

# *Four Gospels: Matthew*

first in a series of sermons on the Four Gospels by Jeff S. Smith

## **Introduction**

Historians tell us that many people wrote accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, but only four of them survived as part of what became the New Testament canon. These four biographies then are authoritative and harmonious in describing a bit of the life and much of the ministry of our Lord and savior. Each of them is distinctive, however, in that the writers selected different episodes to memorialize or emphasize. We do well to consider them all equally, allowing them to supplement each other and complete our faith.

Matthew, or Levi (Mark 2:14), was an apostle, but had served as a Jewish tax collector for the hated Roman empire before his call. Matthew and his fellow publicans were generally despised by the Jewish populace for their perceived disloyalty, greed and collaboration with an infidel occupational force.

That is what makes the call of Matthew so provocative. Jesus early hints at the fact that he cares not for national pride or military resistance by choosing the best man for the office regardless of his political leanings. Interestingly, another of the apostles, Simon the Zealot, was a member of a party that sought to expel the Gentiles from Judah altogether.

Matthew does not identify himself in the book but early tradition connects him to it nonetheless. His name means “gift of God.”

Matthew might have written his account from Syrian Antioch between A.D. 58 and 68. His Hebrew background lends itself well to the deeply religious tone of his account, which includes about 65 references to the Old Testament. Matthew is writing to Jewish readers who may still be curious about this alleged Messiah and to others who might be confused about the promise of the kingdom which appeared to many to be snuffed out at the cross.

## **Discussion**

### **I. Message**

#### **A. Jesus Is The Messiah**

1. Matthew approaches his initial Jewish audience with the royal genealogy and remarkable tale of the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25)
2. the prophesied mission of the messiah was the life’s work of Jesus of Nazareth, whom some people were still identifying as the same
3. Matthew shows how Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecies
  - a. birth in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:6)
  - b. escape from Herod (Matthew 2:16-18)
  - c. residence in Nazareth (Matthew 2:22-23)
  - d. opening his ministry (Matthew 4:12-16)
4. as the messiah, Jesus taught as one having personal authority, unlike the scribes who preached with delegated authority and personal bias (see Matthew 7:28-29)
5. he even resisted the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, who had become enemies both of truth and God (Matthew 16:5-12)

#### **B. Jesus Prophecies About a Kingdom**

1. the Jews were waiting not only for the messiah, but for the restoration of their kingdom, about which Jesus was willing to speak
2. the eternal kingdom was not a place, but the active spiritual reign of God in this world without regard to borders or numbers (Matthew 9:35-38)
3. he himself would be the king of this endless spiritual realm; “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:28)
4. yet citizenship in that kingdom would not be limited to those born into a Jewish household, but would be open to any who would be born again in obedience to his invitation
  - a. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).
  - b. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10).
  - c. righteousness, not perfection or faith alone, would lead one to the borders of that kingdom (Matthew 5:19-20; 7:21)

5. that kingdom was coming into existence with each passing day as Jesus taught and came nearer the cross (see Matthew 12:28)

- a. the kingdom was to be the believer's chief priority in life (Matthew 6:31-33)
- b. no sacrifice should be deemed too great to secure faithfulness and citizenship in God's kingdom (Matthew 13:44-46)

#### C. Jesus Fulfills the Law

1. the coming of a new kingdom necessitated a change in the law, but a fulfillment rather than a destruction (Matthew 5:17-18)

2. throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus points out what the audience had read or been taught about the Law of Moses, showing how a shallower interpretation of it had stripped it of God's idealism

3. Jesus also began to formulate what would be the law of his kingdom and covenant

4. law keeping had become a grudging, heartless activity rather than evidence of faith and hope and Jesus sought to restore both to the practice of obedience (Matthew 7:12, 22:34-40, 23:23-24)

#### D. Jesus Establishes His Church

1. the messiah, kingdom and new covenant come together in the establishment of the church of Christ—the kingdom itself built upon the savior and the good news about him (Matthew 16:13-19)

