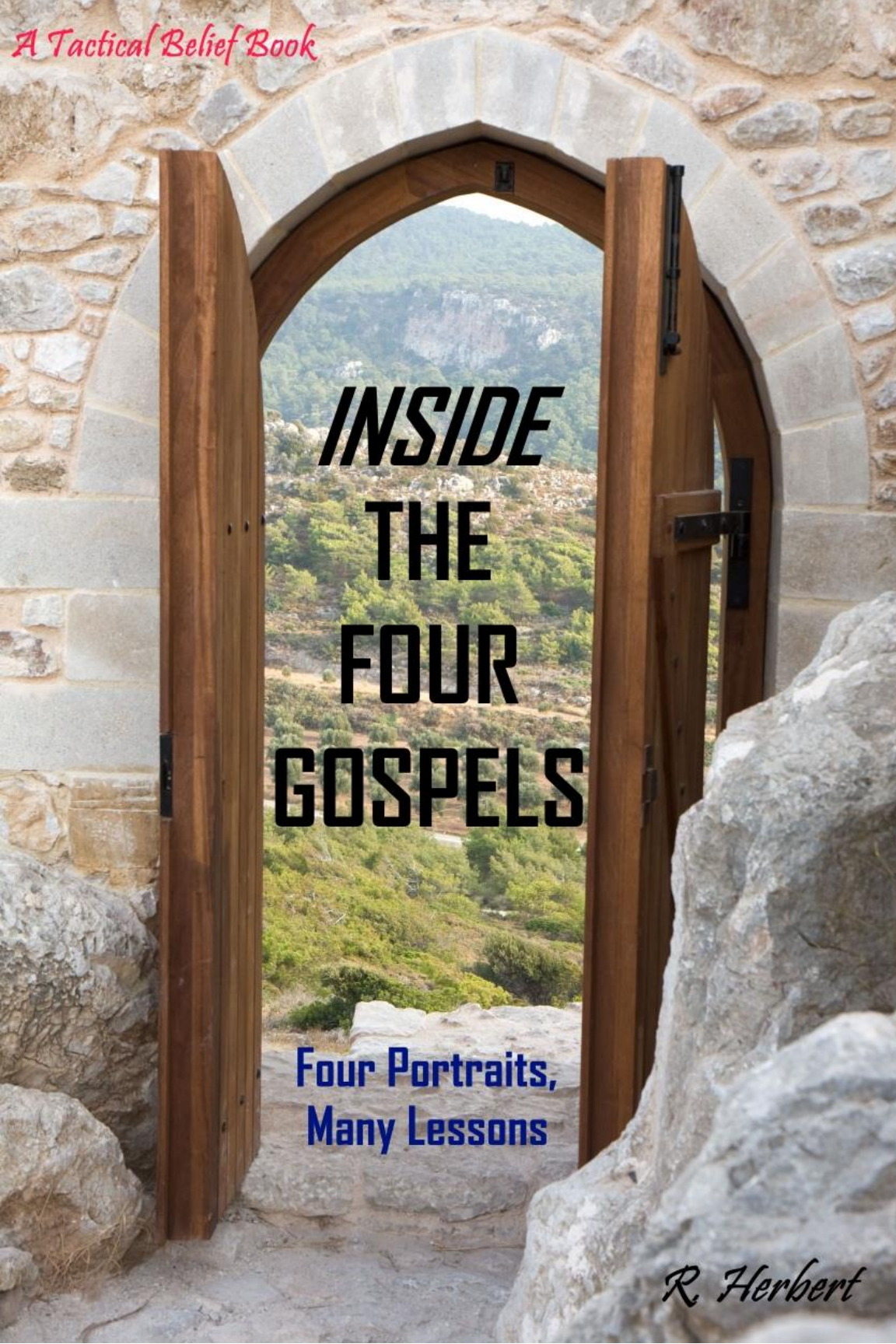
A Tactical Belief Book
INSIDE
THE
FOUR
GOSPELS
Four Portraits,
Many Lessons
R. Herbert

INSIDE
THE FOUR GOSPELS:

Four Portraits, Many Lessons

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INTRODUCTION

Which are the most important books of the Bible? It's an intriguing question. They are all important, of course, but one could make a good case that the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – are of greatest importance to the Christian. Without them the rest of the New Testament would not make any sense, and we would have no idea of the true significance of a great deal of what is written in the Old Testament.

The four Gospels lie at the very heart of Christianity. They record its most essential teachings and provide us with most of what we know about the person of Jesus Christ, his fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies, his message, and his true identity. Yet many Christians do not know why there are four Gospels, or exactly how they differ, and what their unique lessons are.

Why Four Gospels?

There may have been more than four accounts of the life of Jesus written in the first century of the Christian Faith. Luke in his Gospel indicates that there were many such accounts. When he wrote that "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1), it is unlikely that he was referring only to the other two of our four Gospels that were in existence by the time he was writing.

But the early Christian Church preserved the four works that today we call the four Gospels as the accounts with the most certain authenticity and which together showed four very different, but interlocking views of Jesus.

Although the four Gospels all tell the same story – that of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ – they each tell the story differently. Each of the four accounts has its own unique viewpoint and its own perspective on the life of Jesus. This is partly because they were

written to different audiences with different concerns, but also because the four accounts, similar as they may be, all have different things to teach us.

First, each Gospel has its own unique viewpoint. This includes not only the background and outlook of the writer, but also its way of presenting the material and even its perspective on time.

Next, each Gospel gives us a unique "portrait" of Jesus. Just as different artists might paint portraits of the same individual from different angles, so the writers of the four Gospels each chose a different "angle," a different aspect of the identity of Jesus to depict.

Matthew depicts Jesus from a distinctly Jewish perspective, as the Messianic King prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. Mark looks at him from more of a Roman perspective, showing him as a Servant of the common good. Luke takes a Greek perspective, depicting Jesus in his humanness as the Son of Man. Finally, John portrays Jesus differently again, primarily as the Son of God. These different perspectives of the four Gospels are well known, but we can learn a great deal about the nature of Jesus and the work he accomplished when we look more closely at these aspects of the four portraits the Gospels present.

Finally, all of the Gospels can be seen to have distinct themes regarding the lessons they attempt to teach. Some of these themes may be relatively minor ones only stressed a few times in each account. But each Gospel has at least two major – often related – themes that express the most important aspects of that Gospel's message. If we do not know what these themes are, we miss the unique message of each Gospel.

Seeing the Gospels in Perspective

But what exactly is a "Gospel" and how should we look at these accounts as we attempt to understand them better? The word "Gospel" in the sense of a book about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ is actually never used in the Scriptures, where the word "gospel" simply means the "good news" proclaimed by Jesus and

his disciples. The earliest known use of the word "Gospel" to denote one of the accounts of Jesus' life dates to the second century when Justin Martyr (c. AD 155) wrote of the works of "...the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels" (*First Apology*, chapter 67).

Most of us tend to think of the Gospels as biographies of Jesus, but they are not really biographies in the modern sense, as they show only certain aspects of Jesus' identity and work while ignoring or only briefly touching on others. They are not really historical accounts in the modern sense, either, as they all omit large sections of time from his life and sometimes arrange their material topically rather than chronologically. So if we want to truly understand the Gospels, we have to learn to see them in the context of their original settings – to see how and why they were individually written and what their authors were trying to show us.

Rather than seeing the Gospels as biographies or histories, it can actually be more helpful to think of them as plays. Reading the Gospels today is much more like reading the text of plays by Shakespeare or some other great writer. When we simply read those plays, we can see their plot and essential message, but if we see the plays performed on stage we see things much more clearly – the stage settings, the costumes of the actors, and even minor but important details such as the expressions of the actors.

Reading the four Gospels is a similar experience. If we learn and understand the background to the Gospels, the characters, the "stage" they acted upon, and so forth, we gain a far deeper understanding of what the Gospels are saying. That is why in this book, in order to get "inside" the four Gospels, we look first in Part One at the overall background – the "stage" – the stories were played out upon. Then in Part Two we look at the groups we meet in the Gospel accounts – the "actors" in the stories. Finally, in Parts Three through Six, we look at the "play" – the story itself – examining each Gospel individually in terms of its particular background, its portrait of Jesus, and its great themes.

No matter how many times we have read the four Gospels, taking the time to look inside them – to better understand their unique perspectives and individual messages – can richly repay us with insights that increase our understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the messages that the four Gospels contain about him. The four Gospels are certainly among the most important books of the Bible. Isn't it time you got to know them better?

PART ONE:

THE STAGE

1. JUDEA

As the "curtain rises" on the four Gospels, we find that the story begins – in each of them – in Judea. This area was the central (we might say "center stage") region of Palestine in which the story of Jesus both begins and reaches its climactic ending.

Judea or "Land of the Jews" is itself the ancient Roman name, found in the New Testament, for the southern part of Palestine stretching from the border of Samaria in the north to the Sinai in the south.

Originally, it was the area of Israel settled by the biblical tribes of Judah and Benjamin; after the division of Israel following the death of King Solomon, it became the "kingdom of Judah" as distinct from the "kingdom of Israel" to the north.

These kingdoms remained separate states for over two hundred years with Israel having its capital in Samaria (see chapter 2) and Judah maintaining its capital in Jerusalem. Once Palestine became part of the Roman Empire in the first century BC, the Romans incorporated the historical Judah and also Samaria and some other areas into the "Province of Judea."

Although the Romans controlled Judea, they allowed traditional monarchs of the Herodian family to rule as puppet kings. Judah had earlier conquered the nearby area of Idumea (Edom) and forced the Edomites to convert to Judaism. Ironically, Herod the Great (died c. 4 BC) and his successors were of Idumean rather than Judean descent.

Geographically, most of the region of Judea was mountainous "hill country" which dropped down into plains in the west and south. The famous line "I will lift up my eyes to the hills" in the Book of Psalms refers specifically to the act of going up into the hill country to the temple of God in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem itself not only stood on four hills or mountains, but was also surrounded by others such as the Mount of Olives that we read about in the Gospels. These same mountains are frequently

mentioned in the teachings of Jesus, who retreated to them on many occasions to pray privately or to get away from the crowds, who spoke of faith that could “move mountains,” and who made many other references to them.

The “wilderness of Judea,” located in the eastern part of Judea next to the Dead Sea, was a particularly desolate part of this area where John the Baptist began to preach and where Jesus was tempted. Compared to this desert “wilderness,” the rest of Judea was relatively productive and supported the growing of various crops such as olives and the pasturing of smaller animals such as sheep and goats.

A number of Judean cities and towns such as Bethlehem, Bethany, Jericho and Emmaus appear in the Gospel stories, but none was so important, of course, as the capital, Jerusalem, which had a population of many thousands in New Testament times. Jerusalem is mentioned by name 146 times in the New Testament, and many other references to the city occur in the Gospels under synonyms such as “Zion” (named after one of Jerusalem’s fortified hills), “the holy city” (Matthew 4:5) and “the city of the Great King” (Matthew 5:35).

Because it was the location of the temple, for the Jews Jerusalem functioned as the spiritual center of Judea, although the religious authorities there were often at odds with the messengers of God. As Jesus himself said, "...Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:33). There was also frequent religious friction between the inhabitants of the areas of Galilee and Judea.

So despite the regional importance of Judea, it is understandable that relatively little of the life of Jesus was spent in this area, and he was often in danger when he did spend time there. It is vital to understand this fact as two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Mark, actually structure their story around this tension which culminated in the death of the prophet from Galilee at the hands of the religious leaders of Judea.

Despite his rejection by the Judean authorities, Jesus still mourned over the impending destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew

23:37-39, Luke 19:41-44), and his prediction that the city's enemies "… will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" (Luke 19:44) was drastically fulfilled by the Romans within a generation.

But Jerusalem and several other Judean locations were of great prophetic significance, and the Gospels show that Jesus spent time in them in order to fulfill the prophecies made in the Hebrew Scriptures regarding the promised Messiah. The centrality of Jerusalem for the Gospels is also seen in the command of the resurrected Jesus that his disciples preach in his name to all nations "beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

2. SAMARIA

Samaria was the area between Judea and Galilee that had been the northern kingdom of Israel after Judah and Israel split into two monarchies following the death of Solomon around 931 BC. Some two hundred years later, in 726–722 BC, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V invaded the region, captured the capital city of Samaria (after which the region was named), and deported many of its inhabitants to Assyrian cities in Mesopotamia. But some of the Samaritans remained in their land and eventually mixed with other groups who moved into the area.

