5:46-47).

John emphasized this point throughout his gospel. The Old Testament law pointed forward to Jesus. So, to reject Jesus was also to reject the law that foretold him.

One way John stressed this was by applying to Jesus the titles, characteristics, and actions that Judaism had already given to the law. For example, Judaism had said you should feed a hungry enemy with "the bread of the Torah." And in John 6:35, Jesus is called "the bread of life." Judaism had claimed that the "words of the Torah are life for the world." And in John 4:11, Jesus is the giver of living water. Judaism also spoke of "the light of the Law which was given to lighten every man." And John 1:9 calls Jesus "the true light that gives light to every man." These are just a few of many examples in John's gospel that show that Jesus embodied God's law. Jesus and his teachings continue to be the source of life and light for all who follow him.

John dearly wanted his readers to understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ. He wanted them to take comfort in the knowledge that Jesus hasn't abandoned his church, but is always present with us. He wanted them to trust in Jesus, so that they would receive God's blessings through him. And he wanted them to be obedient to the Word of God, so that they would glorify the Lord as his kingdom of priests.

Now that we've looked at the major themes of believing in Jesus, and Jesus' identity as the Christ, we should consider his closely related identity as the Son of God.

SON OF GOD

Jesus' identity as the Son of God is parallel to his identity as the Christ because they both refer to the fact that he is the king over God's kingdom on earth. But it's worth discussing these terms separately because they each have different nuances.

In John's gospel the term Son of God refers to the divine messianic King. On the one hand, it refers to the concept of the Divine Son who came down from heaven to earth, as in John 10:22-40. On the other hand, it can be synonymous with King of Israel or Christ, the human descendant of David who was the rightful king over Israel, as we see in John 1:49 and 11:27.

To get a better understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God in the Gospel of John, it helps to see how John stressed the great mystery that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Let's look first at the idea that Jesus is fully divine.

Divine

One way that John portrayed the divinity of the Son was through the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father. There are many passages that demonstrate that this relationship is qualitatively different from the relationships the Father has with his merely human children, such as believers. Listen to this exchange between Jesus and the Jews in John 10:30-33:

[Jesus said,] "I and the Father are one." Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:30-33).

The Jews rightly understood that Jesus' claim of unity in his relationship with God the Father was, in fact, a claim that Jesus actually was God.

Moreover, according to John 14:9, Jesus is the unique Son of God who revealed the Father as no one else could ever do. Although 1:18 does not use the word "son" the thought is exactly the same. Jesus perfectly reveals his Father to his people. In fact, according to Jesus, in John 14:9, to see Jesus is to see the Father.

And beyond these matters of revelation, Jesus also possesses full divine authority over things like life and death, and ultimate judgment. As we read in John 5:21-22:

Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son (John 5:21-22).

John made it clear that Jesus was God in the flesh. He was God himself, with unlimited authority to carry out God's work on the earth.

Another way John portrayed the divinity or deity of the Son was through Jesus' description of himself as the "I Am." In Exodus 3:14, God revealed his covenant name to Moses by saying, "I am who I am." This was the basis of the divine name that has often been represented in English simply as "the Lord." God's name was thought to be so holy that the Jews of Jesus' day refused to pronounce it. But Jesus applied it to himself.

In John's gospel, he's got "I am" statements that show up about 24 times in things Jesus says. He's got more than any of the other gospels and about half in the whole New Testament. The significance in the first place is that it's a way of identifying Jesus with the God of the Old Testament. So, seven of these statements is just kind of a bare "I am," and on least one of those occasions in John 8:58, 59 when he says it, they pick up rocks to try to execute him for claiming to be the God of the Old Testament. The rest of the statements are "I am" connected with something, like "I am the Bread"; "I am the Light"; "I am the Way the Truth and the Life." These are where you have Jesus claiming to be God, but God related to human life. So, I think that we should read all of the statements together, that John is putting forward for us something Jesus has done, to say, "This man existed in prior time because he is God." When he makes the claim, "Before Abraham was, I am" in John 8:58, it's not just claiming to have lived two thousand years before; it's claiming to be the God who interacted with Abraham and the God who is eternal.

— Dr. John McKinley

In John 8:12-59 Jesus and the Jewish leaders were engaged in an explosive confrontation. The controversy had to do with Jesus' claim to sonship, and his opponents' claim to be sons of Abraham. In verse 44, Jesus told them that their true father was the devil. In return they challenged him by asking if he was greater than Abraham. Then

Jesus ended the argument with these words in John 8:58:

Before Abraham was born, I am! (John 8:58).

Jesus didn't say, "I was," as would have been natural if he simply meant that he was older than Abraham. He said, "I am" claiming to be not only older and greater than Abraham, but to be the eternal God of Israel himself.

Having considered Jesus' divinity, let's look at John's treatment of the fact that as the Son of God, Jesus was also fully human.

Human

Since the time of David, the term "Son of God" was used to refer to the human king who sat on David's throne as king over Israel. We can see this in places like Psalm

2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. John 7:42 also shows that the Jews expected the Christ to come from David's family. And in John 1:49, the term "Son of God" is used as a synonym for "King of Israel."

Several other passages in John's gospel also identify Jesus as the King of the Jews, such as 12:13-15, 18:33-40, and 19:1-21. In short, when John identified Jesus as the Son of God, part of what he meant was that Jesus was David's perfect human descendant that would rule over Israel forever.

The Gospel of John stresses that as the Son of God, Jesus possesses both full divine kingship and full human kingship. Every hope that the Old Testament put in God's reign over the universe, and every hope that the Old Testament established for the rule of the Davidic Messiah, is fulfilled in the kingship of Jesus.

So far, we've looked at the major themes of believing in Jesus, and Jesus' identity as the Christ and the Son of God. So, now we're ready to turn to the blessing of life that comes to those who believe in Christ.

LIFE

John used the word "life" 36 times in his gospel. The other three gospel writers used it a total of 16 times. But it isn't just the sheer number of times that he used it that gives "life" its great importance in this gospel. It's also the role "life" plays in the gospel message. In John 17:3, Jesus defined "life" in this way:

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).

Of course, this knowledge is far more than mere intellectual awareness of God. It includes a measure of rational cognition about God. But more importantly, it's a relationship with him — a personal experience of his presence and involvement in our lives. This fellowship with our Creator is one of the main goals of human existence. According to John 3:16, this life can also be called "eternal," meaning that it will never end. But John makes it clear that we don't have to die in order to obtain this eternal life. In fact, believers already possess eternal life. As Jesus said in John 5:24,

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).

Life is already the gift of God to those who believe in Jesus.

You know, the words that come together as eternal life come to us so easily because we encounter them so often in Scripture. We know that one of the gifts of our salvation through Christ is eternal life. But you know, we are chronological creatures. That's just the way we think. We think in terms of seconds and minutes and hours and days and months and years, and so it's easy for us to think that eternal life is

the life we know now, just with a longer calendar, a calendar that never ends. That's not actually the biblical notion of eternal life. The first meaning of eternal life in Scripture is that it is life in God. It is God who is eternal. One of the contrasts between God and we who are his human creatures is that we are very temporal. We feel time. But God is timeless. And by the atonement that Christ has achieved for us, those who are in Christ enter into the eternal life of God. And so, eternal life means we are alive in Christ with God forever. It's not just a calendar that never runs out of pages. It's a state of existence, which is grounded in God himself, and in the fact that he is eternal. But you know, the second word there in that couplet is really important, the word "life," because in the Scripture there's a contrast between life and death. And after the judgment, there's a contrast between eternal life and the second death. So, eternal life also is an affirmation that in Christ, those whose sins are forgiven, we know life with God and Christ forever. We are forever in the presence of God. We enter into a state of existence which is timeless, eternal, that is all about the glory of God and the comfort and joy and exhilaration of being in God's presence and praising him forever. The contrast of that is hell, defined as a second death. So what we're talking about here with eternal life is not just length in eternity. It's the richness of being with Christ and having fellowship with God, rather than spending eternity in hell.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Eternal life is a gift of deliverance from divine judgment into never-ending joy and peace. And it can only be obtained from God by believing in his Son Jesus. And John's gospel stresses at least two reasons for this. First, Jesus is the creator and the source of life, as we learn in places like John 1:1-5, 5:26, 11:25, and 14:6. And therefore, Jesus has the right to dispense life to those he wishes. In fact, Jesus made this point explicitly in John 5:21.