2. the church would be a disciplined community (Matthew 18:15-18)

3. the church would be a praying community (Matthew 18:19-20)

4. the church would be a forgiving community (Matthew 18:21-22)

5. the church would be an evangelistic community (Matthew 28:19-20)

## II. Applications

### A. The Gospel is There for Unbelievers

1. Matthew writes to Jewish unbelievers about the Messiah they have been anticipating, proving from the prophecies that the life of Jesus matches up perfectly

2. Gentile unbelievers are also treated to a message of deliverance from guilt and waywardness through a universal savior (Matthew 15:21-28)

### B. The Gospel is There For Christians

1. Matthew's gospel shows us the value of the Old Testament

2. we learn the need to live according to a new law with high moral standards of behavior

3. we see a better way to get along with people, especially other believers

4. we are encouraged to share the gospel with unbelievers and to hope always for the return of our savior

## Conclusion

Matthew's gospel account has told of the miracles and parables of Jesus in an inspiring way.

# Four Gospels: Mark

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## Introduction

John Mark was the son of a woman named Mary, apparently a woman of some means in Jerusalem, for the disciples met behind her gate to pray when Peter was about to be executed (Acts 12:12). History has closely linked the apostle Peter with both Mark and this gospel account and a notation at the end of the apostle's first epistle seems to support that (5:13).

John Mark also had the opportunity to travel with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25), but in his life's most noteworthy failure, he abandoned the mission in the middle in order to return home (Acts 13:13). This led to a rift between Paul and Barnabas and resulted in their separation as Mark then accompanied Barnabas on a preaching journey (Acts 15:36-41).

Mark seems to write for Gentile readers, especially among the Romans. He passes over the genealogy of the Lord, which would have had little impact upon those not schooled in the Old Testament, and leaves the condemnations of the Jewish sects to Matthew.

Mark might have written from Rome between A.D. 55 and 65. He writes like a journalist with very concise and pointed records of Christ's life. Mark emphasizes the redemptive work of Christ and the importance of serving God. The Roman pragmatist would have been likely to heed Mark's tone.

## Discussion

### I. Message

#### A. Jesus: The Son of God

1. Mark begins his gospel with an immediate confession that Jesus is the son of God, the one about whom the forerunner had spoken (Mark 1:1-5)
2. John the baptizer was the Lord's older cousin and the one whom God chose to prepare the people for the coming of his son
3. John turned the hearts of the people back to true religion, challenging them to be honest and fair and kind, and to repent for the ways in which they had failed
4. Jesus, however, is God's son, incarnate in the womb of Mary, and coming with a baptism of his own (Mark 1:7-8)

#### B. Jesus: The Son of Man

1. Mark also shows us the sometimes painful humanity of our savior, whose sojourn on earth was not eased by his true identity, but who suffered everything that man does
  - a. he was disappointed at times (Mark 3:1-6)
  - b. he was compassionate (Mark 6:34-44)
  - c. Jesus was troubled about the cross (Mark 14:32-36)
2. Mark calls Jesus "son of Man" fourteen times and although the term has reference to deity and a prophet, it makes us think also about his humanity

#### C. The Actual Words of Jesus

1. Mark records what are likely Peter's recollections of some of the Lord's actual Aramaic words; in these, we have the speech of Jesus unfiltered by translation
  - a. *Talitha cumi* (Mark 5:35-43)
  - b. *Ephphtha* (Mark 7:31-37)
  - c. *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani* (Mark 15:33-39)
2. the inclusion of these untranslated Aramaic words brings us just a little closer to Jesus as he really was

#### D. The Kindness of Jesus

1. if Peter indeed was Mark's source, it is interesting to note what Peter told Mark about his own place in the ministry—what is included and what is omitted that the other writers record
2. Peter seems to have been very aware of how unworthy he was of the Lord's friendship and confidence
  - a. chosen to be one of the twelve, Peter, along with James and John, became the Lord's closest friends (see Mark 5:37)

- b. although he told Mark about his good confession, Mark writes nothing about the Lord's reply (Mark 8:27-30); nothing about Peter being a rock or anything close to it
- c. and yet he does include the unfortunate time that Peter tried to rebuke Jesus (Mark 8:31-33)
- d. Mark also tells us about Peter falling asleep when he was supposed to be watching and how he swore he would never deny his discipleship; "Peter said to him, 'Even though they all fall away, I will not.'" (Mark 14:29; see also Mark 14:37)
- e. it is Mark who reveals what the others did not know about that fateful night: "Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept" (Mark 14:72).