This mixed – partly Jewish and partly pagan – population represented the Samaritans of Jesus' day. Although they worshiped the same God as the Jews and strictly upheld the commands of the Mosaic law, their religion was rejected by Judaism – both because of their partly Gentile ancestry and because the Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Bible and worshiped in their temple on Mount Gerazim in Samaria rather than in the temple in Jerusalem.

As a result, the Samaritans were despised by most Jews – who treated their northerly neighbors terribly, as virtual "untouchables." The depths of this terrible disdain can be seen in the fact that Samaritans could not even be accepted as converts to Judaism. Rather than "contaminate" themselves by passing through Samaritan territory, Jews who travelled between Judea and Galilee would often cross over the River Jordan in order to bypass Samaria, rather than going through the area. Those who did take the direct route would hurry so as not to stay overnight there and would even refuse to eat in that area.

This attitude is reflected in later statements in the Jewish Talmud such as: "He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine" (Mishnah Shebiith 8:10). Perhaps understandably, the Samaritans developed a deep antipathy toward the Jews, and there is no question that there was a great deal of

mutual hostility and religious rejection between the two cultures (Luke 9:52-53).

This was the situation in the society into which Jesus was born. When we understand this background, we see how remarkable Jesus' teaching and actions regarding the Samaritans truly were. We can sense the shock among many of his Jewish listeners when Christ told the parable of the "Good Samaritan," an individual he held up as being not only "our neighbor," but also someone more righteous than a representative priest and Levite – the Jewish religious professionals of that day (Luke 10:25–37).

The nature of Jewish-Samaritan relations (or lack of them) helps us to realize what a statement it was that Jesus chose to pass directly through Samaria instead of crossing the Jordan to avoid the area on the way to Jerusalem (John 4:4-5) as many Jews did. When Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman outside one of their cities, it was directly contrary to Jewish custom (John 4:9), and when he agreed to eat with the Samaritans of the area – and even stay with them overnight – it was the ultimate outrage from the perspective of the Jews: Jesus accepted the Samaritans as being no different from the Jews themselves.

When Jesus healed ten lepers from the border of Samaria (Luke 17:11-14) – at least one of whom was a Samaritan (vs. 16) – he showed again that he loved the Samaritans as much as he did anyone else. In his teaching and serving alike, Jesus accepted and cared for the Samaritans in a manner that completely negated their "untouchable" status in the eyes of many Jews.

So, despite widespread Jewish antipathy, it is not surprising that the early Church quickly recognized the believers in Samaria as equal to the Jews. Many Christians spread through the area of Samaria (Acts 8:1), and the evangelist Philip taught there (Acts 8:5-8). Significantly, the leading apostles Peter and John were sent on a special mission to the area to confirm those Samaritans who had been baptized by Philip (Acts 8:14-17) and to show that their acceptance was the official position of the Church.

The ready acceptance of Christianity by many Samaritans is likely due to their expectation of a Taheb or "Restorer," a Messiah-like figure whom they understood would be the prophet like Moses foretold in the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18). The Taheb, they thought, would be so much like God that anyone who believed in him would believe in the Taheb's Lord (God himself).

In his ministry, Jesus had taught that the time was coming when worship in the holy places of both Jerusalem and Samaria would no longer be important (John 4:21), and the conversion of many Samaritans was one of the first steps in the realization of that truth. The embracing of Christianity by many Samaritans became a clear intermediate step between the preaching of the Gospel to the Jews and to the Gentiles – just as Christ had predicted (Acts 1:8).

A few ethnic Samaritans still survive in their homeland today – mainly in the city of Nablus in what is now northern Israel – and have maintained their traditional identity and worship. Some Samaritan Christians also maintain their faith – descendants of the second oldest Christian community in the world, and the only group of believers founded outside of Judea by Jesus himself.

3. GALILEE

Throughout the life of Jesus, all of Palestine was divided into three Roman provinces, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, with Galilee being the largest (Luke 17:11). The region of ancient (and modern) Israel that we call Galilee apparently was originally just a small circle of land (the name Galilee means "circuit" or "circle" in Hebrew) around the Canaanite city of Kedesh, which was conquered by Joshua and became part of the inheritance of the tribe of Naphtali (Joshua 20:7).

But the region quickly grew and it was in this area that the twenty towns were located that King Solomon gave to Hiram, King of Tyre, in payment for the workmen and cedar wood supplied from Lebanon for building the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 9:11). Perhaps it was then that the area became settled by Gentiles from Phoenicia, though this may have occurred at a later time when the Assyrians moved other populations into the area after the captivity of ancient Israel.

Geographically, the area of Galilee is extremely hilly and rocky, and most people lived in small villages – though the cities such as Tiberias built on the shores of the Sea of Galilee were larger. The Sea of Galilee was, in fact, the central focal point of the whole region. Also called in the Bible the Sea of Kinneret (possibly from the "harp" shape of the lake) or its Greek form, Gennesaret, as well as Ginosar and the Sea of Tiberius, the large lake (today approximately 7 miles wide and 12.5 miles long) was the center of the fishing trade which was Galilee's main industry.

Many Bible commentaries give a picture of ancient Galilee as a rustic and socially backwards area looked down upon by Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere. However, modern archaeology has shown that although the Galileans may have had a different accent (Matthew 26:73) and not have had the education of many of the Jerusalem elites (Acts 4:13), they were nevertheless respected for their thriving commerce.

Galilee was much more fertile than Judea and Samaria and the area was also known for its natural beauty. The Jewish historian Josephus who lived shortly after the time of Christ (c. AD 37 –100) even wrote that "One may call this place the ambition of Nature."

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all give detailed accounts of the ministry of Jesus which was conducted in Galilee. They tell us that it was there that Jesus chose his disciples and where he taught and performed many miracles in the scattered villages and towns. Matthew tells us that he did this:

> … to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:14-16, quoting Isaiah 9:1-2).

Yet why did Jesus spend so much of his earthly life in Galilee? It would have been possible, of course, for him to have grown up anywhere in Judea and to have simply travelled to Galilee to complete his prophesied work there. Most scholars feel that because Galilee was relatively distant from the political and religiously volatile situation in Jerusalem, Jesus' ministry was more likely to thrive and survive in that more out of the way area.

But there is perhaps another reason why so much of Jesus' ministry was completed in Galilee – and that was the nature of the Galileans themselves. The common stereotype that paints the Galileans as unsophisticated and "backwoodsy" fails to take into account an important trait for which they were well known. The historian Josephus also wrote of the Galileans that they were "fond of innovations and by nature disposed to change, and they delighted in seditions."

The latter charge, that they were fond of political seditions, was seen in the revolt against the Romans led by Judas of Galilee in AD 6 and mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 5:37).

However, the fact that the Galileans were socially and temperamentally inclined to innovation and change meant that they were doubtless far more receptive to the seemingly radical new teachings of Jesus. Far less constrained in what they believed than the tradition-bound Jews of Jerusalem, the Galileans (apart from Jesus' own family and those who had known him as a child - Matthew 13:54-58) may have been more open to the message of the Gospel than any other group in ancient Palestine. It was among the Galileans, as Isaiah prophesied, that the light that was to come shone most brightly.

4. DECAPOLIS

The Decapolis was the Gentile-controlled area mainly on the eastern side of the River Jordan and the Sea of Galilee in what is now part of modern-day Israel, Syria, and Jordan. The area is only mentioned by this name three times in the New Testament (Matthew 4:25, Mark 5:20, 7:31), but it was the location of some important events recorded by the Gospels.

In the time of Jesus, the Decapolis – meaning "ten cities" – was a loosely connected group of towns and cities given some degree of autonomy by the Romans, who encouraged the development of their own culture in the region. Each city functioned as a separate entity with its surrounding countryside – so the area around the city of Gadara, for example, was called the region of the "Gadarenes." Ancient texts list between 9 and 18 cities in the Decapolis, showing that the "Ten Cities" was more a general term for the region than a factual number of the towns in it.

The inhabitants of the Decapolis were almost exclusively Gentiles and were disliked and avoided by many Jews owing to their pagan background and culture (Mark 5:11, etc.). Both the Jewish Talmud and some of the early Christian writers indicate it was believed that the people of the Decapolis were the descendants of the seven Canaanite "nations" which were driven out of the Promised Land by Joshua (Joshua 3:10, Acts 13:19).

Additionally, the New Testament shows that, contrary to Jewish law and custom, the people of the Decapolis kept pigs (Mark 5:11) which they doubtless ate and sacrificed in their temples. So, because of their culture as well as their real or imagined history, these people were rejected outright by the Jews.

But the Gospels show that despite this background, Jesus went to these people and showed them acceptance by preaching the Gospel to them as well as healing their sick. The story of his casting out a demon from one of the Gadarenes figures prominently in the Gospel of Mark. Interestingly, although Matthew 15:24 tells us that

Jesus stressed while he was in the Gentile area of Tyre and Sidon on the Palestinian coast that he was not sent to the Gentiles, while he was in the Decapolis Jesus freely healed and encouraged those he helped to spread the word of the healings (Mark 5:19-20).

This also helps us to better understand the stories presented in the New Testament Gospels of the miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and of the four thousand. Many people read these stories without noticing or thinking about the fact that one of the miracles was performed on the Jewish, western side of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:13-21), while the other was performed on the pagan, eastern side – in the Decapolis (Matthew 15:29-39).

When we read these stories, we see that Jesus commanded his disciples to pick up the leftover food. After the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee, there were twelve baskets of food left over – clearly symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel and Christ's role in providing spiritual "food" for all Israel. After the parallel miracle performed on the east side of Galilee in the Decapolis, we are told the disciples picked up seven baskets of leftover food – doubtless symbolic of the Gentile people of the "seven nations" of Canaanites believed to dwell there.

When we see this, we realize what a powerful message these miracles were to the people who witnessed them – not only the compassionate feeding of thousands of people, but also the deeper message of Christ's compassion for and desire to include the despised Gentiles in his teaching and providing of spiritual food. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that many people from the Decapolis followed Jesus (Matthew 4:23-25).

For us today, the New Testament stories of the Decapolis provide an excellent reminder of how we can often better understand the message of the Gospels when we better understand the "stage" on which the stories were set.

PART TWO:

THE ACTORS

5. THE JEWS

At the time of Jesus, the northern ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel had long since been carried into Assyrian captivity and subsequently scattered. The people of Judea were mainly the descendants of the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin – the Jews – who had returned from their own captivity in Babylon.

As a result, all people of Israelite ancestry throughout the Roman world came to be known as "Jews." On the other hand, the terms "Israel" and "Israelites" were often still used by the Jews themselves, just as we find that Jesus calls Nicodemus "Israel's teacher" in John 3:10 and calls Nathaniel an "Israelite" in John 1:47. The two terms could thus be interchangeable in New Testament times. That is why John calls Jesus the "King of Israel" (John 1:49, 12:13), and also records the fact that he was crucified as "King of the Jews" (John 19:19-22).

But when the term "Jews" is used in the Gospels, it can have different meanings. When Jesus speaks of "the Jews" he sometimes means the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judea as opposed to the people of Galilee, and he also often means just the religious leaders of that culture.

Although the religious leaders of the time personified their Jewish culture in many ways, they also fell far short of the principles of the Hebrew Bible that they ostensibly taught and upheld. Both John the Baptist and Jesus himself chastised the Jewish religious leaders for their hypocrisy and lack of true religion, but the Gospels make it clear that many everyday people of Judea were sincere and devout. The stories of John the Baptist's father and mother, Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-80), are good examples, as are those of Jesus' own human parents, Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:1-21).

Also, many of the Jews who heard the teaching of Jesus were receptive to it and became the first Christians. In fact, Christianity

in its formative stage was considered to be a sect of Judaism, and we should realize that a great deal of what the four Gospels tell us can only be properly understood in the light of the first century Jews and their culture. Throughout the Gospels, for example, the life of Jesus is shown as the fulfillment of the promises given in the Hebrew Scriptures to the Jewish people by the prophets, and before them to their ancestors David (Psalm 89:3–4, 29–36; 132:11–17, etc.), Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15), Abraham (Galatians 3:16), and even Eve (Genesis 3:15).

If we want to see more deeply inside the Gospels, we must never lose sight of the fact that Jesus was himself a Jew who practiced Jewish religion and preached primarily to Jewish people using stories and analogies that the Jews of that era would understand. Historically, Jesus is the first individual known by name who was called "rabbi," meaning "teacher." As we progress in this book, we will see that the Gospels do not simply record the major events of Christ's life, but dwell mostly on his teachings.

