

# Road Trip: Journey Into the Bible

## Midweek Part 5: How to Read the New Testament Gospels and Acts

### I. What are the Gospels and Acts?

The Gospels and Acts are historical narratives that document the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as Jesus' continuing ministry through his Apostles and church as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The word 'gospel' means 'good news,' so the gospel accounts declare the good news about Jesus and in the books of Acts, the church evangelizes the world with the Good News.

Each gospel contains stories *about* Jesus and the teachings *of* Jesus. Within these gospels collectively, we find stories about Jesus' birth, his baptism by John the Baptist and his ministry in and around Israel. In his ministry, Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God, heals the sick, casts out devils, and performs other various miracles. Ultimately, Jesus' confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, come to a head and Jesus is crucified by the Romans for blasphemy. However, Jesus would rise from the dead three days later, showing himself as Israel's true Messiah, and God's Son from whom salvation comes.

There are four distinct gospels in our Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (written conservatively between AD 50-65 with John dating as late as AD 95)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are what are known as the '**Synoptic Gospels**' - because they contain similar material. The Gospel of John is distinct from the synoptics because much of the material found in John is unique to this gospel.

Each gospel seems to be written for a specific audience with a specific view of Jesus:

- **Matthew** is attributed to the Apostle Matthew and was written primarily for the Jews and has a very Jewish context. Jesus is seen as fulfilling Old Testament Messianic prophecies. The gospel of Matthew is presented as the continuation and the culmination of the Old Testament narrative of Israel as fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is seen as a new Moses, reconstituting Israel, and fulfilling the faithful role as 'God's son', a role in which Israel failed.
- **Mark** is attributed to John Mark, a close associate of the Apostle Peter and was written for a Roman audience. This gospel was probably the first gospel to be written. Mark is also the shortest gospel, packed full of action as Jesus goes about performing miracles and doing the mighty works of God. Jesus is seen as God's servant (by continually doing the will of the Father).
- **Luke** is attributed to Luke, a physician, as well as a friend and traveling companion to the Apostle Paul. Luke was written to a Greek audience and shows Jesus as the 'Son of Man' as he highlights the humanity of Jesus (through an extended birth narrative, as well as showing Jesus' human emotions and experiences). Luke, as well as Acts, were written to an individual named 'Theophilus'. Luke's aim was to write an orderly account of Jesus life based on eyewitness accounts (Luke 1:2).
- **John's Gospel** was written by the Apostle John and was the last gospel to be written. It seems to have no specific audience in mind, as the main point of the gospel is to get people to 'believe' in Jesus as the Son of God' so they can have eternal life. John's Gospel shares unique details and stories of Jesus' life not found in the other gospels.

**The book of Acts** is the sequel to Luke and begins with Jesus' commission to his disciples (Apostles), and the giving of the promised Holy Spirit, filling the apostles and church with supernatural power. As the church is birthed on Pentecost in Acts 2, we follow the narrative of the spreading of the Gospel in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and eventually spreading out to the 'ends of the earth'. We are also introduced to the Christian convert Saul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul) as he receives Christ and begins a series of missionary journeys.

## II. The Gospels and Jesus in Context

### 1. Israel and Judaism in Context

When it comes to the historical world that the gospel events are set in, within Israel and Judaism, we must realize that a lot has changed since the book of Malachi. A period of roughly 400 years has taken place. This time period is what Christians call the 'Intertestamental Period' and the Jews refer to it as the 'Second Temple Period'. During this time, significant changes took place in Israel and Judaism that are essential for understanding the context of the Gospels. Here are a few of those changes:

1. Political Changes
  - a. Persian Period – Jews were able to return to their homeland and rebuild their city and temple
  - b. Hellenistic Influence – the spreading of Greek culture, language, and ideas
  - c. Maccabean Revolt – A significant Jewish revolt against Hellenistic oppression and a time of Jewish independence
  - d. Roman Occupation – with Pompey's conquest in 63BC, Israel came under Roman rule with Herod the Great ruling as client king.
2. Religious Changes
  - a. Second Temple theology – gave way to a rise of a new breed of Jewish Scholars
  - b. Hellenistic influence – impacted the Jewish religion with the rise of Koine Greek, genres of literature such as epistles and apocalyptic writings, Greek philosophy influenced concepts such as the immortality of the soul, the nature of the afterlife, demonology, bodily resurrection, etc.
  - c. The rise of religious sects – such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes.
  - d. The shift from ancient Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism – the development of the above groups, as well as Rabbis, synagogues, set the tone with various interpretations of the Torah.
  - e. Heightened Messianic Hope – fueled various messianic figures and movements

### 2. Jesus' Ministry in Context

These books of the Bible begin the second major section of the Bible called The New Testament. However, it's important to remember that even though these four books are in the New Testament, the events in these gospels take place while Israel was still under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant era begins with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This often overlooked fact will help us to properly interpret and apply the message of the gospels, especially the words of Jesus.