## II. Applications

### A. The Importance of True Doctrine

1. Mark shows us the importance of submitting only to truth
  - a. it could not come from demons even though they had to submit to the Lord's power
  - b. it couldn't come from the healed people even though they were grateful for relief
  - c. it couldn't even come from the apostles until they had been properly taught by Jesus
2. true teaching is not merely a matter of common sense, but is the result of divine wisdom

### B. God Works Miracles

1. in Mark's account, Jesus is a great worker of miracles; Mark never tries to explain away a miracle or apologize for it
2. his miracles point the way to understanding his compassionate and powerful nature; the people were constantly amazed and awestruck when Jesus defied the laws of nature
3. Jesus had power over demons, disease and death through exorcism, healing and resurrection
4. we know that God has no miracle worker on Earth today like Jesus or the apostles, but we also know that God defies evil by answering prayer

### C. Opposition to Truth From Religious People

1. Mark also shows us how opposition to truth often comes from religious people who have their own agendas and cannot submit or tolerate the teaching of anything that might threaten their own empires
  - a. the scribes questioned his ability to forgive sins, even after he healed a paralytic (see Mark 2:1-12)
  - b. the Pharisees objected to his disciples eating on the Sabbath, although they had violated only tradition and not Moses (see Mark 2:23-28)
  - c. the Herodians considered him a threat to their political power and allied with the Pharisees whom they hated (see Mark 3:1-6)
  - d. the chief priests sought to destroy him because they envied his popularity with the people in Jerusalem (see Mark 11:18)
  - e. the Sadducees hated him because he believed in resurrection and they didn't (see Mark 12:18)
2. when one has a vested interest in error or just tradition, it makes it hard for him to be objective about what the Bible really teaches and where it is silent

## Conclusion

If they are the memories of Peter, Mark's inspired gospel account is a magnificent reminder of the deity and humanity of our savior.

# *Four Gospels: Luke*

third in a series of sermons on the Four Gospels by Jeff S. Smith

## **Introduction**

Luke is the accepted author of the gospel that has come to bear his name. Its introduction and the initial words in the Acts of the Apostles certainly connect the two works, and the eyewitness account in the latter is tied to the doctor who accompanied Paul on some of his preaching tours.

Luke was the beloved physician who became a disciple of Christ. He works more scientifically, giving a chronological outline of the Lord's life. Luke writes for the Greek idealist, stressing the perfection of the sacrifice and God's love for all. He probably wrote his gospel between A.D. 60 and 68. Tradition is that he was a Gentile who remained unmarried throughout life, dying at age 84. Although not a witness of the life of Christ, his inspiration, character and courage made him an indispensable historian nonetheless.

In the prologue, Luke states that he had investigated carefully the accounts of the life of Christ and had since decided to write out an orderly narrative of the things he had discovered. He addresses someone called Theophilus ("loved of God"), as he does in Acts as well (1:1-4).

Luke demonstrates that Jesus is the savior for all kinds of people, not just religious Jews, but their sinners and even those from other nations. Secondly, he shows that Christianity is not a threat to the empire, but perhaps its last, best hope. He records more about the Lord's childhood than any other writer and emphasizes individuals as well.

