

## *Introduction to the Gospels*

Having introduced the New Testament, let's now briefly consider some basic things about "the Gospels."

The English word *Gospel* comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *godspell* and is made up of *god* (God) and *spell* (a story). *Gospel*, then, means either *God-story* or *good story*. This last meaning lines up with the Greek word for which *gospel* is commonly translated. Used over 70 times in the New Testament, *gospel* always refers to the message, the good news of what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ. Thus, we should understand *the Gospels* as referring to "the good news about Jesus Christ."

Why were the Gospels written? It's common to think of the Gospels as biographies of Jesus, but that's not accurate. Biographies give a lot of information about someone's life, but the Gospels are very selective as to what they tell about Jesus. Being guided by the Holy Spirit, the Gospel writers carefully chose what they wrote about Jesus. They had a goal or purpose in why they were writing.

The Gospel writers had at least three motives or goals for these accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. First, they wanted to help the missionary work of the church, showing who Jesus was so that others would trust in Him. Second, they helped the church defend their beliefs, providing answers to questions about who Jesus was and what He did. Third, the Gospel writers wanted to help the church teach believers about their Savior and strengthen their faith in Him.

Why are there *four* Gospels? It is common—and probably correct—to recognize that because each gospel writer had a specific purpose in writing he also had specific people he was writing to. Thus the gospel writers tell about Christ in a way best suited to whom they were writing to. Matthew wrote to Jews showing Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Jewish King. Mark wrote to Romans, portraying Jesus as the tireless Servant of the Lord. Luke wrote to Greeks, depicting Jesus as the Son of Man who came to rescue the lost. John's account is addressed to all men, proving that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who alone can provide eternal life.

The ultimate reason, however, why there are four gospels is inspiration—the Holy Spirit moved these writers to produce written records of Jesus, *guiding* and *protecting* them so that they wrote exactly and accurately the truth about Jesus Christ.

Before surveying each of the Gospels, there are five important things you must understand in order to interpret them correctly.

First, recognize the Old Testament background of the Gospels. For example, when the New Testament talks about the *Christ* or the *Messiah* it does so from the standpoint of what the Old Testament said about the coming Messiah—*who* He would be, *what* he would do, etc. The New Testament doesn't ignore or change the meaning of the Old Testament—it builds on, continues, and fulfills it!

Second, recognize that Jesus' earthly ministry was mainly to the Jews. Jesus was "born under the Law" (Gal 4:4), was "a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers" (Rom 15:8), and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). We should expect this as Jesus was first of all the Jews' Messiah! Sadly, they

rejected Him, with the result that revelation was given that the Old Testament gives no hint of—the church (Eph 3:5–6). Though the Gospels say little about the church they definitely show the gospel is for *everyone* and that disciples be made of *all the nations*.

Third, understand the meaning of the phrases “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven.” These mean the same thing (Matt 19:23–24; Mark 10:23–25). Matthew uses “Heaven” instead of “God” because the Jews he wrote to had such reverence for God’s name they would say “heaven” instead. Also, this kingdom refers to the Messiah’s future, literal rule on earth. When Jesus talked about the kingdom, His Jewish hearers knew *exactly* what He was talking about—a literal earthly kingdom with the Messiah ruling. If Jesus was thinking of a different kind of “kingdom” He would have said so, but He never does this. Jesus is the *head* of the church (Col 1:18), he is never called the *King* of the church.

Fourth, understand the nature and purpose of miracles. Miracles are supernatural acts that only God could do. They were God’s “stamp of approval” on His messenger and the message to prove that they were truly of God (Matt 11:2–6; Acts 2:22). Jesus thus did miracles to prove to people that He was the promised Messiah (Luke 7:18–22).

Fifth, understand the nature and purpose of parables. People often think that Jesus taught in parables to help others understand what He was saying, much like using an illustration. The fact, though, is the exact opposite! Jesus didn’t start teaching in parables until *after* the Jews rejected Him (Matt 13:10, 34–35). Jesus used parables as a form of judgment. Parables gave truth to Jesus’ disciples but at the same time *withheld* that truth from those who rejected Him as the Messiah.