

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

First Baptist Church Dandridge – Fall 2024

Dr. Justin Terrell

justin@fbcdandridge.org

Introduction to the Gospels

1. The Gospels

- a. **The Story Continues:** The Bible contains numerous books, characters, events, and teachings, but it ultimately tells the story of redemptive history. The overall message (metanarrative) of Scripture is the story of how God redeems a sinful people for himself through the person and work of his Son. Some have outlined this metanarrative with the words: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation (CFRC). The Old Testament tells the story of creation, fall, and God's promise to redeem his people by sending the Messiah, which is revealed by way of historical developments, events, prophecies, types, and other literary devices. Therefore, the entire Old Testament points toward the person and work of the Messiah, and why sinful humans need him in order to be saved from God's judgment. However, as the Old Testament concludes (2 Chronicles, Malachi), the Messiah still hasn't appeared. But after 400 years of God's silence, the Lord speaks through the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, where he looks upon Jesus of Nazareth in first century Israel and declares, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). Therefore, the ancient story continues with the arrival of Jesus, and the story of his saving work is told through the four Gospels.
- b. **What are the Gospels?** The word "gospel" is a translation of the Greek word "euangelion" (εὐαγγέλιον) which simply means, "good news." In ancient times, when a distant battle was won, a messenger would sprint back to town letting the people know the "good news" that a foreign threat had been defeated and everyone was safe. Such good news brought people incredible relief and security. We see this language used in Isaiah 52:7, "*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'*" Therefore, the New Testament Gospels are evangelistic works that tell the "good news" of Jesus' life and ministry as the Savior of the world. Mark states this truth in 1:1, "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*"
- c. **What is a Gospel?** As already stated, a "gospel" is the telling of good news. However, when it comes to the New Testament Gospels, there are important distinctions that need to be made about this type of literature. For one, the Gospels are not biographies or historical works, even though they do contain biographical and historical elements of Jesus' life and ministry. In general, historical works or biographies tell a rather complete story of a person's life. For example, a biography of Abraham Lincoln would include everything we know about his

ancestors, his birth and childhood, his education and work experience, his ascension through the political ranks to the presidency, his decisions and actions as president, the circumstances surrounding his death, and the future impact of his legacy. However, in contrast, the purpose of a gospel is not to give every detail about a person's life, but to provide particular pieces of evidence to persuade people in a certain direction. Richard Burridge notes, "The point of this type of literature is to inform the readers of a leader and invite the readers to believe that message" (Beale, 33). Therefore, this is the reason why very little is mentioned about Jesus' childhood or home life. The bulk of the Gospels contain information about Jesus' divine birth, his ministry during the final three years of his life, and his sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension. Donald Guthrie states, "All of the evangelists devote a considerable part of their books to the last week of Jesus' life...evidently it was the passion of Jesus which dominated their purpose...everything pointed ahead to the climax of the death and resurrection of Jesus...this formed the spearhead of early Christian preaching" (Guthrie, 21). The focus of the writers is to persuade readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the only Savior of the World, and to trust him through faith.

- **John 20:30-31; 21:25** – *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.... Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."*

d. **Why Four Gospels?** Some people have wondered why we have four different accounts of Jesus' life when it would seem that only one would suffice. The answers are many, but there are theological, cultural, and apologetic reasons for multiple gospels. Simply said, God inspired the authors to record the specific details of Jesus' life and ministry in ways that connected with different audiences and situations.

- **Theological and Cultural:** Matthew wrote primarily to a Jewish audience, which is why he begins with a genealogy showing how Jesus is a descendent of David and Abraham. Likewise, Luke wrote his gospel to a Gentile audience, which is why he situates events in the context of secular history, emphasizes the universal aspects of salvation, and begins his gospel with a genealogy rooted in Adam. On the other hand, John was inspired to write his gospel in light of gnostic heresies, which is why he placed such a focus on Jesus' incarnate nature as fully God and fully man.
- **Apologetic:** We also find apologetic value in having different gospels, especially when we notice that some details and stories are slightly different in each one. For example, in the story of the Gadarene demoniac, Matthew records that Jesus encountered "two demon-possessed men" (Matt. 8:28), while Mark only records one "man with an unclean spirit" (Mark 5:1). Did either Matthew or Mark make a mistake? No. Matthew records two men because there were two. Mark doesn't say there was only one, but simply records the one that Jesus interacted with. But why are differences like this important? If the gospel writers

worked together to craft a fictitious narrative about Jesus, it's most likely that all of the stories would be identical. However, with slight differences (i.e., "dissimilarity"), although no contradictions (i.e., "coherence"), it strengthens the authenticity of the Gospel accounts, showing that the writers recorded the events from different perspectives and with theological topics in mind.