The second reason that eternal life can only be obtained through Jesus is that only Jesus possesses the words of life, that is, the gospel message that leads people into a saving knowledge of God. Jesus explained this in places like John 6:63, and 12:49-50. And Peter confirmed it in John 6:68.

Jesus is "the One and Only"; or as he is called in John 1:18, "God the One and Only." No one else has ever revealed the heavenly Father like Jesus has, because no one else has ever come from the Father like Jesus has. Jesus' unique role as the revealer of God is grounded in his identity as "God the One and Only," who came to show us the Father and give us eternal life.

And so throughout John's gospel, Jesus is the giver of life to all who believe. Those who don't believe don't understand his words, and they reject the life he offers. But those who do believe receive eternal life right now, and immeasurable blessings in the age to come.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored the background of the Gospel According to John in terms of its author and occasion of writing; we've surveyed its structure and content; and we've considered the major themes of believing, Jesus' identity as Christ and Son of God, and the blessing of life in his name.

John's gospel shows us that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises of blessing. Jesus is the Christ. He can and will keep every glorious promise God has made because Jesus is the saving Son of God. And those promises and that salvation include the wonderful gift of eternal life. If we hold fast to these hopes as we read John's gospel, we'll be better prepared to understand it and to apply to it our lives. And if we keep them in our hearts as we live, we'll be better prepared to glorify God, and to enjoy the eternal life he has given us through his Son Jesus.

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The Gospels

LESSON
FIVE

The Gospel According to John Faculty Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson Five: The Gospel According to John

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Dan Doriani
Dr. John Frame
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Dr. Steven Tsoukalas
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Brian Vickers
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

Why should we be concerned with the Bible's human authors?

Christian tradition has attributed authorship of the fourth gospel to the apostle John. But does it really matter who wrote it? Evangelicals believe that all Scripture is the inspired Word of God. So, if the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the Scriptures, why should we be concerned with the Bible's human authors?

Dr. Brian Vickers

We know that the Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture. We believe that as Christians. But we have to remember that he inspired human authors, and so it's obviously important, that we be aware that the Scripture is inspired, "breathed ... by God," as Paul said. But we have to remember that God doesn't inspire the writers of Scripture in a way that sort of overrides them as individuals, as people. So it's very important, we have to remember, these are human authors and they're using human language, and they're communicating with human beings. And so we need to pay attention to them because they are the messenger, so to speak. You could put it that way. They're God's messengers to us — to the people they're writing to and then also to us. We have to remember, I mean, God accommodates himself to us, you know, in every way. And one of the greatest ways that God has accommodated himself to us is by giving us his Word in words that we can understand. I mean, God's not limited to language. God's not limited to any language at any time. God accommodates himself and speaks to us through human beings, and since he's speaking to us through human beings, we have to take those people seriously and see them as the ones who are most directly communicating to us what God is saying. And so if we kind of skip over or dismiss the human authors of Scripture, in many ways, we're dismissing the divine author of Scripture by ignoring the fact that he, in fact, spoke through human beings.

Dr. David Lamb

As we think about the issue of how the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the Bible, it's actually a lot more complicated than I think we sometimes think. There's a Caravaggio painting from, I guess, it's the seventeenth century that has Matthew sitting there at his easel, and there is an angel basically whispering things into his ear, and at some points in time, guiding his hand. I think that's our perception — that the Holy Spirit spoke directly, maybe through angels, to give an exact transcript of the biblical authors. And I think that certainly could have happened, but I don't think that's probably what happened most of the time. We think about different examples. I think looking at the Gospels is a great example for this, because we've got four gospels. Why do we have four gospels? You would think, why don't we just have one story, the biography of Jesus? But there are four gospels, and each of them are different, and it's one Holy Spirit that was inspiring each of those four authors. So I'm assuming that the character of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John affected how they wrote.

Why does Mark include the cleansing in the temple at the end, whereas in John's gospel, the cleansing of the temple shows up really early? Mark is doing something different than John. Why does John include these long theological speeches and treatises? John is just far more theological, whereas Mark, everything is fast paced; it's actions, it's an action flick — you know, this happens, Jesus heals this person, and immediately something else happens, then Jesus goes and casts out a demon, and then Jesus may give a short little teaching, but we are far less likely to get the long speeches. So we're not 100% certain, but a lot of scholars think that Mark was influenced by Peter. Peter was a fisherman, a kind of a blue-collar guy and was concerned... a very active guy, he was involved. Where John, well, John was young when he was a disciple, but he seems to have more of a theological interest. And to understand what was going on in John's lifetime when John's gospel was written, or later on probably when the book of Revelation was written, John's personality and his temperament influenced how he wrote.

Question 2:**When was the Gospel of John written?**

It's helpful to know when a book of the Bible was written because language and culture tend to vary as history progresses. Moreover, both the Holy Spirit and the apostle John wanted this gospel to be clear and relevant to the circumstances of its original audience. So, it's valuable to ask, when was the Gospel of John written?

Dr. Peter Walker

Mark and Luke would be from the early 60s A.D. Perhaps Matthew is early 70s A.D. What about John's gospel? I think it's very likely that John is also after 70 A.D. There was a scholar, John Robinson, who wanted to argue for the priority of John, that John was the first gospel to be written, and he did a good job to show just how much early material there is in John's gospel. But I think the majority would see the

Fall of Jerusalem has happened by the time John writes his gospel, not least because he makes such a great deal about the fact that Jesus is the new temple. In fact, he's the replacement for the temple, and what's more, we rejoice that Jesus himself is that temple. And so much of the gospel, by the way, takes place in the temple, in the first half of the gospel. So, probably after 70. The early church tradition has the apostle John living to a ripe old age, even into the reign of the Emperor Trajan, who starts his reign in A.D. 96. Well, it doesn't mean to say that John has to write his gospel in the last days before he dies in A.D. 97. He could be writing it at any time between 70 and 95, and I think it's a little bit arbitrary to push it very late just because we know that the apostle John happened to live a long time. So, perhaps in the late 70s or early 80s A.D., John is there reflecting on his original memory of Jesus. That's what gives the gospel such incredible power, because if John was a teenager when he first met Jesus, it's got all the memories of fresh excitement of meeting Jesus back in A.D. 30 or whenever it was. And now he's got maturity at the end of his life, and putting those two together, the youthfulness of knowing Jesus and the maturity of having walked with Jesus for the next 50 years. And I think that's what gives John its two-level kind of reality, it's so simple, and it's so deep. It's so original, and it is so mature. And John's gospel is a late document, but it's not late enough that it's unreliable. It's late and mature because it's in touch, through the apostle John, with the original.

Question 3:

How might the place where John wrote his gospel have influenced its shape and content?

Most scholars believe that John wrote his gospel when he was living in the city of Ephesus. Recognizing that John's own voice can be heard in his gospel alongside the Holy Spirit's voice, how might John's location have influenced what he wrote? How might the place where John wrote his gospel have influenced its shape and content?