When we read these teachings, we must see them as the Jews saw them to fully understand them. To take a single example, Jesus' parable of the "Prodigal Son" is viewed by most Christians as the father in the story representing God and each sinful human as the son whom the father forgives. While this may be the central meaning of the parable, we must not forget that to the Jewish audiences who heard this story, one of its most noticeable aspects is that the man had two sons – one good and one not good. This would have immediately reminded Jewish listeners of biblical stories such as those of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. While sibling jealousy may not be the central point of the story, we miss a great deal of what the parable teaches regarding the foundation of the older brother's unforgiving attitude if we do not remember and look at that aspect – as almost every Jewish hearer would have done. We will see many examples of the importance of the Jewish perspective inside the Gospels as we move through the coming chapters.

6. THE ROMANS

The story of the Gospels is inextricably connected with the story of the Romans in Judea from the account of the decree that was sent out by the Emperor Augustus that the Roman world should be taxed – leading to Jesus being born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7) – to the story of the Roman centurion who stood by the cross at Christ's death (Matthew 27:54).

But to understand the significance of the Roman-controlled events mentioned in the Gospels, we must know something of the background of their presence. In the decades before the life of Jesus, the Roman Empire increased its influence in the eastern Mediterranean, and by 40 BC the land of Judah had become a province of the Roman Empire ruled by Jewish puppet kings. When King Herod the Great died in 4 BC, the Emperor Augustus divided Herod's kingdom among the Jewish ruler's three sons: Antipas, Philip, and Archelaus. Archelaus, who ruled Judea and Samaria, ruled so badly that the Jews and Samaritans both appealed to Rome, and in AD 6 Judea became part of the larger Roman province of Syria, ruled by a Roman Governor.

As we read the Gospels, we find many references to the influence of the Roman occupiers. There was certainly a good deal of tension between the Jews and their hated Roman conquerors, but the Romans encouraged the development of several cities in the region such as Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast which the Romans used as the administrative capital of Judea, and Tiberias – called after the emperor of that name – a city in Galilee mentioned in the Gospels.

A number of Roman soldiers were stationed in the province of Judea to keep order and to suppress the ever-present threat of rebellions – which occurred frequently and were just as quickly and brutally put down. Two cohorts (with about 500 men in each) were stationed in Jerusalem (Acts 23:23-32) and a third cohort guarded

the capital Caesarea (Acts 10:1). An additional two cohorts served throughout the province (Acts 27:1) along with a squadron of cavalry (Acts 23:32).

The rank and file soldiers of the Judean Legions were sometimes Roman, but many – possibly including a number of the soldiers who participated in Christ's execution – were recruited locally. At least two and perhaps more cohorts in Judea were composed of Samaritans.

The military officers were mainly centurions (each commanding 80 rather than 100 men as often supposed). Seven of these centurions are mentioned in the New Testament, and two are particularly prominent in the Gospels – the one who asked Jesus to heal his servant (Matthew 8:5-13), and another who watched Jesus die on the cross and exclaimed "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). Despite being Gentiles looked down upon by most Jews, the New Testament shows some of these individuals to have been honorable men.

The Roman governors of Judea were also military men chosen for their rank and experience. They oversaw local government, taxation, and some building projects. They also served as judges and, as Rome's governing authorities in the area, they alone had the power to execute criminals. While several of the Roman governors are mentioned in the Gospels, only one – Pontius Pilate – is pictured in some detail. Although he is mentioned over fifty times in the New Testament as well as in a number of historical documents, and archaeological evidence of his governorship was discovered in 1961, not much is known about him. The Gospels make it clear that Pilate was weak in dealing with the Jews regarding the false charges brought against Jesus, but they show that he was equally unwilling to execute him and tried repeatedly to avoid this. What happened to Pilate? Within a few years of the death of Jesus, the Roman Governor was recalled to Rome in shame due to his handling of an uprising among the Samaritans. He died soon after, in AD 39.

Although Pilate is doubtless the most infamous example we meet in the Gospels, a great many of the events of New Testament history involved upstanding Romans. It is perhaps not surprising that the Book of Acts shows that the devout centurion, Cornelius, was the first Gentile converted to Christianity (Acts 10). Despite the Romans' reputation for brutality among the Jews, the Gospels show that both Jesus and the early Church fully accepted the individual Romans who turned to God. Sometimes these individuals demonstrated greater faith than that found among the Jews themselves.

7. THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Reading the New Testament today, it is easy to get the impression that many of the Jewish people in the time of Jesus were devout and that the Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious groups were extensive. But this was not the case. The Jewish historian Josephus records that of the total population of Jerusalem (estimated to be around 100,000 or more people), only about 6,000 were Pharisees, and the Sadducees and other groups were less numerous. Nevertheless, these religious groups had great influence; to understand the New Testament deeply, we must understand the roles they played.

Essenes

Known today because of the archaeological discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which portrayed the communal life of a small sect of Essenes, this group regarded the mainstream religious practices of the temple and the synagogues as being corrupt. Many Essenes retreated to the wilderness areas of Judea where they organized monastic communities of believers who studied and interpreted the Scriptures.

The beliefs of different groups of Essenes varied, but they often fell somewhere between those of the Sadducees and Pharisees. Like the Sadducees, the Essenes claimed to be the true priesthood of God, but like the Pharisees they called themselves the “pure” and often utilized fasting and rigorously restrictive behavior. Like the Pharisees, they believed in an afterlife, but like the Sadducees they rejected the idea of bodily resurrection.

Although the Essenes are not mentioned directly in the New Testament, some of their practices seem similar to those of Christianity. Initiation involved baptism, and their communal meals were somewhat like those of the early Christians (Acts 2:42-46). The Essenes also often embraced poverty, and their life in the

wilderness has often led to comparisons with John the Baptist who lived, preached, and baptized converts in the wilderness only a few miles from the Dead Sea – around the time the Essenes were active in the same area.

Zealots

The Zealots were a sometimes fanatical religious-political movement that developed in the first century and which urged the people of Judaea to rebel against the taxation and rule of the Roman Empire. Josephus claims that the movement was begun in AD 6 by Judas the Galilean, whom the Romans eventually captured and executed. But the movement continued to grow and eventually led to the rebellion that caused the war with Rome in AD 66-73 and the destruction of the temple at that time.

But the Zealots were not simply a political force. The term Zealot originally meant one who was zealous for God's law, and the adherents of this group shared many of the Pharisees' beliefs. They placed great emphasis on the kingship of God and their desire to destroy paganism and wrong beliefs of any kind. Although the Zealots are not prominently mentioned in the New Testament, there are some references to them. Their founder, Judas of Galilee, is mentioned in Acts 5:37, and one of the twelve disciples, Simon the Zealot (Mark 3:18), was likely a member of this group at some point.

It is a perhaps an example of Christ's work and teaching that he called to be his disciples not only Simon, an ex-Zealot, but also Matthew, a tax collector and "Roman collaborator." Barabbas was certainly a Zealot (the word used to describe him in the Gospel of John is the same one used by Josephus of the Zealots), and some scholars feel that Acts 22:3 and Galatians 1:14 indicate that the apostle Paul himself may have originally been sympathetic to Zealot ideals – which might explain the origin of his zeal to persecute Christians before his conversion. Certainly, the Zealots exerted considerable influence in the world of the Gospels.

Sadducees

A priestly group, the Sadducees controlled the temple and oversaw many of the affairs of the Jewish State. They regulated relations with the Romans and held a powerful influence in the Sanhedrin, the national judicial body (Mark 14:53-65, etc.).

Unlike the Pharisees who accepted all the Hebrew Scriptures as well as oral traditions, the Sadducees accepted only what was written in the Law of Moses and rejected the later biblical books of the Prophets and the Writings. Doctrinally, they were directly opposed to almost all the teachings of the Pharisees – for example, the Sadducees questioned the existence of the spirit and life after death and adamantly denied the possibility of a physical resurrection (Mark 12:18–27).

Mainly aristocratic, the Sadducees were unpopular with the common people – especially because they implemented the regulations imposed by the Romans. Because their power was dependent on Roman goodwill, the Sadducees were particularly cautious regarding the possibility of Jewish rebellion, so they actively suppressed or eliminated many individuals who gained popular following or support – as they did with Jesus.

Intent on maintaining their own privileged position through right or wrong means, the Sadducees were denounced by both John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Their identity was so closely tied to the temple that when it was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, the Sadducees ceased to exist as a group with any political or religious power.

Pharisees

The largest of the Jewish religious groups, the Pharisees were also the most influential in everyday life and the one that is mentioned most frequently in the Gospels. Meaning the “set apart” or “separated” ones, the Pharisees attempted to separate themselves from both ritual impurity and also from non-Jewish influences.

Although the priests controlled the temple rituals, the Pharisaic scribes and scholars dominated the study of the Scriptures and interpreted them for the people (Matthew 23:2-3). The Pharisees also maintained an oral tradition that they believed had originated at Mount Sinai alongside the written law of Moses and progressively added new rules and interpretations to "build a fence around the law" in order to stop the law being broken. This adding of hundreds of human rules brought them into frequent conflict with Jesus who chastised them not only for their frequent hypocrisy and lack of love in separating themselves from "sinners," but also for adding to the law of God and making it an unbearable burden for people (Matthew 23:4, Mark 7:1–9, 13, etc.).

Yet the teachings of Jesus were closer to the essential doctrines of the Pharisees than to those of any other group. They believed that humans had free moral agency and would receive eventual judgment for their actions, and they also believed in life after death and in the resurrection of the dead. The Gospels tell of Pharisees such as Nicodemus who accepted Jesus' teachings in these areas, and before his conversion the apostle Paul was a Pharisee who was taught by Gamaliel – one of the sect's most eminent scholars (Acts 5:34, 22:3). It is also clear that Jesus and Paul both used Pharisaic methods of debate and instruction in their teaching.

Because the Pharisees fostered the synagogue as a place of study and worship (Luke 11:43), it was natural that after the destruction of the temple and the disappearance of the other religious groups, the Pharisees continued to function – becoming the foundation of modern Rabbinic Judaism.

8. THE DESPISED

Sadly, there were a great number of people who were rejected and despised by many of those who considered themselves religiously pure in Jewish society at the time of Jesus. The New Testament shows there were many righteous Jews, of course, but the problem of denigration was so widespread that we cannot understand much of what is said in the Gospels without seeing the situation clearly. Whole sections of society were widely despised due to their ethnicity, their occupation or their condition.

Gentiles and Samaritans

The Jews of Christ's time often regarded non-Jewish "Gentiles" (a word deriving from the Hebrew word *goyim* "people" or "nations") as pagans cut off from God. They considered Gentiles as "unclean," even sometimes referring to them as "dogs," and would have very little to do with them. Gentiles were not allowed into the main area of the temple in Jerusalem, and most Jews avoided them in everyday life. This meant, of course, that the Romans who occupied Judea were viewed with disdain as well as hatred for their role in the country's subjugation. As we have seen, the half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed in essentially the same way – as unclean and as enemies to be avoided (John 4:9, 8:48, etc.).

But Jesus completely rejected this attitude, of course, and the Gospels are full of stories in which he interacted with Gentiles in the borderlands of Galilee (Matthew 4:13-16) and in the areas on either side of Judea – the area of the Decapolis to the east (Mark 7:31) and that of the cities of Tyre and Sidon on the west (Matthew 15:21). Jesus not only worked with and healed a number of these individuals, but also held them up as examples of people who, unlike many of the Jews, accepted his message (John 10:16). Although the Hebrew Scriptures had foretold a time when God

would work with the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6 and see Luke 2:32), Jesus' interaction with them was rejected by many Jews of his time.

Tax Collectors and Prostitutes

As part of the Roman Empire, Judea was subject to Roman taxes, and these were collected by Jews who were hired as lower level tax collectors (called "publicans" in the King James Bible). These individuals were hated, both because they were viewed as collaborators with the Romans and because many extortionately increased the taxes charged for their own gain (Luke 3:12). The tax collectors were classed with prostitutes, murderers, and thieves and were often called "licensed robbers." Tax collectors were so despised that they had no religious fellowship and were unwelcome in the temple or synagogues (note that in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the temple, the latter "stood at a distance"). That is why the Pharisees were so judgmental of the fact that Jesus treated tax collectors like anyone else and was willing to fellowship and eat with them (Mark 2:15-16). Jesus not only extended the news of salvation to tax collectors (Luke 19:2, 9-10), but also he even chose one to be one of his twelve disciples (Matthew 9:9).