- e. **Are the Gospels Accurate?** Over the years, particularly since the 19th century, secular scholars and skeptics have tried to demonstrate that what we know about Jesus from the Gospels isn't accurate at best and fictitious at worst. Some have denied that Jesus of Nazareth ever existed as a real person. Others have acknowledged that Jesus was a real person in the first century, but deny that the Jesus recorded in the Gospels was the real historical Jesus (e.g., The Jesus Seminar). In other words, the Gospel writers had a theological agenda in mind, so they added components to Jesus' life that made him appear to be divine, miraculous, authoritative, etc. So, how do we know that the material contained in the Gospels can be trusted?
- **Sources:** The Gospel writers were either eye-witnesses of Jesus or were closely connected to eye-witnesses of Jesus. In the prologue of Luke's Gospel, he states, *"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught"* (Luke 1:1-4). Therefore, while Luke wasn't one of the twelve disciples, he was connected with many who were, along with family, friends, neighbors, political leaders, etc. He carefully considered everything they reported and put together his Gospel account. It's been noted that as a first century physician, Luke wrote with "surgical precision."
 - **Dates:** Matthew, Mark, and Luke were mainly written in the AD 50-60's, and John around AD 80-90. However, these dates appear to be some 25+ years after Jesus was raised from the dead. If the Gospels are real, why were they not written within a matter of months? According to Guthrie, the "delay was caused by widespread belief in the imminence of the Parousia, or return of Christ, which if taken seriously would clearly discourage any written records" (22). Therefore, a delay in the written records of Jesus' life and ministry shows that the early church truly believed everything was true. Otherwise, someone trying to deceive might have written fictitious propaganda right away.
 - **Embarrassing Details:** The Gospel writers included embarrassing details about themselves or other apostles. For example, the disciples are reported to be disobedient, full of doubts, caught sleeping or hiding in crucial moments, being rebuked or corrected by Jesus, etc. As Geisler notes, the "principle of embarrassment" is the tendency for authors to remove material that makes them look bad. However, in the Gospels, we see the good, bad, and ugly of those who told the story. We are also given embarrassing details about Jesus. For example, Jesus is accused of being out of his mind, he is deserted by his followers, he is

accused of blasphemy and demon possession, and he is arrested and crucified. These are not details to include if one is trying to create a superhero account of a savior.

- **Demanding Teachings:** The Gospel writers include teachings that are difficult and demanding. For example, Jesus teaches strictly about lust, anger, divorce, money, loving enemies, dying to self, honoring the emperor, etc. Such hard teachings would not be appealing to most audiences, and would be avoided by someone creating a story.
- **Unpopular Details:** The Gospel writers describe things that were either unpopular or culturally forbidden in the first century. For example, Joseph or Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, burying Jesus in his own tomb; the first witnesses of the resurrection were women, who couldn't testify in court; the conversion of Jewish priests; the Jews' attempts to explain away the empty tomb; etc. Such details would not have been popular in the first century.
- **Historical People:** The Gospel writers include details about Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, etc.
- **Personal Sacrifice:** Each of the Gospel writers were followers of Jesus, which meant that they abandoned their long-standing beliefs and practices, adopted new ones, and didn't deny their testimony under persecution or death. No one dies for something they know not to be true.
- **Conversion:** Throughout the centuries since Jesus ascended to heaven, the gospel has led countless people to faith in Christ. Like the rest of Scripture, there is great spiritual power in the accounts of the Gospels. The power contained in these books is also an evidence of authenticity.

2. The Synoptic Gospels

- a. **Definition:** In the 18th century, a German Bible scholar named J.J. Griesbach coined the phrase, "Synoptic Gospels" based on the Greek word "synopsis," which means "seeing together." He chose this word to describe the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, because there are incredible similarities in how they present the life and ministry of Jesus. As D.A. Carson notes, "These similarities, which involve structure, content, and tone, are evident even to the casual reader. They serve not only to bind the first three gospels together but also to separate them from the Gospel of John" (Carson, 77).