Rev. Larry Cockrell

From what I have studied, John was living at the time in Ephesus in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey, and Turkey — well, I would say Ephesus at that time was a very important urban center of the Roman Empire. And when you stop to think about, you know, the area in which he actually wrote the gospel, his audience consisted of Jews as well as Gentiles. And so, recognizing the diversity of the audience he actually had to write to, he took great pains to make certain that when he was using Jewish customs or terms that he could obviously, you know, relate them in a way that Gentiles or non-Jewish readers could understand. In addition to that, he would have to translate a lot of the Aramaic writings into the Greek language for them to actually understand as well. And so it would impact to some degree his ability to communicate, but however, from what research of history has shown, he was pretty effective in making that transition or translation.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

Church tradition tells us that John wrote his gospel in Ephesus. If that's the case, then he was in a Gentile environment. This can help us understand why his narrative, style, and use of phrases are more Hellenistic than the other gospels.

Question 4:
Who was John's original audience?

Like all Scripture, there's a sense in which the Gospel of John was written for the whole church through all the ages. But John also had a specific original audience in mind when he wrote his gospel. And his purposes for his original audience undoubtedly influenced what he wrote. So, who was John's original audience?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

One of the more controverted subjects in regard to the forth gospel, or the Gospel of John as it's called, is really, who is the audience of this gospel? On the one end of the spectrum you have scholars who are prepared to say, "Well, this is the gospel for the philosophers, for the Greco-Roman work, for the Gentiles." That's why it starts, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." On the other end of the spectrum are those who say, "No, it looks like the audience is most definitely Jewish Christians." Which is it? It does seem to me that this is a gospel that is written for diaspora Jewish Christians. And so, in fact, they have to have explained to them a lot of the aspects of the story that they would not understand because they have never lived in the Holy Land. For example, in the beginning of John 4, we have this little explanatory comment: "Jews don't share a common cup with the Samaritans." Now a Jew who lived in Judea or Galilee certainly wouldn't need this kind of answer. In fact there are more explanatory parenthetical remarks in the Gospel of John than all the other three gospels put together. So it's clear that the author is writing for an audience that doesn't know an awful lot about what religion in the Holy Land was like in various ways, and yet they know enough about Judaism that they understand what Passover is. They understand some of the major theological terms that a Jew would use. They understand about clean and unclean and *mikvahs* and that sort of stuff. So it does look like what is going on in the fourth gospel is that the author is writing for Jewish Christians. I think probably in Asia Minor. Ephesus is a traditional answer as to where the audience was in this gospel, and that makes very good sense because there you have very Hellenized Jews, Jews that have integrated well with the larger Greco-Roman society. They know something about Judaism. They don't know it anywhere near as well as the Pharisees or Sadducees who lived in the Holy Land would have known. Therefore, there has to be some explanation, but there are also some assumptions about some things that they would be taken for granted as knowing. For example, that the Hebrew Scriptures are the Bible for Jews. And you could cite that as a sacred source, and it would be taken as a word of authority.

Question 5:

Why did John write his gospel?

One of the most significant factors that influenced the content of the fourth gospel was John's purpose or reason for writing. In fact, John was the only gospel writer who explicitly stated his purpose in his gospel. So, what did he want this book to accomplish? Why did John write his gospel?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, very helpfully John tells us why he's written his gospel. So in the end of John 20, he said that the reason he'd written these things is in order that we may see that Jesus is the Christ, and that we may come to believe in him, and that by believing we may have life in his name. And so he claims in the foregoing to have demonstrated that Jesus is the Christ, and he — particularly through his recording of the signs that point to Jesus's identity and he offers to his readers the opportunity to, in a sense, see Jesus through his eyes. And that as we see Jesus as John saw him, we too may come to believe in him and subsequently to have life in his name as well. So John, very helpfully actually, tells us the reason why he's written is so we might experience what John has already experienced.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

John very clearly expressed his reason for writing his gospel at the end of chapter 20: "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." In light of this, I believe that John's goal for his gospel was for people to know Jesus and believe in him. This includes making believers out of those who do not yet believe, and strengthening the faith of those who already believe.

Question 6:

Why is John's gospel so different from the other three?

Scholars typically set John apart from the other gospels because it shares so little material with them. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the "Synoptic Gospels" because they resemble each other so closely. But John's gospel is distinct in both style and structure. Why is John's gospel so different from the other three?

Dr. Peter Walker

The differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels have caused no end of debate amongst scholars. What's the reason for it? Well, John himself says that he's been selective. He said, look, you could write tomes and reams of material about Jesus, and these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. So we know that he's been selective, and that could explain the reason. Perhaps he's already seen Mark's gospel, knows Mark's gospel, and says, "I don't need to repeat that. I want to give you some more material." So, to see John's gospel as selective and also as deliberately complementary, adding to what we have in the

Synoptics, is one of the key ways to understand the differences. I think after that you can then say, well, John would probably say, I'm wanting to give a story which teaches that Jesus was eternal, and I'm going to tell you a story, which rather than starting on the human side and gradually working up to the eternal, divine nature of Jesus, says let's cut to the quick, and let's tell the story, as it were, knowing the end of the story — Jesus is divine, and he came as genuinely from God. And I think that's governed his selection very much. That's why he begins with talking about Jesus being the eternal Word of God and the Son of God in a very strong sense. That's why at the beginning of John's gospel he sort of reveals all and says straightaway, these are some of the titles of Jesus, and this is who he is. We don't have a sort of gradual learning as we do in the other gospels.

Another thing I think which is important to him is, he's writing for a Jewish audience, perhaps particularly, and wants to help them, and he uses the imagery of the temple, the temple, which meant so much to Jewish people, and he says, look, this is going to be one of the chief ways you are going to understand who Jesus is. The temple in Jesus' day was the place of divine presence, where God was really thought to be present on earth. And what he's trying to do is say, Jesus was the divine presence on earth. He says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." There's that Old Testament imagery of the tabernacle, which became the temple. And I think he's trying to develop that theme quite a bit, to try and help people to see that Jesus really was God's presence on earth. Just like the temple was, so now Jesus is, and I think that explains many of his differences.

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, John's gospel obviously looks quite different to Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Synoptic Gospels. John doesn't start with the birth narratives, for example, he goes straight into Jesus's adult life, and John has collected together a number of sayings and "signs," as he calls them, around the number seven. So there are seven "I am" sayings, there are seven signs. And he puts these together to really try and demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that we may come to believe as John has come to believe. He has arranged his gospel broadly around Jesus's public ministry so, like the other gospels, the first half of it concentrates more on his public teaching ministry, and the second half, moving towards his death on the cross. But he's less concerned with the chronology and more interested, I think, in making sure that we really understand the identity of the Christ and that we may come to have faith in him as John, the author, has done too.

Question 7:

What did John mean when he called Jesus the "Son of God"?

One of the most prominent themes in the fourth gospel is John's assertion that Jesus is the Son of God. Of course, Jesus is called the "Son of God" throughout the New Testament, where this title is typically synonymous with "Christ" or "Messiah." But

John's gospel uses this title in ways that indicate something very special about the Messiah. What did John mean when he called Jesus the "Son of God"?

Rev. Thad James, Jr.

Jesus had many titles, one being the Son of God. So when John refers to Jesus as the Son of God, he is making direct references to the deity of God, or the deity of Jesus. And we see that during that time frame there was concerns — is Jesus "as a man," and could he be truly God? So when John references, it was specifically pointing to the deity, that Jesus is the Christ, he is the Messiah, the Son of God. The people of that time would have readily understood that reference and the association with God.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

When John called Jesus "the Son of God," I believe this had a sacred meaning, and this meaning might even have transcended the traditional Jewish concept of the Messiah. Later in history, the early church appealed to John's gospel to formulate and prove the doctrine of the Trinity. I think they were right to do this.