## **Discussion**

### **I. Message**

#### **A. Good News About Salvation**

1. Luke presents the gospel as God's effort to rescue man from his own sin and hopeless situation, beginning with the words of Mary (Luke 1:46-50)

2. Luke tells of the child's visit to the temple and the amazing response he received there (Luke 2:25-32)

3. where the Jews of that age might have innocently assumed that salvation was about deliverance from Roman oppression, Luke shows how the Lord quietly dispelled that error by promising an even greater emancipation from sin itself (Luke 9:23-27)

4. when Jesus went to the cross, all this came into greater clarity, especially what he had said about the cross itself (Luke 23:35-37)

5. but it was not until he was raised from the tomb that salvation from sin—meaning its consequence as much as its circumstance—became truly possible (Luke 24:1-7, 13-14, 25-27)

#### **B. Good News About a Kingdom**

1. we talk more about the gospel than we do about the kingdom, but the two subjects were one in the Lord's ministry—it was a gospel of the kingdom (see Luke 8:1)

2. priority was always to be placed upon the affairs of that kingdom, even when that interfered with one's temporal ambitions (Luke 9:59-62)

3. the only trouble was that the wealthy found it very difficult to enter the kingdom because it could not be purchased with money or good deeds or anything else, even though those very things were often the evidence of reluctance to enter such an egalitarian realm (Luke 18:18-25)

4. the kingdom that Jesus had in mind was unlike any that had ever existed; it was to be a spiritual realm defined by righteousness, peace and joy among believers all around the globe (Luke 17:20-21)

#### **C. Good News Seen in Jesus**

1. this gospel, or good news, was not built around a myth but rather the planning and events that were taking place in the life of Jesus for all in Judea to witness

a. Jesus was not crucified because he was an impostor, but because his identity clashed with the leadership's vision of liberation

b. Jesus was not crucified because he pretended to work miracles or falsely claimed royal lineage, but because he was not the kind of messiah the religious authorities wanted (Luke 23:1-25)

2. Luke's gospel was assembled with the goal of making an orderly record of Christ's life (Luke 1:1-4)

3. and his Father remained involved in the process for three decades, taking his time to make it work out right so that atonement was the result where the devil and Sanhedrin alike would have preferred a military option

- a. God saw to his son's conception and birth, his baptism, his miracles and even his death
- b. God worked in his resurrection as well, just as he intends to work in ours when the time comes (Luke 24:44-47)

## II. Applications

### A. To Those Who Disbelieve

1. Luke was a scientist, a doctor, and he writes in such a way to produce evidence that will lead to an objective conclusion about the historical character that was Jesus of Nazareth
2. modern men are apt to demand such evidence and the testimony of these witnesses and the behavior of Jesus and Mary lend credence to the messianic claims
3. faith, however, will be required for no one will be invited like Thomas to touch his wounds or to see Jesus eating a piece of broiled fish (Luke 24:36-43)
  - a. faith to seek the forgiveness of a God who must be there
  - b. faith to seek a fresh start at life and to put the past where it belongs
  - c. faith to involve oneself in the kingdom of God
  - d. faith to submit to the savior and sacrifice in his name

### B. To Those Who Do Believe

1. the Christian's familiarity with the gospel can diminish his attention to its finer points and his daily struggle with life can cloud the greater reality of eternity
2. the believer should be joyful and thankful in life, rather than being subject to wishes and worries
3. commitment to the kingdom means imitating the king and his selfless love for all men
4. the kingdom comes first (Luke 24:50-53)

## Conclusion

Luke's gospel account is indeed an orderly record of the life of Jesus, from his conception to his ascension. We leave the apostles waiting in Jerusalem for power from on high, the very place we will find them in Luke's second work, the Acts of the Apostles. From there, they expand the kingdom throughout their world.

# *Four Gospels: John*

fourth in a series of sermons on the Four Gospels by Jeff S. Smith

## **Introduction**

Four men were charged with recording the events and teaching associated with the life of the Messiah, Christ Jesus of Nazareth. Each comes from a different background and communicates the gospel message from a unique perspective. The three gospels other than John are considered synoptic because the latter contains 92 percent information that is unique to John. Why four gospels? In fact, it appears that many more accounts of the life of Christ were written, but only these four bear the divine imprint of inspiration and infallibility.

