

# *The Synoptic Gospels*<sup>1</sup>

*Matthew, Mark, Luke*

## **Introduction**

These books are traditionally called “*Gospels*” because the word means “*good news*” as is used in Mark’s account of the acts and teachings of Jesus (Mark 1:1). It is evident that the passion of Jesus dominates the purpose of these books. Everything in these books points ahead to the climax of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This major difference between the Gospels and all other biographical works is crucial in understanding and appreciating their uniqueness.

## **Why Were the Gospels Written?**

Initially, the oral apostolic testimony among the Jews possessed such weight that an authenticated Gospel in a written form was not necessary. However, the written story of the life and teaching of Jesus became essential when the eyewitnesses began to die.

At the same time, there may have been no felt need for a written record, since it was commonly believed that Christ’s return was imminent. However, as time passed and the apostles died, the realization that Christ’s return was not as soon as they anticipated.

As indicated by Luke’s Gospel, there were other attempts to record the life and ministry of Christ, but only four of these have survived as authentic records. Of course, the multiple apocryphal gospels of later origin indicate both the recurring fascination with providing details that are not included in the canonical gospels and demonstrate the careful discernment of the church in rejecting such writings as counterfeit.

By the end of the second century, all the evidence indicates that the four gospels were accepted, not only as authentic, but also as Scripture on a level with the Old Testament.

## **What Are the Synoptic Gospels?**

The first three Gospels are called the *Synoptic Gospels* because they “*see together*”—have the same point of view regarding the life of Christ. They present the life of Christ in a way that complements the story presented by John in his Gospel.

## **Study Approach**

Overall, the reader should consider two questions in analyzing the Synoptic Gospels:

1. What are the characteristics that cause each Gospel to differ from the others?
2. What are the common characteristics found in all three Gospels?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: Dunnett, W. M. (2001). [\*Exploring the New Testament\*](#). Crossway Books.

## THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

### Author

Matthew, one of the original disciples of Christ, wrote the first book in the New Testament. He was first named Levi and worked as a publican collecting taxes in Palestine until he was called to follow Jesus (Matthew 9:9, 10; Mark 2:14, 15).

### Purpose and Content

Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily to Jewish readers and presented Jesus as the Messiah, the King of the Jews (e.g., His genealogy (1:1–17); the visit of the Magi (2:1–12); His triumphant entry into Jerusalem (21:5); the judgment of the nations (25:31–46); the superscription over the Cross (27:37); and his focus upon “*the kingdom of heaven,*” which is unique to Matthew.

This book serves as the bridge between the Old and the New Testaments. It links the prophecies of the coming Messiah with the fulfillment of prophecy in the person of the Lord Jesus. Matthew often refers to, or quotes from, the OT prophets and connects their words with his subject (e.g., 1:22, 23; 2:15, 17, 18, 23; 4:14, 16; 8:17; 12:17, 21; 21:4, 5; 26:54, 56; 27:9). It is as though Matthew first refers to the Old Testament, which says, “*He is coming,*” and then presents his own message which says, “*He is here!*”

### The Sermons (or Discourses) of Christ

The prominence of the sermons/discourses of Christ is easily observed in Matthew’s Gospel—his pattern includes narrative material about Christ, and then he includes an important sermon/discourse. There are five such discourses in Matthew’s Gospel:

1. The Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29)
2. The Commission to the Twelve (10:1–42)
3. The Parables of the Kingdom (13:1–53)
4. The Meaning of Greatness and Forgiveness (18:1–35)
5. The Olivet Discourse (24:1–25:46)

Each of these sermons/discourses relates to the claims that the King makes upon those who would share in His kingdom.

## THE GOSPEL OF MARK

### Author

In contrast to Matthew, Mark was NOT one of the original disciples of Christ. He was, however, a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), a companion of Simon Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) who himself was a close associate of Paul and the Jerusalem apostles. Therefore, Mark’s relationship to the apostles was close enough to render him intimately familiar with the life of Christ and the activities of the early Christian leaders.

In A. D. 112, Papias cited Mark as “*the interpreter of Peter.*” A comparison of Peter’s sermon in Acts 10:34–43 with Mark’s Gospel demonstrates how the former is an outline of the life of Jesus to which Mark provided much greater detail.

### **Purpose and Content**

Mark addressed his Gospel primarily to Roman readers and presented Jesus as the *Servant of Yahweh*. (According to tradition, Mark wrote his Gospel while in Rome.) The chief characteristic of Christ in this book is His activity, the *mark of a good servant*.