Dr. Peter Walker

Now the phrase, "Son of God," actually had been used in the Old Testament to describe ordinary human beings who were special in some way. The king of Israel was known sometimes as the son of God. And John wants us to realize that when he's using the phrase, Son of God, he's actually using it in a distinctive sense. It doesn't mean an ordinary human being; it means someone who's Son of God in an eternal, ontological sense, that's the technical word. And it's because, I think, he wants to rule out misunderstandings of the Son of God in this weaker sense and wants us to be quite clear that he's using Son of God of an eternal being, that before he ever uses the word, Son of God, he introduces instead that Jesus is the Word of God. And he pegs out his description — Jesus is eternal, he's preexistent, he is the source of life — and by the end of his prologue, even though the word "Son of God" hasn't been used, and even the word "Jesus" is only just used at the end of it, we have had it made quite, quite clear that we're dealing with an eternal, preexistent person. So when he then starts using the phrase, "Son of God," we know what he means.

Dr. Steven Tsoukalas

The key to me is, what he meant by "Son of God" is, the very first verse of John. "In the beginning was the Word ... The Word was with God ... The Word was God." If I were to paraphrase the three clauses of John 1:1, I would paraphrase this way: "In the beginning was the Word," that is, when everything was created was created, the preincarnate Christ always was. Clause two: "And the Word was with God." The Word, the preincarnate Christ always was with the Father. "And the Word was God." The preincarnate Christ always was in his very nature, his very essence, God. So we have clause 2, two distinct persons. The Word was with, always, the Father, and yet clause 3 of John 1:1 states what the Father was by nature or is by nature, the Word shares that same nature. So you have here the beginnings of Trinitarian theology. You have the distinctness of persons of Jesus and the Father, yet they share the same essence, nature. And verse 3 of John 1 is very important. It talks about all things

coming into being through the Son, or by the Son. The “all things” there came into being. The Greek verb is “*ginomai*,” they “come to be.” What a stark contrast between the past tense of “*eimi*,” which is “I am” in John 1:1. The past tense of “I am” is “he was.” So the verb for Jesus is “I am,” past tense, “he was.” But the verb for the created order in John 1:3, the “all things” is *ginomai*, “to come into existence.” There is a stark contrast between that which is God and that which is the created order.

So what does John mean by Son of God when he applies that to Jesus? Well, in part, he means God the Son. You can reverse the nouns. Son of God means God the Son. He shares the very nature of the Father. And indeed in John 5:18, he was calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. Those are John’s words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Making himself equal with God the Father. So, Son of God in John means, in part, God the Son, equal with God the Father, a distinct person but equal in nature. And, of course, John also writes in 1:14, “The Word became flesh.” There’s that “became” again. His humanity became in a point in time, and he joined this created humanity, full humanity, with his eternal nature as God the Son, so that for John, and indeed for the whole New Testament, and of course for the whole Bible, Jesus is fully God and fully man — fully God, fully human. That’s what the phrase “Son of God” means in the gospel of John.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

What John wanted his audience to understand and know was that Jesus Christ indeed was God, and so he was speaking to the authenticity of our Lord and speaking to his deity. Even in the gospels he would obviously include the words of the Lord where the Lord would even say that he and the Father were one, speaking in terms of their essence and their being. So there, in and of itself, is a declaration of his deity. In addition to that, John would also make statements to the effect that Christ had come from the Father where the Father, you know, resided in heaven, and he came to do the Father’s will obviously by making known the Father to mankind, and then atoning for sin, thereby reconciling, you know, man to his Father. In addition to that, John refers to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Creator, and to be the Creator, he had to be with the Father in the beginning before he obviously was sent into the world to atone for the sin of the world.

Question 8:

What was so significant about Jesus’ “I am” statements in the Gospel of John?

One way John emphasized Jesus’ unique identity was by quoting Jesus’ “I am” statements. In these statements, Jesus identified himself using metaphors that featured the phrase “I am.” But modern readers often have trouble recognizing this as noteworthy language. Why were these statements special? What was so significant about Jesus’ “I am” statements in the Gospel of John?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

Well, there are a variety of things one can say about the “I am” statements in the Gospel of John. And some of them are perfectly straightforward and some of them are much more theologically loaded statements. What’s interesting about this is that most of them that have predicates: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” “I am the vine; you are the branches.” “I am the bread of life.” What’s interesting about all of those “I am” sayings plus a predicate is that those are the very things that were said about wisdom in the Old Testament, that God’s wisdom is like bread that you eat that nourishes the soul. It’s like living water that refreshes the person, all of these sorts of things. It’s like a vine that grows and produces fruit. All of these things were said about the wisdom of God and the Word of God in the Old Testament and old Jewish wisdom literature, but now it’s being said about a person. Jesus is the incarnation of the wisdom of God, and so the “I am” sayings are predicating of Jesus what previously was said of the personification of wisdom in early Judaism. But then we have the “I am” sayings that are without predicate: “Before Abraham was, I am.” Now what’s really interesting about that is that in the Greek, “*Ego eime*” is frankly, redundant. The word “*eime*” means, “I am” — the verbal form of “I am”. “*Ego*” means “I”, so you don’t really need “I, I am.” You just need “*eime*” not “*Ego eime*”. So it’s emphatic — “I myself am.” What I think is that he’s stating his preexistence, which is something that’s in fact said in John 1. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.” He was with God in the beginning. Before the creation of everything, the Word of God existed. I think, “Before Abraham was, I am” is a statement about the preexistence of the divine Son of God, and it causes enormous offense on the occasion. Maybe most interestingly is that there are seven “I am” sayings, and in early Judaism seven is the number of perfection. Not only are there seven “I am” sayings, there are seven sign miracles, there are seven discourses that go with the seven “I am” sayings. So what we’re being told here is in the “I am” sayings and in these discourses and in the sign miracles is that God’s perfect revelation of himself has come in Jesus.

Question 9:**What was the relationship between Jesus and the temple?**

John’s gospel records many different times that Jesus visited the temple in Jerusalem, and even records that Jesus explicitly identified himself with the temple. Why did John include so many references to the temple? What did it have to do with Jesus’ role as Christ or Messiah? What was the relationship between Jesus and the temple?

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the fascinating things in John’s gospel is just how much of it is set in the temple in Jerusalem. And it’s obviously very important for John to convey some kind of connection between Jesus and the temple. I think what’s going on here is that for Jewish people, the temple was the place where they believed that God’s *shekinah* glory had once upon dwelt, and there’s a bit of a dispute as to whether it still dwelt

there at the time of Jesus, but that's what it was really meant to be. And so John portrays Jesus as now being a similar divine presence on earth, just like the temple and then you notice that this goes all through his gospel. He begins in John 1:14 with this phrase, "the Word of God tabernacled," — or "dwelt" — "amongst us." It's the temple word again. Then in John 2 you have Jesus going into the temple and the cleansing of the temple. And in that conversation Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." And John makes a little comment, "He was talking about the temple of his body." What's John doing there? He's saying, just as the temple was, so now Jesus is God's presence, and we don't need the old Jerusalem temple. We now need Jesus; we've been given Jesus, and that's great. And then through the rest of these opening sections of John's gospel, it's uncanny how much relates to the temple still.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