After the Roman army took control of Judea there was a marked increase in prostitution as rank and file Roman soldiers were not allowed to marry. As a result, many of the poorer people and ex–slaves fell into this profession. In a society where most women were not allowed any real status, prostitutes were considered beneath respect. The Jews referred to prostitutes by the term "sinners" and held them in the same disdain as tax collectors, which is why "tax collectors and sinners" are frequently mentioned together in the Gospels. Interestingly, Jesus never referred to women by this term and simply called them prostitutes – as when he told the Pharisees that "… the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you" (Matthew 21:31-32). Jesus also spoke openly with these women and treated them with the same

respect, acceptance and kindness that he showed all people. It is not without significance that the woman who anointed his feet with expensive perfume before the end of his life was one such individual (Matthew 26:6-7).

There were other despised occupations in Jesus' time, but those of tax collector and prostitute were probably the most widely condemned and are most frequently mentioned in the Gospels.

The Poor and the Infirm

It is clear that the poor, the sick, diseased, and disabled were also often despised in the world into which Jesus was born. His birth in impoverished circumstances makes its own statement, but his life and teaching were full of acceptance for these suffering people. The reason the poor and physically challenged were so looked down upon was because it was often assumed that the sins of these people or perhaps those of their parents had led to their condition. Even the disciples fell victim to this sad opinion when they asked Jesus regarding a blind man, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

Like other religiously disenfranchised groups, many of these people could not even worship in the temple. Those with infirmities were allowed into the outer area known as the "Court of the Gentiles" (showing that they were essentially viewed in the same way), but could not enter the temple proper (Acts 3:1-2-8).

Jesus showed the disciples a different attitude toward the poor and the afflicted, of course. He fed the hungry (Matthew 15:32) and healed all those with infirmities who came to him (Matthew 15:30). Jesus also used the poor in his teaching as examples not of sin, but of righteousness (Luke 6:20). While on one occasion he healed an infirm person and told him to "stop sinning" (John 5:14), this was an individual case and he did not usually make any such connection.

But Jesus accepted the shunned and showed love to the shamed. Whether they were despised on account of their ethnicity,

occupation or condition, Jesus went out of his way to be with these people and to help them, showing that they were all part of the humanity he came to save. While the society of the time symbolically cut these groups off from God by not allowing them to approach him in the temple, the Son of God showed his love for them in going, instead, to them.

PART THREE:
MATTHEW'S STORY

9. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

According to the unanimous traditions of the early Church, Matthew was the first Gospel written (the church father Eusebius, for example, places the date of this Gospel as early as AD 41). That is why Matthew is the first of the four Gospels in our English Bibles. Today, however, many scholars of the New Testament feel that there are indications that the Gospel of Mark was written first and that Matthew's Gospel was written later – perhaps sometime after AD 70 – but there are no definite reasons to reject the earlier date. In any event, it is agreed that Matthew was certainly one of the first two of the four Gospels to be written. It is also a unique account that is vital to our understanding of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Who Was Matthew?

The New Testament tells us that Matthew (also called Levi) was chosen directly as a disciple by Jesus from his position as a tax collector (9:9), and there are many indications within Matthew's Gospel that its author was familiar with finances and taxation. We find far more references to money in Matthew than in the other three Gospels, as well as many specific references to tax collectors. Matthew is also the only Gospel writer who records the story of the temple tax (17:24-27) and a number of Christ's parables about money (18:24-35, 20:1-16, etc.).

More than any other New Testament writer, Matthew also speaks of the misuse of money. His is the only Gospel that mentions the bribery of the guards of Jesus' tomb to ensure their silence (28:11-15) and what Judas spent his betrayal money on (27:3-10). While Luke speaks of not being a "servant" of two masters (God and money), Matthew uses a stronger word meaning to "be a slave to" money (6:24).

Matthew's Audience

Overall, it was Matthew's Jewish background and identity that had the greatest effect on his Gospel. More than any other Gospel writer, Matthew could produce a portrait of Jesus from a Jewish perspective – as the promised Messiah who fulfilled many prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew also included several related matters of Jewish interest, such as genealogy (presented in the Jewish rather than Greco-Roman manner) and numerological groups – for example, contrasting pairs such as the parables of the wise and foolish virgins (25:1-13) and the sheep and goats (25:31-46) that are not in the other Gospels. Some scholars feel that this Gospel is even structured into five specific parts like the Pentateuch – the five books of Moses.

The Jewish perspective of Matthew is so pronounced that the primary audience of this Gospel was probably fellow Jews whom Matthew wanted to convince regarding the messianic identity of Jesus. The Gospel was also likely intended as a message of encouragement and instruction for Jewish Christians (interestingly, Matthew is the only one of the four Gospel writers to use the expression "the church"), but the underlying focus on Jewish religion remains paramount.

Early traditions claim that Matthew's Gospel was, in fact, originally written in Hebrew to better reach his Jewish audience. The present Gospel does not seem to have been translated from Hebrew, however, so it is possible that the Gospel we have today is a second version of the book written in a Semitic-influenced Greek of the type used in the ancient synagogues.

It is not coincidental that in Matthew's Gospel, the ministry of Jesus is shown only as going to the Jews – not to the Samaritans or the Gentiles. The disciples are sent out on a mission only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and told "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans" (10:5-6). This does not mean that Matthew has no interest in these other groups. He cites prophecies showing they would eventually be included in

God's plan and examples of Christ's acceptance of them. But it is only at the end of this Gospel, in the "Great Commission," that Jesus tells his disciples, "…Go therefore and make disciples of all nations …" (28:18-19). Up to that point, Matthew's focus is entirely on Jesus' message to the Jews.

Matthew's Perspective: The Past

Each of the four Gospels displays a unique perspective on time that is consistent with the needs and expectations of its audience. This dimension of time is particularly easy to see and recognize in Matthew's account, which is deeply rooted in the past.

Matthew continually looks back to what was written in the Hebrew Scriptures, to the prophecies and promises of the Messiah who would come. In fact, the standard *Greek New Testament* (Aland *et al.*, 1983) lists some 68 references in the Gospel of Matthew that are cited from the Old Testament. This is an astonishing number of citations for the size of the book, that far outstrips the quotations from the Old Testament found in the other Gospels. It shows Matthew's great interest and even dependency on the prophecies of the past in the construction of his account.

In this sense, Matthew's Gospel could be called the "Gospel of Fulfillment," as he continually tells us that actions or events in the life of Jesus occurred that it "…might be fulfilled," or "was fulfilled," or "should be fulfilled." Even apart from these examples of fulfilled prophecies of the past, Matthew frequently inserts the expression "it is written" – again directing his readers back to the past and to the evidence of Jesus' identity as the promised Christ, or showing them how rooted the teaching of Jesus was in the bedrock of Jewish culture and biblical law.

Interestingly, Matthew often does not arrange his material chronologically, he simply organizes it by topic, and we see again in this fact the importance for this Gospel not of how things happened in the present, but how the events that had occurred fulfilled the words of the past.

10. MATTHEW'S PORTRAIT: THE KING

Matthew's Gospel is the story of Jesus as promised Messiah and King. While we know that many in ancient Judea were looking for a messianic figure during the time in which Jesus lived, their conception was largely a physical one – based on the desire for a leader who would rescue them from their Roman conquerors. Through the organization of his story and his skillful use of the Hebrew Scriptures, Matthew shows that Jesus was the promised and looked-for King, but in more – and different – ways than anyone expected.

The kingly nature of Jesus is hinted at from the very beginning of the Gospel, as we see in its opening words: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). The very name with which the genealogy opens and closes – "Jesus Christ," meaning "Jesus the Anointed" (1:1, 17) – is a direct allusion not only to his special relationship with God, but also to the fact that ancient Israel's kings had always been anointed to their office.

Matthew follows this "headline" assertion not by stressing that Jesus was the son of Abraham and then David, but by selecting King David as the first mentioned of Christ's ancestors because the title "Son of David" (which is used more times in Matthew than in all the other Gospels combined) emphasized Jesus' royal lineage as heir to Israel's throne (Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15, etc.).

The significance of this title is shown beyond doubt in the words of the people amazed at Jesus' miracles who asked: "Could this be the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:23), and later in the response to Jesus' question: "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied (22:42).

As Matthew traces it – according to Jewish custom – the royal lineage of Jesus ran down through his (adoptive) father, Joseph (1:16). In this way, Matthew stresses that Jesus was born to a

descendent of David, before showing he was born in the City of David – Bethlehem – as had been foretold of the promised Messiah (2:4-6, 11 and Micah 5:2).

Matthew (and Matthew alone) tells us of the three wise men (*magi*) who sought out Jesus at his birth and who – while not kings themselves, as is often thought – were dignitaries operating at the level of the royal court (2:1-12) and who may have even served as ambassadors of foreign kings. Historically, kings often sent gifts and greetings to other royalty by means of such ambassadors on the birth of an heir. By their own words, the wise men who sought the young Jesus were looking for a royal person: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:2). This introductory story clearly sets the tone of Matthew's stress on the King and his kingdom that is found in this Gospel.

When we reach the latter part of Matthew's story, the kingly references to Jesus are made particularly clear – first in the narrative of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem which Matthew tells us fulfilled an important prophecy of Zechariah:

> Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey... His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth (Zechariah 9:9-10).

In this prophecy we see Jesus at his first coming – as a lowly king coming in humility – and then at his eventual return – as a mighty King coming in glory. Matthew confirms the fulfillment of the first part of this prophecy in telling us: "The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' " (21:9, 14-16). Equating Jesus with the Son of David was the same as calling him "King."

When Jesus was later arrested and taken before the Roman Governor, Matthew tells us that Pilate asked him "Are you the king

of the Jews?" and Jesus did not deny the identification (27:11). When the soldiers mocked Jesus, it was in this specific context:

> Then the governor's soldiers … stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" (27:27-29).

Finally, at his crucifixion, we remember that the written sign placed upon the cross of Jesus read: "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (27:37). When we consider the ongoing stress Matthew has placed on the true kingship of Jesus throughout his Gospel, we see that his recording of the words "…the king of the Jews" was not just the noting of an ironic detail of the story, but something entirely central to it. These words are, in a sense, a summary of this Gospel. They show not only the rejection of Jesus by his subjects at his first coming, but they also foreshadow the promise of the resurrection that was soon to follow and the eventual return in all power of the Son of David who was born to be King.

We also find Jesus frequently called the "Son of Man" in Matthew, but unlike Luke who uses this term to stress the humanity of Jesus, Matthew seems to use the epithet to reflect a key prophecy in the Book of Daniel where "…one like a son of man …was given authority, glory and sovereign power…" – an everlasting kingdom over the nations (Daniel 7:13-14). So we see, for example, Jesus' words: "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28).

11. MATTHEW: THE GOSPEL OF JUSTICE AND MERCY

In addition to the emphasis Matthew places on Jesus' identity as the promised King, the son of David, we find other unique aspects of this Gospel. Matthew shows not only the Jewish concern for righteousness, but also that this was often misdirected. Although the Jews saw the Mosaic law as the pathway to righteousness, Matthew shows that Jesus was a teacher like Moses – and greater than Moses – who gave a new understanding of God's law. Every devout Jew knew that God had told Moses: "I will raise up for them a prophet *like you* from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18, emphasis added). Thus, Matthew highlights the similarities between Jesus and Moses at many points in his Gospel.

With that background in mind, we can see the significance of the fact that throughout Matthew's unique record of the Sermon on the Mount, the law of Moses is mentioned repeatedly, along with Jesus' reinterpretation of several of its commands. For example: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago 'You shall not murder …' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (5:21-22, etc.). Matthew shows that in these cases Jesus was not doing away with the law or giving a new one (5:17), but stressing the *spirit of the law* that was to be written on human hearts, as promised in Old Testament prophecies of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:33).

In Matthew, Jesus calls us to a higher level of righteousness than was possible with a focus on the letter of the law. In fact, it is in Matthew that Jesus tells his disciples specifically: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20 ESV). And in Matthew Jesus also speaks out against hypocrisy in the keeping of

the law more than in the other Gospels (13 times as opposed to four times in all the other Gospels combined). Once again the religious authorities of the day are chastised as being guilty of this:

> Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness … (23:23).

Clearly, to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees is not to tithe more precisely, but to stress justice and mercy in our lives.