The Greek word *eutheos*, translated variously as “straightway,” “immediately,” or “forthwith,” appears forty-two times in the book. This message made a natural appeal to the busy, down-to-earth Roman reader.

According to the amount of space Mark allots to it, the most important activity of Christ was His death and resurrection. Almost one third of the entire book is devoted to the narrative of the last week of the life of Christ, 11:1–16:18). This demonstrates clearly what aspect of Christ’s life that Mark considered to be of supreme concern.

## THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

### **Author**

According to the New Testament, Luke was a physician (Colossians 4:14), a companion of Paul (Philemon 24), and the writer of a two-volume history of the life of Christ and the early church (Luke and Acts). His Gospel has long been the favorite of both Christian and non-Christian readers because of its superb presentation of Christ’s spotless life. Like Mark, Luke was NOT among the original disciples of Christ.

### **Purpose and Content**

Luke addressed his Gospel primarily to Greek (or non-Jewish) readers and presented Jesus as the *Son of Man*, the ideal human being. Since the Greeks had long sought the “*perfect man*,” Luke’s work was designed to fulfill that quest. As a result, Luke emphasized subjects like the account of the birth of Christ (1:26–38; 2:8–20); the testimony of God to His Son (3:21, 22); the announcement of Jesus as the Anointed One (4:16–24); and the mission of the Son of Man (19:10).

Together with these passages one should consider Luke’s emphasis on the prayers of Jesus; His parables (10:30–37; 15:1–32; 18:9–14); the human interest features (10:38–42; 19:1–10; 24:13–35), in which the Lord deals graciously, yet firmly, with interesting people; and of course, the prominence of the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of Christ (1:35; 3:22; 4:1, 18).

A further illustration of the outreach of this book is the repetition of phrases relating to humanity. From first to last, Luke shows that the Gospel (God’s Good News) is meant for all people (2:10, 14, 31, 32; 3:6; 9:56; 10:33; 17:16; 19:10; 24:47).

## CHARACTERISTICS COMMON TO THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

While each Gospel has its distinctive emphasis, several significant events or subjects are common to all three. As a result, these accounts have become the best-known teachings and events of Christ's ministry:

Announcement of the Savior by John the Baptist (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3)

Baptism of the Savior (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3)

Temptation of the Savior (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4)

Teachings and Miracles of the Savior (the major portion of each Gospel)

Transfiguration of the Savior (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9)

Trial, Death, and Burial of the Savior (Matthew 26, 27; Mark 14, 15; Luke 22, 23)

Resurrection of the Savior (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24)

## SUBJECTS THAT RECEIVE SPECIAL EMPHASES

### Unusual Nature of Christ's Birth

In emphasizing the unusual nature of Christ's birth, the Gospel writers show how it was prophesied in the Old Testament, announced by an angel to Joseph and Mary, and brought about by the operation of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1, 2; Luke 1, 2).

### The Parables of Christ

The teachings and miracles of Christ occupy the major portion of the gospel records. Distinctive in the teachings of Jesus was the frequent use of parables. A parable is a story or situation in the human realm which is employed as a means of illustrating or defending some spiritual principle. In these three Gospels at least thirty separate parables are found, and they include many other short statements that are parabolic in nature. Among the most notable are the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 and the parables of the lost things in Luke 15.

### The Kingdom

One of the most important areas of our Lord's teaching concerned the *kingdom*. The two expressions, "*the kingdom of heaven*" (limited to Matthew) and "*the kingdom of God*" occur often.

God's kingdom is essentially "*His rule over His creation.*" It is primarily a spiritual reality, "*The kingdom of God cometh not with observation...for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:20, 21). The *kingdom* is in the hearts of believers, but it is also a visible reality.

The Son of Man "*shall come in his glory...and before him shall be gathered all nations*" (Matthew 25:31, 32). At that time, He shall appear and rule over the earth, a theme prevalent in the prophets (cf. Isaiah 11:1–10; Zechariah 13:1–6; Malachi 4:1–3).

When the kingdom was announced by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1–3) and by the Lord Jesus (Mark 1:14, 15), the spiritual aspect was prominent. However, when "*the Day of the*

*Lord*” comes at the close of this age, the visible aspect will be evidenced. Then God’s plan will be fulfilled, all things will be summed up in Christ, and God will finally be all in all.

### **The Miracles**

In addition to His teachings, the miracles of Christ formed an important part of Christ’s ministry. Not only were they both evidence of His messiahship, but they were also occasions for bringing needy people to a realization of something even greater than their need for physical necessities—their spiritual need! In proportion to its length, more miracles are found in Mark than in Matthew and Luke (at least twenty individual occasions)—the *Gospel of the busy Servant*!