The relation of the temple to Jesus is very, very important, and Jesus comes as the fulfillment of the temple. Now, how does he do this? Well, it's very clear that he sees himself as the fulfillment of the temple, John 2. You think of it when he's dealing with the religious leaders. He'll say, "Destroy this temple in three days and I will rebuild it." And they say, well, you know, "How is this possible? How can you build this temple in three days?" And John adds that sort of parentheses there, well, "After his resurrection we understood that he was referring to himself." So, Jesus sees himself as the new temple, as the fulfillment of the temple. It's important to realize that the temple in the Old Testament is really the meeting place between God and his people. You think of that "Holy of Holies" where even though God is all-present, he uniquely dwells with his people. It's the place where sacrifice would take place. It's where the priest would go into the presence representing the people. All of that symbolized God's presence with his people, the means of atonement, the means of provision by which he could be their God and they could be his people. Jesus as the fulfillment of this is the one who in his very person, and in his very work is the one who is the mediator. He is our priest. He is the one who brings God's presence to pass. He is into very self, Emmanuel, God with us. He is the fulfillment of the temple in that he is the one who brings what it points forward to, to its end. He brings the sacrifices to an end. He now opens up access. You think of the New Testament, the new covenant reality that we have direct access, quite contrast with the Old Testament people of God where they could only, through one priest once a year have access. He is now the one who is the mediator; he gives us access to the Father. Through him, we now can come directly to God, and through him, we then by extension are temples where the Spirit of God dwells with us. We are now in intimate relationship. The barriers are removed. So he is the fulfillment of the temple in that he is the one to which the temple pointed.

Dr. Greg Perry

In John's gospel, in chapter 2, Jesus talks about his body as the temple of God. And we see that for several reasons. One, it's a particular emphasis in John's gospel to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of all of the Jewish festivals, of these particular symbols that are so important from the Old Testament like the brazen serpent for

example, manna from heaven in chapter 6, the bread of life. So we see John portraying Jesus as the fulfillment of these aspects of Jewish worship and of Israel's Scriptures. But also there's a particular important relationship between Messiah and temple in Jewish thought. And one of the things that the Messiah would do would be to come and to fulfill the function of the temple. As David helped to build the temple, the Son of David would also fulfill the function of the temple. And we would see the restoration of what the enemies of God's people had destroyed, he would fulfill. So, Jesus is saying that the temple's going to be destroyed, that's an act of judgment against God's people, but also it's going to be rebuilt. Not the physical temple, but "my body is going to be raised up." And so that important relationship between temple and Messiah is fulfilled in Jesus. And the power and presence of God with his people is no longer to be understood just in a physical place, but in the physical person of Jesus the Son of God. So these imagery from the Old Testament is so important for understanding John's Christology and we see that in Jesus' reference to his body as the temple.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat

The temple in the Old Testament was God's special presence among his people. It was lifted; it was raised in the community; it was life in the midst of death; it was the Garden of Eden in the midst of a fallen world. And there's a sense in which, as Jonah learned the hard way, that God is everywhere. He's omnipresent; he can't be avoided. But there's another sense from an Old Testament and a New Testament perspective, that God is specially present in particular places, and the temple was God's special presence on earth; it was the way in which he encountered his people. Again, to use language that's familiar in our tradition: the temple is God's sacramental presence, a physical reality that exhibits God's presence among his people. So, when the New Testament begins to pick up on this theme — in John 1, for example, Jesus "tabernacles" among his people — he is the actual presence in the temple of God, there for his people. It's his salvific presence, his life-giving presence. And then you also have that kind of enigmatic, cryptic statement that Jesus says when he passes by the temple, and he says, "Tear this temple down, and in three days I'll build it up again." And they laughed at Jesus because they knew the second took years to construct under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah and subsequent generations, but they didn't know that Jesus was talking about himself. He's the temple. He is God's presence among his people. And that presence among his people is our salvation. It's our redemption. He is God's temple.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

John's gospel indicates that Jesus fulfilled the function of the temple. In the Old Testament, the holy temple was the place where God could be with his people, and where the people of God could worship him and be near to him. So, in John 4, in the discussion about the place of worship, the Jewish people said that the proper place was the temple. But Jesus has now brought this temple into a perfect state. He has become the mediator through whom human beings can approach God. Only by relying on Jesus Christ can we be with God. Jesus died for us and completed our salvation, so that we can receive the true life that he gives. Because of Christ, we are

allowed to be with God and to live in him. In this way, Jesus has replaced or completed the function typified by the Old Testament temple.

Question 10:

What might the term “Word of God” have meant to John’s original audience?

One of the most distinctive aspects of John’s gospel is that it begins by calling Jesus the “Word of God.” The meaning of the Greek term *logos*, which we translate “word,” is debated by theologians. Often, the meaning they attribute to it reflects their understanding of the ethnicity and background of John’s original audience. What might the term “Word of God” have meant to John’s original audience?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The Gospel of John begins with a prologue, and if we ask, “Why is Jesus called the Word of God?” This comes from the old Jewish wisdom literature, really. What we’re being told in Proverbs 8 and Proverbs 9 and later Jewish wisdom literature, like the Wisdom of Solomon, is that this personified wisdom person was there with God helping in the act of creation. And so what’s happened is that a personification in Proverbs now becomes a person in John 1, and Jesus is called this Word or wisdom of God that was with God in the beginning and took on flesh and dwelt amongst us.

Rev. Thad James, Jr.

“*Logos*” was a very significant and important word, and we can go back to the Greek philosophers, Heraclitus who used the word “*logos*” to mean the reasoning, that which kind of held things together. And then we can talk about the stoics who also used the word “logic.” To the stoics, they knew something was accountable for creation, again, that started all that exists out here. And even for Aristotle, “the *logos*” was that grand intelligence that held the world together. So now, when John says, “In the beginning was the Word,” or in the beginning was the *Logos*, he’s speaking directly to an audience that valued intelligence, that valued knowledge, and to tell them that this knowledge, this intelligence that, you know, created the world and held it together — this which you’re taking about, this *Logos*, is Jesus, that he is the Christ, this person that here walked amongst you. So he was presenting it to a specific audience for a specific purpose, for them to understand in their own intelligence and their own knowledge that this which they were talking about for ages is Jesus the Christ.

Dr. Steven Cowan

John begins his gospel with this very interesting verse: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The word that is translated “Word” there is the Greek word *logos*. And there is a lot of discussion over the background to this term. I believe that there probably are a multifaceted dimension, or dimensions, to John’s use of this term *logos*. There is very likely a connection to earlier Jewish writings, like from the Jewish philosopher Philo, as well

as other intertestamental Jewish writings that connect the term *logos* to the personification of wisdom, in the book of Proverbs, for example, where wisdom is portrayed as a person that speaks and does things. And there may be some connection with the *logos* there. But even beyond that, and maybe even more directly, there is almost certainly a connection of this term “*logos*” to stoic philosophy that was around during the time that John wrote his gospel. You may recall from the book of Acts that the apostle Paul spoke to stoic and epicurean philosophers on Mars Hill in Acts 17. The stoics believed in this concept called “the *logos*.” They actually used that same Greek word. And for the stoics, “the *logos*” was a rational principle, this impersonal principle that governed the universe. It was kind of like a natural law that made things work in an orderly way and helped explain why the flowers grow, and the rain falls, and why rocks go to the ground when you let go of them, and things like that. So “the *logos*” was this rational principle that governed the universe and helped make sense out of the fact that it worked in a regular and orderly way. And I think that at least part of what John is doing there is he’s trying to connect Christ and Jesus to this stoic concept in a very interesting way. And so he begins his gospel by saying, “In the beginning was the *Logos*.” And the Greek readers of this book would have said, “Okay, yeah, I believe that already.” But then John says, “I know you believe that already, but let me tell you something you don’t know — and the *Logos* became flesh and dwelt among us.” So I think that is at least part of what John is up to with the use of that term.