It is not surprising then that in Matthew's Gospel we find a distinctive emphasis on the judgment of wrongdoing. We see this theme of judgment throughout the book in parables unique to Matthew's Gospel such as the Parable of the Weeds (13:24-30, 36-42) and the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (18:23-35), as well as in passages such as the "Seven Woes" spoken against the scribes and Pharisees (23:13-33), and in Christ's words regarding the end-time judgment (25:1-46).

On the other hand, Matthew also shows God's great mercy in some of the parables he records and in many passages that underscore the importance of mercy in God's eyes or his gracious willingness to extend mercy to us. We see this, for example, on two occasions when Matthew records Jesus citing the words of Hosea, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). One of these instances – Jesus defending his disciples' plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath – is only found in Matthew (12:7). Tellingly, although the second instance – one of Jesus defending his having dinner with tax collectors – is also mentioned by Mark (Mark 2:15-17), only Matthew records the words "… go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'" (9:13). Matthew's repeated mention of the words from Hosea provides a clear example that for him "mercy, not sacrifice" is a key to understanding Jesus' teaching and interpretation of the Scriptures.

We should also not forget the importance of love in this Gospel as the force that applies justice when it must and which offers mercy when it can. It should not surprise us that while Matthew is not the only Gospel that records the story of Jesus stressing that the greatest commandments are those of love toward God and fellow man, Matthew alone includes Jesus' words "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40).

The connected themes of justice and mercy based on love run throughout Matthew's Gospel and both sober and encourage us. They are the practical applications of his announcement of the gospel itself: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2). For Matthew, justice calls for our repentance and the institution of the kingdom of heaven calls for the expression of mercy in our lives. This is, in fact, the great underlying moral theme of Matthew's Gospel: that God's righteousness requires justice, but his freely given love offers mercy – and that his law of true justice and mercy is fulfilled only by love.

PART FOUR:
MARK'S STORY

12. THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Matthew and Mark's Gospels share so many verses that it seems very likely that one was a major source for the other. If the traditional view that Matthew was written first is correct, then Mark used Matthew's Gospel as the basis for a shorter summary. If, as many scholars now believe, Mark's Gospel was written first, then that of Matthew is an expansion of Marks' original account. In either case, Mark's Gospel does include some unique material and his story has its own themes and perspectives on the life and ministry of Jesus.

Although the second Gospel is anonymous in the sense that it does not itself include its author's name, there is considerable evidence in the New Testament and in early Christian history to confirm that it was written by John Mark, the young cousin of the apostle Barnabas.

Details of the language and style of this Gospel indicate that the author's first language was not Greek, but rather a Semitic language such as Aramaic. The great number of details found in the Gospel that are not necessary for the account, but which could have come from the apostle Peter, also indicates the likelihood of the traditional view that Mark, a Judean Jew, composed this Gospel using Peter as one of his primary sources.

This view of the Gospel is strengthened by the agreement of early Christian scholars such as Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. The fact that Mark was not one of the original apostles or some other leading figure in the early Church makes it more likely that he did indeed write the Gospel that today bears his name rather than it being written by someone trying to produce an accepted account by means of a claimed authority. This is all the more true because the Gospel's many details regarding Peter would have made it easy to claim that apostle as its author.

Who Was Mark?

Although he was not a leading figure, the New Testament gives us more information about John Mark than any of the other Gospel writers apart from the apostle John. Mark's Gospel itself states that as a young man he was present in the Garden of Gethsemane on the evening Christ was arrested – and that he fled when those arresting Christ attempted to seize him (Mark 14:51–52).

Luke mentions Mark several times in the Book of Acts, and Paul also mentions him several times in his epistles. We know that Mark was the cousin of the apostle Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) and that he started the first missionary journey with Barnabas and Paul, but withdrew for some reason (Acts 12:25). Although this led to Paul not wishing to include Mark on the second missionary journey, Mark went separately with Barnabas (Acts 15:39). We know that he later became a significant help to Paul, and Mark is one of the last people the apostle mentioned in his final letter (2 Timothy 4:11).

We also know that Mark worked closely with the apostle Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and Mark's Gospel often seems to tell its story from Peter's perspective (1:35, etc.) including many details that probably only Peter could have given him (14:66-71, etc.).

Beyond this information about Mark himself, we also know that one of the churches of Jerusalem met in his mother's home and that Peter apparently visited his home often enough that a servant there recognized the apostle by his voice alone (Acts 12:12–14). Because Mark was present to follow Jesus to Gethsemane on the evening of the Last Supper, a number of scholars have thought it likely that the Supper may have taken place in a room in Mark's mother's home.

Mark's Audience

Most scholars believe that the original audience for Mark's Gospel was primarily a Roman one. There is a good deal of internal evidence for this. Not only do we find the frequent use of Latin terms in the Greek manuscripts (for example, *denarius* in 12:15,

quadrans in 12:42, *praetorium* in 15:16, and *flagellare* in 15:15) in this Gospel, but also many other details such as Mark's use of the Roman system of dividing the night into four watches instead of the Jewish system of three divisions (6:48, 13:35).

Also, Mark's explanation of Jewish customs (for example, 7:3; 14:12; 15:42) and his translation of Hebrew and Aramaic expressions into Greek (for example, 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 9:43; 10:46; 14:36; 15:22) both indicate that his primary audience was probably not one consisting of Judean Jews.

Another clue that Mark's audience was a Roman one may exist in his mention of Alexander and Rufus as the sons of Simon the Cyrene (15:21), because these individuals seem to have been personally known to the Christians in Rome (see Romans 16:13).

Finally, Mark's audience clearly lived in a somewhat different world than the largely quiet and pastoral Judea. Romans were used to a faster pace of life enabled by straight Roman roads, organized commerce and efficient messenger systems. In the Roman world, if something was important it would usually be done quickly – and something done quickly was often likely to be important! We see this throughout Mark's Gospel in the way significant events are described. This is a world view that a Roman audience would have particularly understood – it was their own view.

All this suggests that John Mark may have been in Rome with Peter in the late 50's or early 60's, sometime before to shortly after that apostle's death (ca. AD 64–68), and that Mark may have composed his Gospel at that time with the primary audience being the Christians in Rome.

Mark's Perspective: The Present

Mark's Gospel is firmly set in the present in the sense that it does not continually appeal to past prophecies as Matthew's account does, but looks instead more directly at Jesus' deeds in the "here and now." In fact, "here and now" perfectly summarizes the stress on time in Mark. This Gospel not only stays within the time of the

actions recorded, but also (as we already saw in relation to its Roman audience) Mark's Gospel continually underscores the immediacy of "now."

For example, Mark tells us (emphases added) that at the onset of Jesus' ministry "*At once* the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness" (1:12); "*Without delay* he called his disciples" (1:18); "they *immediately* followed him" (1:18, 20); "news about him spread *quickly* over the whole region of Galilee" (1:28).

The pattern continues throughout the Gospel. The Greek word *eutheos*, translated "immediately," "straight away," "at once," etc., occurs no fewer than 42 times in Mark, and this and other terms of time give a preciseness and immediacy to important events and even everyday actions. When Mark tells us regarding Jesus and his disciples that "As soon as they left the synagogue they …" (1:29), he conveys a sense of pressing dedication to what they were doing. When he tells us of the man healed by Christ that "immediately the leprosy left him" (1:42), we see the kind of power that effected an instantaneous change.

And it is not just Jesus and the disciples that act with speed. Often the agents of evil do also. When John the Baptist is imprisoned, Salome's daughter doesn't just ask for the head of John – she asks for it "right now" (6:25). Mark paints a verbal picture of a cosmos in which good and evil are completely dedicated to their goals and the battle between them is being fought not in some past or potential future, but constantly in the here and now. But we must not see the immediacy of Mark's account as only a product of Roman attitudes and expectations. Mark uses constantly active narrative and the historical present tense, which show the dedication and non-stop work of Jesus. This gives every reader of this Gospel a sense of the need for dedication and an attitude of urgency in doing the work of God.

Mark is a Gospel of the here and now. His present-focused story challenges us to live out our part in God's calling, not by dwelling on events of the past or plans for the future, but by doing what we have been given to do, now.

13. MARK'S PORTRAIT: THE SERVANT

The likelihood that Mark's Gospel was originally written for a Roman audience is of great importance in understanding this portrait of Jesus. For many Romans, the concept of "*virtus*" was an important ideal, and this virtue involved a willingness to work and to serve the common good – usually through service to the State and often with great deeds. So just as Matthew gives his Jewish readers a portrait of Jesus as Messiah to which they can relate, Mark does the same for a Roman audience with his portrait of Jesus' service.

Mark shows us Jesus as a totally dedicated servant – but one who is dedicated to serve not an abstract concept of State, but the individuals who comprise the State. And Jesus is not shown as a great man who nobly serves his own ideals, but as a humble man who serves out of his love for people. It is as though Mark uses the concept of service as the very basis of his portrait of Jesus, but a service that is rooted in deep humility. We see this emphasis on Christ as servant in many ways.

Because Mark's portrait of Jesus is as a servant, it is not necessary for Mark to record his genealogy as Matthew and Luke do – the ancestry of a slave is not of any importance, and the servant makes no claim to connection or status. Instead, Mark ignores the birth and childhood of Jesus and begins his Gospel with the start of Jesus' ministry – his service. The job of servants is primarily to act rather than to speak and Mark also does not emphasize the teachings of Jesus as much as the other Gospels do. In fact, he omits large portions of Jesus' sayings and sermons. For example, this is the only Synoptic Gospel that does not record any of the Sermon on the Mount. And while Mark records fewer parables than Matthew, he describes more miracles. Mark concentrates far more on Jesus' actions and service than on his teaching.

So Mark does not paint a verbal portrait intended to impress us with Jesus' position or great deeds, as biographies of important Romans did. The voice confirming his divine identity at his baptism is addressed to Jesus alone (1:10-11), and even the miracles of Jesus are recorded primarily as simple acts of compassion and service rather than signs of his messianic identity.

In fact, one of the most characteristic aspects of Mark's Gospel is his stress on what has been called "The Messianic Secret." In Mark, Jesus constantly conceals his messianic identity from the public as much as this is possible (Mark 1:40–45; 8:29–30). This secrecy regarding Jesus' identity before his death and resurrection was noticed even by the earliest Christian writers and is a profound part of Mark's portrait. Mark acknowledges that Jesus was the promised King, but his portrait may be said to stress the king's "pre-enthronement" ministry as a servant. For Mark, Jesus is only publicly "coronated" with the crown of thorns at the cross. Up till that point he is seen not as a king in disguise, but as a true servant who openly serves God and humanity.

Mark's Gospel shows us that God himself serves. His portrait of the Son of God is summed up when Jesus proclaims: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

14. MARK: THE GOSPEL OF SERVICE AND HUMILITY

Mark's stress on the servanthood of Jesus affects his narrative in many ways. A major theme of this Gospel is that of the preparation of disciples. We see this from the outset in the narrative of John the Baptist who came to call people to repentance and to "prepare" the way of Christ (Mark 1:1b-8). This is the only "background" to Jesus' life and ministry that Mark gives, and the theme is continually developed in the following chapters as Christ calls his own disciples and then prepares them to call others.

Service

Within this theme of discipleship, the service of Christ is continually shown as the example his disciples are given to follow. This carries important lessons, as Mark shows us the service Jesus exemplifies and to which he calls us is neither occasional nor necessarily without suffering.

Mark's characterization of Jesus' ministry is one of ongoing, unceasing service. We see this in a fascinating detail of his Gospel – his use of the word "again" – emphasized in the following examples: "And *again* He entered into Capernaum after some days" (2:1 NKJV); "...Once *again* Jesus went out beside the lake ... and he began to teach them" (2:13); "*Again* he entered the synagogue" (3:1 ESV); "*Again* Jesus began to teach by the lake (4:1); "When Jesus had *again* crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake" (5:21); "*Again* Jesus called the crowd to him ..." (7:14).

None of the other three Gospels places so much emphasis on ongoing, dedicated service. For Mark, Jesus shows us that service does not occur only occasionally, it is an ongoing part of the life of the Master and his disciples.

Mark also shows that the service Christ exemplifies and to which he calls his followers is not always comfortable service – it is service that may well involve discomfort and even suffering. This is made clear in chapters 8 through 10 of his Gospel in the repeated correlation between Jesus' sufferings and the "cost of discipleship" for his followers. In these chapters Jesus makes three predictions of his suffering and death on the Cross (8:31, 9:31, and 10:33-34), and he follows each of these three predictions of his suffering with a statement regarding discipleship.