There are two aspects of the work of Christ:

1. His work during his earthly ministry (his teaching and works/miracles) to Israel
2. His work of salvation through his death and resurrection for the whole world

While the gospels chronicle Jesus' earthly ministry and dealings with the Jewish people and his death and resurrection, it's the epistles that go on to explain the meaning of his death and resurrection and give us a clear doctrine of salvation. Jesus earthly ministry was centered on the Jewish people, while his salvation was universal and would fully include both Jews and Gentiles.

Jesus gave his life for the world, but his earthly ministry was almost exclusively to the Jews in Israel. Any dealings Jesus had with Gentiles during his ministry was often a sign to the unbelieving Jews.

If we're not careful in recognizing the distinction and differences between Jesus earthly ministry and Jesus' ministry of universal salvation then we will misread, misunderstand, and misapply some of what we read in the Gospels.

Notice some of the scriptures about Jesus' earthly ministry:

- Matthew 10:5-6 *"Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. (In sending out the twelve)*
- Matthew 15:24 *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."* (In responding to a Canaanite woman)

- John 1:11 *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*
- Galatians 4:4-5 *But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law..."*

Here's the contextual premise to view the ministry of Jesus from: ***Jesus came specifically to God's Covenant people Israel at the end of the Old Covenant age, in order that Israel would, through repentance, receive their Messiah as he went about inaugurating the Kingdom of God and establishing a New Covenant.*** In other words, Jesus' earthly ministry was 'Covenantal' in nature toward Israel.

So, we must be mindful, even when reading the Gospels and Jesus' words that we put them in proper context and pay attention to the audience he was speaking to.

### III. Themes in the Gospels and Acts

- Jesus as Israel's Messiah (Son of David, Lord, Christ)
- Jesus as the Son of God (and the preexisting Word)
- Israel as God's Covenant People
- The Inauguration of the Kingdom of God
- Jesus' power over demons and Satan
- Jesus' teaching in discourses and parables
- Jesus' Confrontations with the Pharisees
- Jesus' Death and Resurrection
- The Birth of the Church
- The Giving and Power of the Holy Spirit
- The Fulfilling of God's Promises to Israel
- The Gentile Mission, Expansion, and Inclusion
- The Powerful Advance of the Gospel

### IV. The Genre of the Gospels and Acts

The Gospel and Acts can be described as "**Theological Narrative**", with the Gospels being aptly described as "theological biographies." They are biographical, and record a factual historical account of Jesus' life, but they are not mere biographies. They are biographies that are also meant to be theological, to guide people in forming an accurate theological view of Jesus and God.

Acts is primarily a historical account of the Apostles ministry after Jesus' resurrection. While historical, Acts provides a strong theological purpose showing the powerful working of the Holy Spirit and the expansion of God's kingdom from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Also within the Gospels we also have the literary genre of **parables**. Jesus is known for his teaching of parables. These include parables of the *kingdom*, parables of *stewardship*, parables of *love* and *forgiveness*, and parables of *judgment* and *accountability*. Parables have been described as a simple story with a spiritual meaning behind it. While this is generally true, parables function as so much more.

Parables often serve as a means of calling forth a response from the hearers, to get them to think and then realize the parable is about them. Interpreting a parable is sometimes like interpreting a joke – a good joke will draw you in with the story and then hit you with the punch line. Also, to properly interpret parables, we must pay attention to the audience Jesus was speaking to.

Also within Jesus' teaching, other than parables, we see Jesus using other literary forms such as hyperbole (Matt 5:29-30), similes and metaphors (Matt. 10:16, 5:13), poetry (Luke 6:27-28), questions (Matt. 17:25), irony (Matt. 16:2-3), and woe oracles (Matt. 23).

## V. Principles on How to Interpret and Apply the Gospels and Acts

1. Read the narratives in context asking the proper 'who, what when where' questions.
2. Interpret each individual narrative within the purpose of the entire book.
3. Note how John's gospel differs from the Synoptic Gospels. John's gospel is centered around 'signs' and discourses that highlight Jesus' identity and is more loosely structured chronologically than the Synoptics.
4. The Gospels are about Jesus, so keep the focus on Jesus and what he's doing within the narratives.
5. Pay special attention to the themes, titles, and phrases that may be repeated throughout a gospel (for example the theme of 'belief' in John's gospel).
6. See the connection between the gospels and the Old Testament. (How is Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament, what types and shadows are there of Jesus, how do the gospels use the Old Testament in quotes and allusions?)
7. Compare parallel accounts in the other gospels and see how they complement and supplement each other.
8. Consider the audience relevance when reading/interpreting the sermons, parables, and words of Jesus. Remember, Jesus was often times speaking to a specific Jewish audience.
9. See the importance of Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God and consider the role that the Kingdom of God has in our world today.
10. Look for how Jesus patterns a relationship with the Father that we can model.
11. Keep an eye on the role that the Holy Spirit plays in the life of Jesus, the Apostles, and the church in the Gospels and Acts.
12. Remember that Acts tells us *what happened* in the early church, not necessarily what *should happen* for all churches for all time. Historical literature is more descriptive than it is prescriptive.