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, John uses the word “*logos*,” translated “word,” to speak about the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. And there’s been a lot of speculation about why John would use a word that had such a strong association with Greek philosophical thinking. And certainly in Greek philosophy the word *logos* meant reason, and there is a sense in which Jesus is the most reasonable person you could ever expect to meet. But I think it’s also fair to say that the idea of the “word of the Lord” is a very dominant theme in the Old Testament, and Jesus comes among us as God incarnate, God, the Word made flesh, and reveals to us what God is like, both in deed and in action, and therefore, I think that John sees the word *logos* as being very pregnant with meaning, not only for those from a more Gentile background, but also of course, for Jews who had a very strong idea of God as being the Word, and standing by his word and acting through his word.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

The Greek word “*logos*” appears in the prologue of John’s gospel. I believe that John picked this word because of its rich meaning. On one hand, in the Greek context, *logos* caused people to think of the origin of the universe. It’s connected with creation and communication. At the same time, the Old Testament was already speaking of God’s word in the same way as *logos*. So when those familiar with the background of Jewish Scripture saw the word “*logos*,” they naturally would have thought of how God created and maintained the world by his word, and how he brought salvation to people through his word.

Dr. Peter Walker

John's description of Jesus as God's Word in his opening prologue, his opening chapter, is one of the most fascinating things in the gospel. And why does he do it? Well, it's partly because in the Old Testament God's Word was a way in which the writers referred to the way in which God was present with his people. And God was transcendent and distant in one sense, but this God, this God of Israel, was someone who wanted to be close to his people, and he comes close to them by his Word, which he speaks and he becomes knowable. So one of the reasons he's doing it is to say that just as God made himself real in the Old Testament through speaking his word, so he's ... now he's done it through Jesus. Another sense which scholars often talk about is, yes, even the pagan world, "the word" was used as an idea of talking about the rational principle at the heart of the universe. And so, in one sense, John is saying, yes, Jesus is the one in whom the whole world hangs together and finds its coherence; he is its rational principle.

Question 11:

How might our understanding of Jesus as the Word of God influence our interpretation of John's gospel?

In the prologue to his gospel, John called Jesus the "Word" of God four times in just a few short verses. John clearly wanted his readers to have this idea in mind as they read his book. But why? How might our understanding of Jesus as the Word of God influence our interpretation of John's gospel?

Dr. John McKinley

In John's gospel, he introduces the readers to Jesus with a prologue, first 18 verses, where he says, "Jesus is the Word." "The Word was with God." "The Word was God". He's got multiple reasons why he is doing this. It functions for John's purposes to set up this prologue as kind of like a lens — that we're supposed to look through this to see everything Jesus says and does. And John has lots of statements from Jesus. We're supposed to understand even though this is somebody who's going to get killed, even though this is a man, this is actually God. And so, to call Jesus the Word of God is a way of very quickly and in context to the Old Testament, identify Jesus as a divine person, that he is a divine associate; he is fully God himself. John is also in that, saying, "In the beginning was the Word." He is saying that in Jesus you have a new creation taking place. And so the God who was creating in the beginning and who creates by word and Spirit, that God is now bringing about a new creation, and the Word is now here, and he's enacting that in his life. So, with calling Jesus the Word of God, John is also saying he is the Son of God, he is the divine agent, and he is the One who brings life, and then by the time we get to John 3, he is bringing about a new birth, and it's a whole new layout of humanity and creation all contained in that concept of the Word of God by which he creates. Now it's possible that John is also thinking in terms of his Greek audience which of thought of the word, of "the *logos*," as the principal of rationality, or the mind of God, never a person, though. If that is true, John is doing something that never took place in Greek thought, where he is

saying the Word is a person. And he says, “The Word became flesh,” and now this is someone that you have to deal with, and it’s God in our midst, in human reality. John, if he’s doing anything evangelistic, it is just driving to the same point that this is God, you have to deal with it. And that is reaching to John 20:28, where John wants us to have seen Jesus as God, speaking God’s word to us. We can trust it because he is the Word of God. Now you need to bow and make the confession Thomas does, that you are, “My Lord and my God!”

Question 12:

Has the church always affirmed the full divinity of Christ?

Some false religions, like Islam, deny that Jesus is God incarnate. And throughout history various Christian heretics have made similar mistakes. The Jehovah’s Witness cult even uses the prologue of John’s gospel to try to refute the view that Jesus is fully God. But has the church ever fallen into this error? Or has the church always affirmed the full divinity of Christ?

Dr. John Frame

The doctrine of the deity of Christ became very important even during Jesus earthly lifetime. He was called “Lord,” and I believe very often that that word “Lord” was not just a term of general respect, but it recalled the fact that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was called Lord as the head of the covenant. And so Jesus was very much considered God by those disciples who were discerning. And of course in John 1:1 we read, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” So at Jesus very incarnation he was God. Right at his birth, he was God. Now in the early church this was generally accepted. There were some like the Ebionites and later on the Arians who did not believe in Jesus’ full deity, but the biggest problem in the early church was the acceptance of his full humanity. There were people who thought that Jesus had not come in the flesh, as John puts it, and that means Jesus did not become a full man, or a true man, and that was the view of the Gnostic sects as we call them. This particular version of it was called Docetism, but it comes from the idea that the body is bad, that the material world is bad and only the spirit world is really worthy of God. And they thought that it would be inappropriate for Jesus to take on a human body, and so there was a lot of argument about the true humanity of Christ. The Docetists, the Gnostics, in the early part of the church, but eventually, of course, those groups were considered heretical and not given the right to participate in the teaching of the church. And so the early church was quite convinced right from the beginning by the teaching of Jesus, by the teaching of the apostles, by the resurrection by which God honors the work of Jesus, that Jesus is fully God as well as fully man.

Question 13:**Why did John refer to Jesus' miracles as "signs"?**

Jesus performed many miracles throughout his earthly ministry. He healed people, fed multitudes, exercised power over creation itself, and even raised the dead. But in John 20:30, John referred to these incredible works not just as "miracles," but as "miraculous signs." Why did John refer to Jesus' miracles as "signs"?

Dr. Dan Doriani

Jesus miracles are called signs in the Gospel of John because they are signs. Signs point beyond themselves and one of the traits of the ministry of Jesus and his miracles is that people sometimes stared at, shall we say, they stared at his finger instead of where his finger was pointing. So Jesus would feed people — fed 5,000, fed 4,000 — and people would say, "We liked that. Would you please make some more bread for us?" And Jesus would say, "I know you liked it. I was trying to get your attention. Please don't stare at the finger. It's pointing somewhere." Apparently one of the tests of intelligence of dogs is this: stupid dogs, when you point, will stare at your finger, and intelligent dogs will follow where the finger goes. Sad truth of the matter is, sometimes dogs are smarter than people. The people stared at Jesus' signs, and he said, "No, no. I'm pointing you to life. I'm pointing you to bread. I'm pointing you to light." Some understood it. Some didn't. But a sign is always something that points beyond itself.

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

When recording the miracles of Jesus, John's gospel uses the special term "signs." This is difficult to translate clearly into English or Chinese, but those reading the gospel in the original language would know that this term actually appears in the other gospels as well. But it appears far more consistently in John. John writes about Jesus' miracles in ways that are designed to help his readers understand their significance. He's not focusing on the miracles themselves, nor on the power that these miracles reflect, but on the fact that the miracles point to Jesus' divine identity. That's why he uses this term.