In the first statement Jesus relates his own service and suffering to that which his disciples must also take on: " …Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me… whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (8:34-35).

We should remember that the evidence for Rome as the probable place of this Gospel's writing suggests how important this prophetic warning and encouragement were for the Christians in that city who began to undergo persecution under the Emperor Nero starting in AD 64.

Then, in his next two statements, Jesus stresses another aspect of service that the disciple must have – that of humility.

Humility

Service and humility go hand in hand in this Gospel, as we saw above in Mark 10:45 with its stress that "even" the Son of God humbled himself in order to serve. Jesus tells his followers they must not only serve, with suffering if necessary, but also they must serve in humility.

Following the second prediction of his own suffering (9:31), in Jesus' next statement regarding discipleship (9:35) he says: "… Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." Finally, in his third statement (10:43-44) he says: "…whoever wants to become great among you must be your

servant, and whoever wants to be first must be *slave* of all" (emphases added).

In both of these statements Jesus makes it clear that the suffering of discipleship must be joined with the self-denial of servanthood, but we should not miss the fact that Jesus uses two different words to show the different levels of humility: *diakonos* = servant and *doulo*s = slave. To be great in the functioning of God's kingdom, we must humble ourselves as a servant; to be the greatest, we must humble ourselves yet more – as a slave.

Mark's Gospel shows us that true discipleship is the reversal of normal human perspective. Those who are of least importance in their own estimation and most willing to serve are really the greatest in the estimation of God and in the level of service that he can give them. As such, this Gospel calls for a different perspective from that of the "upward mobility" sought by many in the Roman Empire, just as it is sought by many in our own world today. Instead, Mark holds up Christ as the ultimate example of "downward mobility" – of a striving to serve that continually seeks the welfare of others above its own.

It is no coincidence that Mark shows us it is not the great of the world who are usually the great servants, but the little people who serve out of love. It is the minor characters – those who are usually not even named – in Mark's script who display truly unselfish giving and service: the poor widow who gives everything she has despite her own need (12:41-44), the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive ointment for his burial (14:3-9), and others. The greatest acts of service Mark records are, in fact, those of some of the least of the people, and Mark shows that these instances were held up by Jesus himself as examples of true service that is based on love and conducted in humility.

PART FIVE:

LUKE'S STORY

15. THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

The Gospel of Luke is the most historically oriented of all the Gospels and is closest to our modern idea of a history of the life of Jesus. It is "His story" in great detail. The longest Gospel, Luke contains a great deal of unique material that gives us important and often fascinating insights into the life of Christ. Luke's account also contains many of the stories that are among the most well-known and loved in all the Gospels: the accounts of the annunciation to Mary, the visit of the shepherds to the infant Jesus, parables such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and the story of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

Luke was probably the last Synoptic Gospel to be written, but although some scholars think it was not composed until AD 80 or later, the date for this Gospel may be much earlier. This is because the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, the Book of Acts, ends with Paul still being held a prisoner in Rome, waiting to present his case before Caesar, and it is clear that the outcome of this situation still was not known. Also, there is no mention in Luke of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), so it seems more likely that this Gospel should be dated before that event.

Who Was Luke?

Although the author of the third Gospel (and the Book of Acts) does not directly identify himself, the tradition of the early Church and a good amount of internal evidence indicate that it was composed by Luke, the physician (Colossians 4:14) and companion of Paul (2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24). The author was certainly an individual with some knowledge of Judaism, but he uses the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, extensively when quoting the Scriptures and was more than likely from a Greek-speaking Gentile background.

The existence of medical language in this Gospel has sometimes been claimed, and the Gospel certainly looks at things such as birth and healing stories with a special interest. The vocabulary and style are those of an educated writer and along with the Book of Hebrews, Luke and Acts contain the best Greek in the New Testament; although there are parts of both the Gospel and Acts where the Semitic-influenced style found in the Septuagint is used.

The author of Luke tells us that he placed a high premium on information received from eyewitnesses (Luke 1:2), and this Gospel certainly includes many small details that are not found in the other accounts of the life of Jesus. In this, the Gospel may reflect skills of the trained physician who listens carefully and treats no detail as insignificant.

Luke's Audience

Luke's Gospel (like the Book of Acts) is addressed to a "…most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3), but many theories exist as to who this individual was, or if he was, in fact, an individual. Theophilus could have been a Roman official (just as Paul addresses such dignitaries as "most excellent…" – Acts 23:26, 24:3, 26:25) or even a Jewish high priest in Jerusalem (Theophilus ben Ananus was high priest in AD 37-41, and Mattathias ben Theophilus was high priest AD 65-66). On the other hand, Theophilus could possibly be a symbolic name (Theophilus literally means "loved by God") for the Christian reader of the Gospel. It seems most likely, however, that the Gospel was written to a real individual but also distributed among early Christian communities. This audience was most probably one of Greek-speaking Christians in the eastern Mediterranean area.

Whoever the original recipient or audience of the Gospel was, Luke writes with a sophisticated vocabulary and style that indicates many of his readers were educated city dwellers. And although many of Luke's readers were doubtless of Gentile background, Luke does stress many things also of interest to Jewish readers. For

example, he uses the Jerusalem temple as a "framing motif" for his account – beginning (Luke 1:8-23) and ending (Luke 24:53) his Gospel there and including key events set within the temple during the story.

Luke's Perspective: The Future

Luke's perspective often involves a focus on the future, and we see this viewpoint expressed in a number of ways. For example, in Luke's Gospel we find the continued use of the word "will," as in "the Son of man will …." We see how pronounced this pattern is when we realize that compared to Mark's Gospel which, in a typical English translation, has 89 occurrences of "will," Luke's account uses this same word 243 times. While it is true that the word "will" occurs many times in Matthew's Gospel, the great majority of these instances are found in the citations of past prophecies that state "such and such will happen." In Luke the emphasis is almost entirely on words spoken in the present, referring to future actions or events.

Of particular interest is the way in which Luke seems to project end-time events from his own time into the distant future. If we look, for example, at Mark 13:24-29, we find that in Mark's Gospel cosmic signs of the end-time are introduced directly after the prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans with the words "But in those days, following that distress," (Mark 13:24) – with the expression "But in those days" appearing to be at the same time as Jerusalem's fall in AD 70. Luke, however, distances these same two events by writing "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (21:24).

In subtle ways like this, Luke appears to discourage near-future expectations of the return of Jesus and to project the end-times to a more distant, unknown future. The evangelist's reasons for doing this are clear. Luke not only wished to counteract the negative arguments of Christianity's critics who, as the apostle Peter tells us, asked "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our

ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:3-4), but he also strives to refocus his readers' minds on the fact that any apparent delay in Christ's return is not an excuse to ignore the message of Christianity, but a reason to strive to accomplish more in carrying out the work that still needs to be done.

16. LUKE'S PORTRAIT: THE SON OF MAN

Like all the Gospels, of course, Luke's overall message is that of the life and significance of Jesus Christ. Luke takes his own approach, however, in stressing the humanity of Jesus throughout his narrative. We can summarize this theme by saying that Luke is the Gospel of the One who was just as human as he was divine. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear why the name frequently used by Luke for Jesus is the "Son of Man."

"Son of Man" was a common Aramaic expression meaning a "human being" as opposed to an angel or any other kind of being, but Luke invests the term with the humanity of Jesus that he accentuates in his story. We see this in many ways. Luke's genealogy of Jesus goes all the way back to Adam – the first and archetypal man – and this Gospel gives the most detailed account we have of the mother of Jesus – his actual human parent. Luke also records much unique material about the infancy and boyhood of Jesus.

Consider the relative stress in the two Gospel accounts that deal with the early years of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel there are 75 verses (not including the genealogy) that tell us of Jesus' birth and youth. In Matthew there are only 31 verses on Jesus' birth and nothing on his boyhood. More importantly, Matthew's birth narrative is clearly aimed at showing Jesus' kingly status, whereas that of Luke is the record of the birth in simple human terms. It is typical of Luke that he would record "And the child grew and became strong…" (Luke 2:40). We continue to see unique glimpses into the human life of Christ in this Gospel – throughout his ministry to his final human suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross. In fact, every important event in the life of Jesus is recorded in Luke with an eye to his underlying humanness.

This is not to say that Luke downplays the divine side of Jesus' nature in any way – he stresses that Jesus will be the Son of God even before he describes the Messiah's birth (Luke 1:32-35). But as he details his account of Jesus' life and ministry, it is always from a position which notices and comments on Jesus' humanity. Even after his resurrection, when he appeared to his disciples, Luke stresses the humanity of Jesus, as we see by comparing the accounts in John and Luke: "…he showed them his hands and side…" (John 20:20); "Look at my hands and my feet…Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39).

As a result of this point of view, Luke portrays the human compassion and understanding of Jesus more than any other Gospel. He continually focuses on Jesus' ministry to the outcasts and marginalized within his own society – the poor, the sick, women, tax collectors, the religiously impure – and even those like the Samaritans and Gentiles (for example, the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30-37; and the Good Centurion, Luke 7:2-10) who were held at arm's length outside Jewish society. This theme of the active compassion of Jesus and his extension of salvation to all humanity is nowhere better summed up than in the verse: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

17. LUKE: THE GOSPEL OF PRAYER AND FORGIVENESS

In addition to the portrait theme of Jesus as the Son of Man, Luke's Gospel has two underlying, but often less noticed, themes that can be illuminating: its focus on prayer and forgiveness.

Prayer

There is a noticeable stress on prayer in Luke's writing – in fact, Luke mentions prayer twice as often as any of the other Gospel accounts and includes much unique material regarding prayer. For example, in Luke alone we find the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. Luke notices prayer, comments on it, puts it in context, and ultimately uses it as an underlying framework for his Gospel.

The evangelist begins his account of the life of Jesus, not with the Messiah's birth, but with the prayer that preceded it. He tells us that it was as the devout people of Jerusalem were praying in the temple (1:10) that an angel appeared to the priest Zechariah to inform him of the coming birth of his son – John the Baptist – who would prepare the way for the Messiah (1:17). In the same way, Luke closes his Gospel, not with Christ's ascension, but with the fact that it was followed by the disciples returning to pray and worship in the temple (24:53), where his Gospel's prayer-focused narrative began.

Between these starting and ending points, as Luke recounts the life and ministry of Jesus, he weaves into his narrative continued references to prayer – and especially the prayers of Jesus himself. In fact, Luke tells us more about the prayer life of Jesus than any other New Testament writer. While Mark only mentions the prayer of Jesus three times, Luke does so continually. To read the Gospel of Luke is to hear Jesus praying just as much as it is to hear him

teaching the crowds. Only Luke tells us that Jesus prayed continually (5:16), and he includes seven accounts of Jesus praying that are not found in any of the other Gospels.

Luke tells us that Jesus was praying when the Holy Spirit descended upon him at the beginning of his public ministry (3:21). It is Luke who tells us that Christ spent the whole night in prayer before he chose his twelve disciples (6:12). Only Luke gives us the added details that when Jesus took his closest disciples – James, Peter, and John – up the mountain to allow them to see him transfigured as he would be in the kingdom of God, he first ascended the hill to pray (9:28), and the three disciples experienced Jesus' private prayer before they witnessed his transfiguration (9:29).

The third gospel makes it clear that Jesus often prayed in the presence of his disciples and that he taught them how to pray not only by his example (9:18), but also by giving them the prayer outline we call "The Lord's Prayer" (11:1-4) and a number of parables on prayer. These parables are gems of instruction that teach us not to lose heart and to pray with shameless persistence (11:5-8, 18:1-8). Throughout, they continually stress the attitude we should have in approaching God (18:9-14). In these ways and in others (6:28, 10:2, 22:40, 46, etc.), Luke shows Jesus constantly urged his disciples to pray.

In Luke we continually catch sight of the importance of prayer in Jesus' own life and work. We see him praying in every circumstance, from formal blessings (9:16) to informal and spontaneous expressions of joy (10:21). We see that he prayed before important events, and also after them – apparently especially after performing miracles (5:15-16). Jesus often withdrew at such times, Luke says, to lonely places and prayed (5:16). By the time we come to the end of Jesus' ministry, there can be no doubt in our minds, if we are attuned to Luke's message, that it is through prayer that Jesus performed his works – not through his own strength (John 5:19, 30), but through a close relationship with God based on ongoing empowering prayer.