When the Lord formally announced Himself as *God’s Anointed* at the beginning of His public ministry (Luke 4:16–21), He included these two aspects of His commission: the proclamation of the Gospel and the working of miracles.

When He had thus announced Himself, He added, “*This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears*” (v. 21). Both His words and His works were means of revealing God to men, which was the purpose for His incarnation (Matthew 11:27).

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is meant by the “Synoptic Gospels?” Who wrote these Gospels?
2. To whom was each of the Synoptic Gospels written and for what purpose?
3. What common characteristics are found in all three books?
4. What are the distinctive characteristics of each book?

## YEAR @ A GLANCE

*Save the date*

### JANUARY

- 1 NEW YEARS DAY OFFICE CLOSED
- 7 DISCOVERING EVERYDAY COURSE 3WKS
- 11 CELEBRATE RECOVERY BEGINS
- 13 MENTOR MEETING
- 21 CIB APPRECIATION LUNCHEON
- 24 FAMILY MEETING & POTLUCK WEDNESDAY
- 26 D-NOW YOUTH 26-28TH HERE AT ECF!
- 28 MINISTRY FAIR - GET CONNECTED

### FEBRUARY

- 2 LADIES GAME NIGHT
- 4 CHRISTIAN CHARACTER COURSE 4WKS
- 10 GRIEFSHARE BEGINS 13WKS
- 17 AFTERNOON OF PRAYER
- 23 FAMILY MOVIE NIGHT
- 25 YOUTH SERVE SUNDAY

### MARCH

- 3 DISCOVERING EVERYDAY COURSE 3WKS
- 6 LADIES 222 FELLOWSHIP
- 9 MENTOR MEETING
- 15 YOUTH GUYS SLEEPOVER
- 22 SEDAR
- 30 EGG HUNT
- 31 EASTER

### APRIL

- 7 CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINES 4WKS
- 12 LADIES NIGHT OF WORSHIP
- 13 KITE DAY
- 18 PENITENT MEN 18TH-20TH

### MAY

- 3 XO MARRIAGE SIMULCAST 3-4TH
- 5 DISCOVERING EVERYDAY COURSE 3WKS
- 11 MENTOR MEETING
- 11 AFTERNOON OF PRAYER
- 12 MOTHER'S DAY
- 19 GRADUATION CELEBRATION
- 22 POTLUCK LORD SUPPER BAPTISM

### JUNE

- 7 4WK COURSE CHRISTIAN BELIEF
- 10 DRENCHED 10-14TH
- 16 FATHER'S DAY
- 27 LADIES RETREAT 27-29TH

Dates and events may be updated.  
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### JULY

- 7 DISCOVERING EVERYDAY COURSE 3WKS
- 8 YOUTH CAMP 8-12TH
- 13 MENTOR MEETING
- 22 KID'S CAMP 22ND-25TH
- 24 BAPTISM AT THE PARK

### AUGUST

- 4 COURSE CHRISTIAN CHARACTER 4WKS
- 10 AFTERNOON OF PRAYER
- 18 BACK TO CHURCH

### SEPTEMBER

- 1 YOUTH END OF SUMMER PARTY @BECKS
- 1 DISCOVERING EVERYDAY COURSE 3WKS
- 14 MENTOR MEETING
- 20 PRISCILLA SHIRE 20-21ST
- 25 POTLUCK LORD SUPPER BAPTISM

### OCTOBER

- 6 CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINES 4WKS
- 31 FALL FESTIVAL

### NOVEMBER

- 3 DISCOVERING EVERYDAY COURSE 3WK
- 9 MENTOR MEETING
- 8 LADIES NIGHT OF WORSHIP
- 15 WTR MARRIAGE RETREAT 15-17TH
- 16 AFTERNOON OF PRAYER
- 16 SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS
- 20 POTLUCK LORD SUPPER BAPTISM
- 28 THANKSGIVING

### DECEMBER

- 1 CHRISTIAN BELIEFS COUSE 4WK
- 1 CIB BUILD
- 8 CIB DRYRUN
- 13 CHRISTMAS IN BTHLEHEM 13, 14, 15TH
- 14 CIBOLO PARADE
- 20 YOUTH LOCKIN
- 24 CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP/CANDLELIGHT
- 25 NO 222 CHRISTMAS
- 31 NO 222 NEW YEARS DAY