Question 14:**In John's gospel, what is belief?**

We can't read much of the Gospel of John without encountering John's emphasis on faith. In fact, one of John's major concerns in his gospel was that his readers believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And because of this, his gospel focuses a lot on belief. But what does faith look like? In John's gospel, what is belief?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Clearly the idea of belief is very important for John's gospel in that he actually says as his own summary of why he's written that he's recorded these things so that we may believe and that by believing have faith in the Son. And belief is essentially trust;

it's confidence that Jesus is who he said he was and that Jesus did what he said he was going to do. And John thinks that by trusting Jesus, by taking him at his word, we will enjoy spiritual life and enjoy all that he promises there, and that belief is not something that is sort of, is an "airy fairy" thing, but it's a very concrete thing. It's actually examining the evidence and putting your confidence in that which is said and that which is done. And that is what John wants his readers to do as a result of his testimony to all that Jesus came and said and did.

Rev. Thad James, Jr.

In the Gospel of John, when he talks about belief and what he's expecting us to believe... First, when we say belief, we're talking about something that we would have confidence in, that we would have assurance in, something that is trustworthy, that I can bank on. So when we talk about, in the Gospels about belief, what John is wanting us to do is to have that trust and that faith and that confidence in Jesus, in Jesus as our Savior, in Jesus as our Lord, and that we can have that confidence that what John says and what Jesus says is true, and that we will have eternal life and our sanctification through the work of Jesus Christ.

Question 15:

How did John describe eternal life?

John wanted his readers to understand that by believing in Jesus, they would have eternal life. Of course, when most people hear the term "eternal life," they tend to think about everlasting life after death. But is that what John meant? How did John describe eternal life?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Eternal life is a concept that John seems to love talking about. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life," life everlasting. And life is not so much a quantity, but is a quality in John's gospel. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it in all its fullness, in all its abundance." So, for sure, the confidence a believer has is that when they die they will spend eternity with God, but John seems to also speak about it as being a quality — life that we can enjoy because we know the one who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life," life of being reborn again, able to live the life that we should do in right relationship with God. So it's something that is a great celebratory note in John's gospel. Eternal life is what Jesus came to give us and it begins even now.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

Eternal life, according to the gospel, is not necessarily defined. It is more or less, I guess, described. And particularly in John 17:3 where Christ states, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." And what you have stated there is, one, an experiential desire to know God,

and then secondly to share in fellowship with the Lord through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. John Frame

Eternal existence is something that both the righteous and the wicked have, both faithful and unfaithful people have, throughout time. The wicked are going to spend their eternal life in judgment and suffering. The righteous will spend their everlasting existence in fellowship with God. But eternal life has a different connotation from eternal existence. Eternal life — “life” is a value term. When Adam was created, God breathed into him the breath of life, which is not only existence. I mean, he had existence as a lifeless body before that, but he entered into a kind of fellowship with God, and life in Scripture is always a value term. Life is the opposite of death. Death is the wages of sin. Life is the gift of God, the grace of God, taking us out of sin and giving us personal relationship with him and friendship. So that’s the eternal life that’s going to continue. It begins here on earth when a person comes to faith in Christ. Jesus says that those who believe in him have everlasting life right now, and so as we enter into our relationship with Jesus as our Lord and as our Savior and as our friend, that is eternal life, and we’re going to see that grow and expand and deepen throughout all the ages of time, and that’s the wonderful promise of the gospel.

Question 16:

Why did John connect love for God with obedience to God?

John’s major concern in his gospel was to convince readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and to encourage them to follow Jesus faithfully. And he made it clear that faithfully following Jesus includes both love for God and obedience to his law. But how are these things related? Why did John connect love for God with obedience to God?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Right at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is obedience. Jesus said, “If you love me you will obey my commandments.” When we see God for who he is, we agree with him, and when he tells us to do something, of course we believe he’s right. At the heart of every sin is questioning the very character of God, assuming we know better than he does about the things in this world.

Dr. J. I. Packer

If a person loves someone else that person will respond to the one whom he or she loves. That person will take note of what it is that the loved one likes and dislikes, and they will make it their business to provide for the other one’s pleasure the things that the loved one likes and to avoid the things that the loved one dislikes and finds painful. It’s just the same in our relationship to the Lord Jesus, our Savior, whose disciples we are, and to his Father from whom come the laws that uh, testify to what can be a source of pleasure to God and what is bound to be a source of displeasure.

And so love to the Father and the Son necessarily entails trying to please them. And you please them by doing what they ask for, and that's obedience to the teaching that they give as to how one lives a holy life. So in the New Testament, Paul says in a number of places that uh, you labor to please God, and that's one of the signs that you love him. And in 1 Thessalonians he tells folk who are already pleasing God, do it more and more because that's the way to advance in love. And that means in godliness, and that means in fellowship with the Father and the Son, which after all, is going to be quite literally our eternal life. It starts here; it goes on forever in glory. But pleasing the Father and the Son is, if I may put it this way, the name of the game from start to finish, except that there isn't any finish. This goes on forever.

Dr. Riad Kassis

I think love to God and obedience to God should come together, because love is not just some kind of emotional feelings, but it is something that should be seen in our actions. So, when I say that I love my wife I should be ready to obey her, and at the same time my wife should be ready to obey me if she loves me. And I think in our relationship with God, it is not enough to say that we love God or we worship him, but it is very significant that we should show this love in our practical daily life, from Monday to Saturday, even on Sunday.

Dr. John Oswalt

One of the problems in the church is a tendency to divide love and obedience. Part of the reason for that is a faulty understanding of love. We have made love a sentimental feeling. I often say, a squishy feeling in the pit of your stomach. But in fact, that's biology, that's not love. The Bible understands love as choosing the best for another at whatever cost to yourself. So then, in many ways love will be in the absence of pleasant feelings. It is instead a choice. And so, for instance, in the letter of 1 John, John very clearly relates belief and love and obedience. So, I am choosing out of an active attachment to God to do what pleases him. I am choosing to serve him, and I think sometimes our images get us into trouble. If we think of God exclusively as King, then we tend to think of obedience as that which is coerced. The King demands it, and if we don't do it, we will be punished. I certainly do not want in any sense to do away with the imagery of King. It's biblical. But I think we need to couple with that image, the image of Father, so that the Father requests that I do something; it's still obedience for me to do it, but I'm doing it out of that active attraction, that active choice to please him, to do what is best for him, and in the long run for myself.

In many ways, these two — love and obedience — are two poles. It's easy if I leave out love to obey simply out of a sense of duty and demand, and when that happens it's very easy for me to say, what's the minimum that I have to do to get by? I sometimes have students like that. "Prof, what's the minimum that I have to do to pass this course?" On the other hand, if we are only motivated by this faulty understanding of love, this sentimental feeling, then there's a tendency to think, oh well, it doesn't really matter what I do. I feel good about God and God feels good about me. And ... tragedy. But if in fact these two are held together, then I am saying, "Oh, God" — again, that student you die for — "I really want to learn this subject. Is

there more work I can do?” It’s an attraction that draws me in, and so I am saying, Oh God, I want to please you; I want to be like you; I want to do what you want because of my choice. By the same token, because I love him, I am then motivated to do the best and not the least.

Dr. Steve Harper

In the Bible there is an interesting connection, between obedience and love. Now we all know that there is some aspects of life where we obey, whether we love a person or not. But, the Bible is not satisfied for us to think of relationship with God that way. The Bible never separates obedience and love. And really, when you get down to it, we don’t either. We are most likely to obey the people that we love. The person that I obey the most in my life is my wife Jeanie, and it is because I love her, more than any other person in the world. So, obedience and love are always connected. We are not forced to obey; we long to obey those that we love. And the word “obedience” itself is fascinating, because it does not mean to go run out and do something. It means to listen. It comes from the Latin word “to listen.” And again, we listen to the people that we love, because we know that they care about us, we know that they have our best interest at heart. When they tell us to do something it is for the right reasons. And so, love and obedience are always working together, because what God wants more than anything else, is not just acts of service, but acts of service born out of love.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

There is in the Bible a very close connection between loving God and obeying God. I think the first thing that we have to clarify is that nearly loving God is not a fulfillment of the command to love God. There can be a duty oriented, obligatory drudgery that was never in mind when the Bible said, “If you love me,” or Christ said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” But if the love is there, if there is this voluntary self-giving, rooted in a delight in God, then the most natural and validating manifestation of that will be a profound, willing and ready obedience because it’s rooted in a desire to be pleasing to this God whom you love and delight in. It’s rooted in the trust that this “God’s way” is as reliable and for your good as his own character. This is why there is this vital link between obedience and love in the Bible.