As we reach the end of Jesus' life, we see his agonizing prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (22:39-46) not as a unique situation, but as yet another example of Jesus' regular reliance on prayer, expressed at a crucial moment in his life. Luke gives us details of the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus that no one else records – such as the fact that "…his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (22:44). It is typical that although all the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus returned from praying and found his followers sleeping, only Luke records that Jesus urged the disciples "Get up and pray…" (22:46). As we will see, Luke alone records some of the prayers of Jesus on the cross, and Luke alone lets us hear Jesus' final prayer: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (23:46).

It should not surprise us, then, that when Luke tells the post-resurrection story of the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, he provides a detail that we might easily miss, but one that is of clear significance. Even though those disciples apparently walked and talked with the risen Jesus for hours, it was only when he prayed that they recognized him (24:13-31). Perhaps, by analogy, we can say it is to the degree that we follow the examples and teachings of Christ in the "Gospel of Prayer" that others will recognize the Son of Man in us, also.

Forgiveness

Often interwoven with Luke's theme of prayer we find the additional theme of forgiveness. This important topic appears at the very beginning of Luke's account ("…to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" – 1:76-77) and at the very end ("…repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations…"– 24:45-47) – bookending, as it were, the whole Gospel.

Much to the anger of the religious authorities, Jesus is repeatedly shown granting forgiveness to individuals. We see this in his healing of the paralytic where Jesus announces: "… I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…"

(5:20-24). This point is reiterated in the story – found only in Luke – of the penitent woman whose sins were forgiven (7:47-49). It is only in Luke's Gospel that we find the story of the prodigal son, his forgiving father, and unforgiving older brother (15:11-32). And it is only in Luke that we find the important instruction on forgiveness:

> … If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him (17:3-4).

Luke also shows Jesus forgiving not only in the sense of dispensing forgiveness to the repentant, but also in his willingness to forgive those who sinned against him and remained unrepentant. When his disciples offered to pray that fire would come down from heaven on the Samaritan village that refused to accept Christ (9:54), Jesus rebuked them, doubtless in a spirit of being willing to forgive the insult. In fact, shortly after that Luke shows Jesus exalting the virtues of the "Good Samaritan" (10:33).

Even more clearly, at the cross Luke alone records Jesus' words: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), words that are the archetypal example of Christian forgiveness – a prayer so radical and vital to Christianity that it is amazing that it appears only in this one Gospel.

Luke highlights, in a way that no other Gospel does, Jesus' teaching and practice of forgiveness. If we wish to develop the virtue of forgiveness in our own lives, there is no better place to begin to study this topic than in this Gospel.

PART SIX:

JOHN'S STORY

18. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John was the last written of the four biographies of Jesus that are preserved in the New Testament. It is usually dated to quite late in the first century – somewhere around AD 85 often being thought probable, and a date in the 90's even being possible.

Because it was written much later than the first three Gospels, John contains a great deal of material not included in the earlier accounts – as though the apostle was looking back and filling in many details that the other writers had not mentioned. But the fourth Gospel is not just a patchwork of "additional" material. As we will see, John carefully organized his material around seven key events that provide a thematic rather than chronological focus for his Gospel. John also has a very different tone. While the Synoptic Gospels are mainly descriptive, John's Gospel is more reflective. Of all the Gospels, it gives us the deepest look inside the life and teachings of Jesus.

Who Was John?

The apostle John was the brother of James – both sons of the fisherman Zebedee and both originally disciples of John the Baptist before being chosen by Jesus to be among his original twelve disciples. The brothers clearly had forceful personalities and were not afraid to express themselves, as Jesus famously referred to the pair as "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17).

Along with the apostle Peter, James and John became the leading disciples of Jesus. The three were the only witnesses of some of his miracles; they alone witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountainside, and they often pushed to the forefront in the disciples' interaction with Jesus – as when they witnessed Christ's final prayers in Gethsemane more closely than the other apostles did.

But John especially seems to have had a quieter, thoughtful side, and his writings – his Gospel, the three epistles ascribed to him, and the Book of Revelation – contain some of the most profound teachings of the New Testament. John was, of course, also the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23) – the one of the Twelve who was especially close to Jesus.

The Book of Acts shows that after the resurrection, John's role grew quickly in the early Church. He is named second after Peter in Acts 1:13 and shown as working alongside the leading apostle in the following chapters. Tradition tells us that John eventually went to the city of Ephesus, from where he wrote the three epistles attributed to him, and that the apostle was eventually banished by the Roman authorities to the Island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), where, according to tradition, he wrote the Book of Revelation.

Although it is impossible to verify, Christian tradition also holds that John outlived the other apostles and that he was the only one to die of natural causes. It is known, however, that when John was old, he taught Polycarp who later became Bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp in turn taught the Christian scholar Irenaeus, passing on to him many of the stories about John that have come down to us.

John's Audience

It is not clear who the specific recipients of this Gospel were. Early tradition suggests that John wrote primarily to the Christians in Asia Minor, and this is certainly possible. But wherever his original audience was located, it seems clear that John was writing to people who had experienced rejection by local Jewish populations and were also dealing with Roman insistence that they honor the emperor as their "lord."

In John, the writer's perspective often appears to be one in contrast to Judaism, rather than showing Christianity as merely a continuation of it as the earlier Gospels did. John usually uses the term "Jews" in a negative sense, but he uses the term to refer to the

Judean authorities in Jerusalem who persecuted Jesus rather than to the Jewish people as a whole (like all the apostles, John himself was, of course, Jewish). In fact, most of Jesus' discourses recorded in the first half of John's Gospel (which deals with the ministry of Jesus) reflect conflicts with the Jewish authorities.

The Pharisees are central to John's portrayal of the Jewish leaders (more so than in the earlier Gospels), and this is doubtless because after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Pharisees took over the spiritual leadership of Judaism and began to discourage Jewish sects – including Christianity – that emphasized messianic or "kingdom" teachings. As a result, many Christians were expelled from the synagogues, and John refers specifically to this development (9:22, 12:42, and especially 16:2).

Additionally, in the last half of the first century Christianity began to experience persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities. The first Roman persecution took place under the Emperor Nero in AD 64 after the Great Fire of Rome, but after a few years a much broader – empire-wide – persecution began in AD 81 under the Emperor Domitian who resented the Christians' unwillingness to participate in emperor worship and their choosing to worship Jesus as "Lord" – a title he claimed for himself. It was this second persecution that undoubtedly formed the background to much of what is written in John's Gospel.

So tradition and the internal evidence of the Gospel itself both indicate it is likely that John wrote his account with an eye to encouraging the Christians of the latter first century who were being rejected by the Jewish authorities on the one hand and by the Roman authorities on the other. In answer to these pressures, John writes from the perspective that Christianity represents the true fulfillment of Jewish hopes and beliefs in the worship of the one true Lord.

While the primary audiences of the earlier Gospels were Christians of Jewish, Roman and Greek backgrounds respectively, John composed for a more universal audience of Christians from many backgrounds.

John's Perspective: Eternity

Just as John's Gospel is different from the Synoptics in many other ways, so its perspective and its focus in time is unique. While the first three Gospels often focus on past, present and future respectively, John's account utilizes a wider view. Just as his audience was a universal one, John's perspective is an eternal one. Beginning "in the beginning…" (1:1) and ending in an indefinite future (21:22-25), John's account is all-encompassing in its view of time. Throughout his Gospel, the apostle stresses not any particular time frame, but rather aspects of eternity. For example, the repeated emphasis on the kingdom of God that we find in the first three Gospels is missing in John (in fact, the expression occurs only on one occasion – 3:3-5 – in his account). Instead, John places continual emphasis on "eternal life" (3:15, etc.).

In addition to his view of time, John also utilizes a unique perspective among the Gospel writers in terms of symbolism. It is not coincidental, for example, that his Gospel contains seven miracles and seven "I am" statements, as we will see. The number seven was symbolic of completion in ancient Near Eastern cultures, and John selects seven examples of various things for this reason (as we find in the seven plagues, etc., of his Book of Revelation), though some of the examples are subtly woven into his account.

The material of John's Gospel may be divided into two halves – the ministry of Jesus (chapters 1-12) and the final few days of his life (chapters 13-21). John prepares us and points out this division by the use of time markers – not of years or days, but seven time markers regarding Christ's "hour." Three times in the first half of the Gospel we find some variant of the expression "my hour has not yet come" (2:4, 7:30, 8:20), then, beginning at the end of chapter 12, four times in the second half of the Gospel we find variants of "the hour has come" (12:23, 12:27, 13:1, 17:1).

John also uses contrasting symbolic images that were common in his culture. He continually stresses the contrast between light and darkness, good and evil, God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist,

believers and unbelievers, truth and falsehood, love and hatred, life and death. For John, all people "belong" to one side or the other of this universal contrast. We are children of righteousness or children of evil, children of light or children of darkness. There is no in-between. But John paints a portrait of Jesus as the Eternal One who came, in love and truth, to call us from the one side to the other.

19. JOHN'S PORTRAIT: THE SON OF GOD

John's story of the life of Jesus is very different from the accounts given in the Synoptic Gospels. We see this in the material John does not include that is found in the earlier three Gospels, as well as the material he does include that the other accounts do not have.

John's Gospel omits a number of important events in the life of Jesus: the temptation in the wilderness, his transfiguration, the Sermon on the Mount and the giving of the Lord's Prayer. Also, John records no examples of Jesus casting out demons, and there are no parables in his Gospel. Perhaps most surprisingly, the institution of the Lord's Supper is not mentioned by John. The omission of these important events is most understandable when we consider John to have written a supplemental account of Jesus' life – focusing mainly on events not recorded by the other Gospel writers.

This makes sense when we consider the material that is unique to the fourth Gospel. Only John describes events of Jesus' early Galilean ministry such as his miracle of turning water into wine. While the other Gospels do not discuss any visits by Jesus to Jerusalem between his childhood and final Passover, John supplements the record by telling us that on other occasions Jesus cleansed the temple early in his ministry, taught in the temple, and healed a blind man at the pool of Siloam as well as a lame man at the pool of Bethesda. John also records Jesus' conversations with the Pharisee Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well, in addition to a number of his longer "discourses," such as his teaching on the Water of Life and the Bread of Life.

John alone tells us of the anointing of Jesus, that Jesus wept, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the plot to kill Jesus, and his prediction of the glorification of the Son of Man and the last judgment. He alone tells us of the foot-washing commanded by

Jesus at the Last Supper, Jesus' extended farewell discourse, his answer to Pilate, his placing of his mother in the care of John at the cross, and his post-resurrection appearance to Thomas. These and many other details indicate that John was supplementing the earlier Gospels with his own extensive eyewitness accounts. In fact, a little more than 90% of the material in John is not found in the other Gospels.

But John's account is not just a filling in of missing details. Uniquely, the fourth Gospel begins with a prologue giving us glimpses of its underlying themes and motifs in the same way that an overture might do for a musical symphony. This prologue shows us Jesus as the preexistent "Word" – the Son of God who came to reveal the Father. And it shows us Jesus himself being revealed in the testimony of those who were witnesses to his works. John the Baptist, the disciples, and others declare him to be the Lamb of God, the Christ, and the Son of God. Unlike Matthew's King, Mark's Servant, and Luke's Son of Man, John's Jesus is primarily portrayed as the Son of God - God indeed. We see this in many ways. In John, Jesus replaces the temple in importance as the manifestation of the presence of God, and John's Gospel puts more emphasis on the relationship between God the Son and God the Father than is found in any of the Synoptic accounts.

John not only begins his Gospel with the teaching that Jesus is the "Word" who co-existed with God, but he also places great stress on the words of Jesus – his teachings. No other Gospel looks at Christ's ministry in quite this way: John's account is one of connected and often extended discourses. He does not tend to record short sayings and remarks of Jesus like the other Gospel writers do. Rather, he gives us whole teachings, even when these are difficult to understand (6:60, etc.); but the stress is always on the divine nature of Christ. The three predictions of Jesus' death recorded in the other Gospels (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33–34, etc.) are replaced by John with three instances in which Jesus predicts he will be "lifted up" (3:14, 8:28, 12:32) – signifying not only his being physically lifted up on the cross, but also his resurrection.

This stress on Jesus as the Son of God is also seen in Jesus' works that are recorded in the fourth Gospel. John organizes a great part of his account around seven actions in Jesus' ministry that he describes as "signs" – proofs of Jesus' divine identity. The seven signs consist of Jesus' changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana (2:1-11); healing the royal official's son at Capernaum (4:46-54); healing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (5:1-15); feeding the 5,000 (6:5-14); walking on water (6:16-24); healing the man born blind (9:1-41); and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45).

John was obviously aware of other miracles that Jesus had performed, but he selects only these seven from a much larger pool. To qualify as a "sign," John chose only miracles that had been performed in public and that pointed in some way to a significant aspect of Jesus' divine identity. In the signs he selected, Christ's power to create (feeding of the 5,000) and to bring light to darkness (healing a man born blind) is demonstrated, as well as his power over space (healing at a distance), over time (healing a man sick for many years), over matter (water changed to wine), over nature (walking on water), and even over death itself (the resurrection of Lazarus). Collectively, these seven miraculous signs are given by John to prove to those who will accept them that Jesus is, indeed, the true Son of God.

Throughout his Gospel, John also records Jesus using the expression "I am …" on a number of occasions. Many scholars have noted that there are seven nominal declarations (statements of Jesus' identity) of this type in John. The seven "I am" declarations are as follows: " I am the bread of life" (6:35-51); " I am the light of the world" (8:12); " I am the door of the sheep" (10:7, 9); " I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14); "I am the resurrection, and the life" (11:25); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); "I am the vine" (15:1, 5). These seven declarations are all important aspects of John's portrayal of Jesus that are not found in the other Gospels. All present the centrality of Jesus in God's plan for humankind.

20. JOHN: THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF AND LOVE

Near the beginning of his account John hints at the two great themes of his Gospel when he writes: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). For John, grace and truth are actively expressed as love and belief, and these are the two themes that John develops throughout his Gospel. But John divides the stress somewhat in his account. In chapters 1-12 the word "believe" appears 72 times, as opposed to only 23 times in chapters 13-21. Conversely, the word "love" appears only 12 times in chapters 1-12, but 44 times in chapters 13-21. In other words, John places much greater stress on belief in the first half of his Gospel and on love in the second half.

Belief

John begins his Gospel with a strong stress on the theme of belief. In the first chapter of his account, we read that Jesus "... came as a witness to testify ... so that through him all might believe" (1:7) and that "... to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12). Belief is also stressed, of course, in John 3:16 – the best-known verse in the New Testament – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The teaching is reiterated yet again in John 3:36, where John tells us "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life."

This theme continues throughout John's Gospel, and we can see its importance in the sheer number of references the apostle makes to belief compared to the other Gospel writers. Although different translations may vary, we find in the NIV, for example, that the word "believe" occurs some 9 times in Matthew's Gospel, 15 times

in Mark's Gospel, 10 times in Luke's Gospel and an astonishing 95 times in the Gospel of John.

But John is not simply writing about belief in God, he writes about belief in Jesus as the Son of God. That is why this Gospel ties the miracles of Jesus to belief in him on so many occasions. For example, after his first miracle in which he turned water into wine, John tells us: "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). The pattern is frequently repeated – the miracles are not recounted simply as proofs of the identity of Jesus, but also as the cause of the disciples' belief.

Yet John also shows that belief in Jesus is not always belief for the right reasons. In fact, he tells us: "… many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people" (2:23-24). John also shows us examples of those, like Nicodemus (3:1–21), who almost believe yet cannot bring themselves to fully accept their belief.

Perhaps most strikingly, John continually contrasts the wrong belief or lack of belief of many of the Jews and their religious leaders with the true belief of despised groups such as Gentiles and Samaritans. The story of the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well (4:1-42) is an important example – and one unique to John's Gospel. John places the story of this woman within a few verses of the story of Nicodemus (also unique to John), as though to directly compare the two individuals, and he concludes the story with a powerful acknowledgement of the belief of many of the Samaritans in Christ:

> Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony … And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (4:39-42).

But the greatest example of John's stress on belief is perhaps found in another story unique to his Gospel – that of the disciple Thomas who doubted the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus seen and described by his fellow disciples until he had witnessed it himself (20:24–29). John alone records the words of Jesus to Thomas as an important statement: "… Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29). All the original disciples had seen the risen Christ before they believed, and John even admits this of himself (20:8). But John stresses that Jesus' final beatitude would apply to all future believers who because of their belief would in some way be more blessed than the apostles themselves.

Love

The theme of love lies at the heart of the fourth Gospel and is even more fundamental to John's message than the theme of belief. In fact, the word "love" appears more often in both John's Gospel and in his first epistle than in any other books of the Bible.

Love is the concept that bookends, as it were, all the material John chose to include in his Gospel. He summarizes much of the introduction to his account by quoting Jesus' words regarding God's love for us ("…God so loved the world…" – 3:16) and essentially ends his Gospel with Jesus' words relative to our love of God ("…do you love me?…" – 21:15-17).

Between these two points, John continually returns to the theme of love, and his often-given title "the apostle of love" is well deserved. Compare: while the word love appears in 15 verses of the NIV translation of Matthew's Gospel, 7 verses in Mark, and 14 verses in Luke, John's account mentions love over 50 times in some 39 verses.

As we saw above, the theme of love is especially developed in the second half of John's account (chapters 13-21), in which Jesus' instruction to his disciples on the evening of the Last Supper – the

so-called "Upper Room Discourse" – is undoubtedly the most important discussion of love in all the Gospels.

Two verses – John 13:34-35 – are pivotal in this section: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In many ways the whole second half of John's Gospel could be summarized in these two verses, and the apostle repeats and expounds this teaching throughout the rest of the book.

In John, we are not commanded to love our "neighbor" as in the first three Gospels (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27) or even to be willing to love our "enemy" as our neighbor (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27). We are instructed to love "one another" – that is, everyone (John 13:34-35, etc.). This command parallels the love of God who, John stresses, gave his only Son so that "everyone" may not perish but may have eternal life (3:16).

There is also another difference between the commands to love in John and those found in the Synoptic Gospels: We are not just commanded to love others as much as we love ourselves, but to love others as Christ did – raising the requirement to the ultimate level of sacrificial love that the Son of God exhibited. This is an extraordinary command. It is spiritually akin to saying we must all climb Mount Everest. Some of us might make the ascent on occasion, but no one lives at that level permanently! Yet this is a command that is repeated multiple times in the second half of John's Gospel and summarized in John 15:12-13: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

We should not miss the significance of the repetition of this command - it is an important aspect of John's teaching. He tells us twice that God is love, multiple times of the Father's love for the Son, and multiple times that we must love one another as he loved us. Yet if we read John's account carefully, we find he is not simply repeating the statements, but expanding and expounding on them as we progress through his Gospel.

So how do we apply that love and in what ways? Although many see John's writings as teaching the "theory" of love in contrast to the apostle Paul's "practical approach" (1 Corinthians 13, etc.), John continually grounds his account in examples of Christ's ongoing expression of love. For John, Jesus was not just the manifestation of God to the world but also the manifestation of God's love. Perhaps the clearest practical example we find of this is in the practice of foot washing given by Jesus to his disciples (John 13:1–17). There is perhaps no more practical example of the application of Christ's love, other than his actual sacrifice, in the New Testament, and yet this event is never mentioned by Paul in any of his epistles. In reality, both John and Paul stress the practical application of love, but John does so by means of examples from the life of Jesus.

John does not simply say "love your enemies" or even spell out aspects of that love such as patience and forgiveness. Almost shockingly, he shows us instead Jesus washing the feet of Judas and sharing his bread with him – knowing that Judas was about to betray him (13:11-14, 26). It is as we read his account carefully that we see the way John taught "loving as Christ did" by means of the example of Christ himself.

But even if love is the most important theme of John's Gospel, it cannot be divorced from the theme of belief. In the very heart of his account of the Upper Room Discourse, John shows how the two great themes of love and truth (or love and belief) that his Gospel explores were tied together in the words of Jesus himself: "… the Father himself loves you because *you have loved me and have believed* that I came from God" (16:27, emphasis added).

Ultimately, for John, love and belief cannot be separated. We cannot develop the kind of love God exhibits without believing, or truly believe without loving. As has been wisely said, "belief is the eye of love, love is the heart of belief"; both are necessary for the eternal life that, John tells us, God has desired to give us from the beginning.

APPENDIX:
USING A HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS

Although simply reading through the four accounts of the life of Jesus is certainly all we need to do to grasp their essential message, there are other ways we can occasionally approach these books for a fresh perspective and to help us see things we otherwise would have missed.

One of the best alternative ways of reading the Gospels is to use a "harmony" that arranges the material of the four books in such a way that we can read the different accounts of each event together. The value of doing this has been understood for centuries. In fact, the earliest known harmony of the Gospels, the *Diatessaron* by the ancient Christian scholar Tatian, was compiled in the second century – nearly two thousand years ago. Tatian's work attempted to merge all four accounts of Christ's life into one continuous story – almost like merging photographs of a person taken from four different angles into a single "three-dimensional" image.

Today harmonies are usually of two types: "synthetic" or "parallel." Either they synthesize or merge the different accounts into one single story flow as Tatian's original *Diatessaron* did, or – more commonly, today – they place the material from each of the Gospels side by side in parallel columns.

Although they are not common, synthetic harmonies can be helpful. A harmony of this type not only brings all the information on a given event together into one connected story, but also synthetic harmonies help us to get the larger overview – allowing us to clearly see where stories which only appear in one of the Gospels fit into the overall flow of the others, and so to better see them in their context.

Parallel harmonies are often more useful however, because while they too bring the different versions of each story together – at

least side by side – they still keep the individual stories separate. This can help us to see similarities and differences between the individual accounts so we can better understand what is unique in each Gospel – what each author wanted to stress, what he was trying to focus on, and what his particular message is.

For example, as we have seen, the birth of Jesus is described in two of the Gospels – Matthew and Luke. The two accounts tell the same basic story, but when we put them side by side we find many details in Luke's account that fill out Matthew's story of the nativity – such as the census that forced Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem and the story of the annunciation to the shepherds. Matthew, on the other hand, gives us details such as the story of the wise men, the flight into Egypt, and King Herod's massacre of the children in his attempt to kill Jesus. Both accounts tell us the essential story, but a harmony helps us to see a more complete picture. As in this instance, a harmony helps us to see that in many cases Luke focuses on the social background of the life of Jesus, while Matthew's focus is more often on political aspects of the time that affected Jesus' life. While this is just a simple example, in cases where events are described in three or all four of the Gospels, a harmony can be even more useful in bringing all the facts together.

Making such a harmony is not simple, however. In the course of his ministry Jesus travelled around preaching in many of the cities and towns of ancient Galilee, Judea and their surrounding areas. This makes it likely that he repeated the same messages at different times and in several places. For example, both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke include Jesus' instruction on how to pray – the Lord's Prayer – but Matthew gives this as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9-13), while Luke sets the prayer at a separate time after Jesus had been praying and his disciples asked him how to pray (Luke 11:2-4). This means that in some cases it might seem that material in a harmony is not in the correct place or is being duplicated, but most modern harmonies are constructed with careful scholarship that takes this situation into account.

Today there are many harmonies that you can consult or read through as part of your personal Bible study. Some just compare the three "Synoptic" Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – while others also include John's Gospel, which is sometimes difficult to mesh with the others, but which often adds much additional material, of course.

A number of harmonies of the Gospels are available for purchase from various book publishers, and several harmonies can be utilized for free online.

For a single column harmony with all the Gospel accounts merged into one story, you can try the one online at:
https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/harmony/index.cfm

For a multiple column, parallel harmony, you can look at the one here: http://biblehub.com/parallelgospels/

You can also download a parallel harmony based on the NET Bible here: https://bible.org/assets/pdf/Peyton_GospelHarmony.pdf

Whether you choose to purchase a printed harmony for use in your study of the Gospels or elect to use one of the available free online versions such as those mentioned here, using a harmony can give you a fresh and often fascinating view of the story the Gospels tell. Whether you are a new student of the Bible or have read it for many years, using a harmony can enrich your study in ways that deepen your understanding of the four Gospels and give you a much better knowledge of the unique and special emphases of each story of the King, the Servant, the Son of Man, the Son of God, who was Jesus.

AFTERWORD

You can find more free Christian e-books on the websites at TacticalChristianity.org and LivingWithFaith.org. New books are added periodically. For your study of the Gospels, we recommend the books *Lessons from the Life of Jesus: Practical Insights from the Gospels* and *The City on a Hill: Lessons from the Parables of Jesus* which can be downloaded *here*.

If you do not have access to a Bible to read the additional verses given in each chapter of this book, or for Bible study at any time, we recommend BibleGateway.com or many of the other websites that give free access to translations of the Bible in multiple languages.