Question 17:

Does Jesus’ Farewell Discourse apply to all Christians, or was it only intended for the apostles?

John’s gospel includes a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples just before he was arrested and crucified. This conversation is often called Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse.” But neither Jesus nor John explicitly explained whether this discourse was supposed to apply only to the disciples, or if it had the broader church in mind. Does Jesus’ Farewell Discourse apply to all Christians, or was it only intended for the apostles?

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

In chapters 13–16 of John’s gospel, there is a long section that explains that Jesus will see his disciples again after leaving them, dying, and then rising from the dead. So, some of this material is only applicable to the apostles. But there is quite a bit of additional content that can be applied to Christians today. For example, in chapter 17, Jesus prayed not only for the disciples that followed him at that time, but also for those that would believe in him in the future. So, I believe that when Jesus was giving his farewell discourse, his mind was already on those who would follow him in the future, including today’s Christians.

Dr. James Hamilton

Following the Farewell Discourse, we see Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, and in that prayer, John, who’s writing for the benefit of Christians, he presents Jesus praying not only for his disciples but also for those who will believe on the basis of the disciples’ testimony. And so, when John presents Jesus praying this way, and when John writes this gospel for the benefit of believers and so that people will believe, I think we have good grounds for concluding that the statements that Jesus makes in the Farewell Discourse are not to be limited in application to the apostles. There may be on a case-by-case basis particularly full meanings for the apostles that may have scaled back senses in which they apply for other believers, but God’s word is for all God’s people, and that includes the Farewell Discourse.

Question 18:**What was the main point of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer?**

At the end of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, John recorded Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, in which Jesus prayed for his disciples, and for everyone that would come to faith through them. What was the main point of Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer?

Dr. Steve Harper

When Jesus prays in John 17, it’s an extension and sort of a climax to the upper room discourse. Maybe he prayed in the upper room; maybe he was praying as they walked toward the Garden of Gethsemane. But it’s definitely the bridge between 14, 15, 16 and 18. And I see it as Jesus’ prayerful way of asking the Father to enable those apostles to overcome the world later after he’s raised from the dead. That’s what he says to them, “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” And he uses that phrase, uses the term “world,” 19 times in that prayer. So I think the main point of the High Priestly Prayer is it’s the prayerful request to the Father that God will so empower and indwell — John 15, “abide in me and I in you” — will so indwell those apostles that they’ll be able to overcome the world. Now, there are some clues in the prayer of how he hopes that they’ll do that. The first way is we overcome the world by glorifying God instead of glorifying the world. Whenever we live in a way that honors God and pleases God, we’ve overcome the world in one sense of the word. Another way that he prays for them is that they will keep the Word. He talks about how he has given them the Word. He’s been their teacher. He’s been their rabbi. He

has instructed them. Now he's praying that what's gotten into them will now become part of the way that they live. And what's interesting to me in that prayer is that at verse 9 the thing pivots into the apostles. But then when you get to verse 20, it's to those who will believe. So he's not just praying that the original twelve will overcome the world, he's praying that we'll overcome the world, too. And I think that's a great encouragement, that the same power that was available to those original apostles to do that is also available to us.

And as he works his way through that prayer about overcoming the world, he says several neat things, I think. One is if we do that, we'll experience joy. Like Stanley Jones used to say, "For this I was made." There'll just be that inner sense that I'm doing what I was put on the earth to do, and there's great joy in that. He says also that we'll dwell in unity, because when you see other, you know, believers doing that, you find a oneness in that prayer. And he prays for that. "I pray that they may be one, Father, even as we are one." There's a kind of an ecumenism that happens in this experience of living out our faith. We find other believers all around the world who are doing that same thing, and that's a wonderful thing. And then, of course, he prays that we'll live in love. But all of that is to point to, I think, the main idea, and that is that by doing these things, we'll be overcomers, we will overcome the world.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

The main point of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer from what my study has, I guess, revealed to me, is it represents his transition from his earthly ministry to his intercessory ministry. In Hebrews, the writer talks about, obviously Jesus interceding for us, being that he is our High Priestly Prayer. When you stop to look at the High Priestly Prayer, obviously it can be stated that is a summary or a synopsis of the entire, you know, Gospel of John, but when you look at it more closely, we can see that Jesus obviously is praying to the Father to be restored to his former glory. Secondly, he is praying that his disciples would be kept, and thirdly, he is also praying for those who would believe on him through their message. And so you can see the transition that is taking place. Having completed his earthly ministry, he now is preparing to obviously fulfill that role as the intercessor. And we know from Scripture that he ever lives to intercede for us, and he is seated at the Father's right hand as our High Priest, interceding to the Father.

Question 19:

Why was Jesus so willing to be crucified?

After his Farewell Discourse and final prayer, Jesus was arrested. But even though he knew he was going to be crucified, Jesus made no effort to avoid arrest. He allowed himself to be taken, beaten, and executed. Why was Jesus so willing to be crucified?

Rev. Mike Glodo

Why was Jesus so willing to be crucified? Well, John's gospel begins by telling us that the Word, Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, was in the beginning with the Father — that Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, was privy to the divine counsels that Father, Son and Holy Spirit had agreed to redeem fallen humanity. So Jesus had the counsels of heaven. He understood the mission from the divine perspective. He also understood the ultimate outcome, the ultimate victory. That was one reason. We also know that Jesus understood that he was to come to atone for the sins of the world. He understood the purpose of his crucifixion. As John the Baptist declared when he saw Jesus coming, "Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world." And so John's gospel tells us that "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son that whosoever would believe in him would not perish" but be saved. So Jesus understood the purpose of his atonement. As part of that, Jesus was the consummate, obedient human being. He says in John's gospel that my food is to do "the will him who sent me." So apart from his own feelings, apart from even the goal of his crucifixion, Jesus was perfectly and fully obedient to the Father.

And then ultimately, I think in John's gospel, you can look to chapter 12. There, Jesus says for the third time, the Son of Man must be lifted up. But there's a unique element added in chapter 12. He says, "When the Son of Man is lifted up, he will draw all men to him." And then he goes on to say in chapter 12 that, "then shall the ruler of this world be cast out." That Jesus, by his crucifixion, disarms Satan. That Jesus, by his crucifixion, broke the powers of this world that oppress, that enslave, that condemn, so that Satan no longer has any authority over us. Hebrews 2 tells us that Jesus destroyed the power of him who has the power of the fear of death, that is, the Devil. Colossians 1 tells us that Jesus put to shame all the authorities and powers. So Jesus, in his crucifixion, is diving into death itself to destroy death from within, because when he arose from the dead, he would signify that the death that permeates this world, not just that holds us in the grave, but that manifests itself in our fears and dysfunctions, in our sins against one another, in our securities, these things have been destroyed. Their power is no more. So that when we look at the cross, we not only see the payment for our sin, but we see the end of the reign of the ruler of this world and the beginning of the reign of the ruler of the world to come.

The Gospel of John is a testimony to the love and faithfulness of God. John himself said that he wrote his gospel so people would believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing, they would have life in his name. We have no greater hope than this. And John's gospel is a powerful witness to the truth of our salvation.

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