The author of the fourth gospel account is identified within the book only as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:20, 24). Because James had been killed before this book was apparently written, and Peter is associated with this particular disciple, the leading candidate is the apostle John, one of the sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17). John is also credited with writing three Biblical letters and recording the Revelation of Jesus Christ at the latter end of his life, while on the island of Patmos.

John’s account is considered the most theological and personal of the four gospels. He clearly presents Jesus as divine and much more than mere man. He spells out his purpose by way of conclusion in the twentieth chapter.

John possibly wrote from Ephesus between A.D. 80 and 90. His work is also quite structured, but contains much material that the others do not. He stresses the deity of Christ and his propitiatory offering. John seems to be the disciple whom Jesus especially loved and for that reason, perhaps, John’s gospel account is less public and more private and personal in tone. It eschews a recounting of Christ’s parables, favoring metaphors instead.

## **Discussion**

### **I. Message**

#### **A. The Evidence**

1. like Luke, John writes in order to present the evidence for Jesus as the Christ, but John writes from the point of view of an intimate friend and insider, beginning with the testimony of the Old Testament (John 1:43-46)

a. something good finally did emerge from Nazareth and it was the messiah of prophecy, but not all were convinced because they read with bias (John 5:39-40, 46)

b. Abraham rejoiced to see the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of the work that Moses had begun (John 6:32-35)

2. John the baptizer, so revered in his day by the people, also bears witness about Jesus (John 1:6-8, 15, 19-23)

3. the apostles testified about him, including John who wrote to that end (John 20:30-31, 21:24)

4. God himself bore witness about his son (John 12:27-30), as would the Holy Spirit, or Comforter (John 14:25-27)

5. in his miracles and signs, Jesus showed that he was the son of God, but people who did not want to believe simply chose to ignore the evidence, much as they will today

#### **B. The Verdict**

1. those who rejected his lordship did so because they did not know him in the spiritual sense, because there was no room in their selfish hearts for the love of God, because they were consumed with earthly life, because they were hardened by sin (see John 1:10-11, 6:36, 12:37)

a. there was no light that could reach them because they shunned its ability to expose their shortcomings

b. people reject the savior today for the same reasons—not just simple disbelief, but to protect a cherished, shortsighted, futile lifestyle that produces temporary pleasure at the expense of others and eternity (John 3:19-20)

2. those who responded to Jesus were seldom the rich and powerful, but were usually the poor and weak whom he helped

a. they listened to him and believed the objective, hopeful evidence before their eyes

b. they grew to know him by walking in the light his words shone

c. they learned to love him and thus one another (John 13:33-35)

## II. Applications

### A. Christ is God's Last Word

1. the Hebrew writer says that God once spoke through prophets, but has now spoken through his son
2. Jesus is both the messenger and the message—he is God's truth and glory and love in a letter of flesh and blood
3. by his life and death, Jesus is God's greatest outreach to softhearted sinners (John 3:13-18)

### B. We Must Respond One Way or Another

1. the testimony is in and the evidence demands that we reach a verdict about Jesus of Nazareth (John 14:1-6)
2. if we reject him like his contemporaries did, it is not because we are incapable of belief, but because we are unwilling to go along with him
3. if we accept him, it will require a wholehearted commitment to his will and obedience to his word—something that certain believers are unwilling to give
4. rejection of the gospel is not always about simple disbelief; sometimes it is an unwillingness to submit to Jesus

### C. Eternal Life Begins Now

1. salvation is yet future in the sense of heaven and rest, but this life can also be about salvation
  - a. satisfaction in our battle with the temptation
  - b. freedom from slavery to sin
  - c. new potential to make a difference in the world around us
  - d. the promised of answered prayer
  - e. real joy that comes with a heart of hope
2. the work he begins in us today will only be completed when he returns, but there is no reason to wait any longer

### D. Sharing Faith With Others

1. Jesus warned his apostles that the world would hate them as it had hated him and indeed they and the early church faced severe persecution and frequent martyrdoms
2. when we find ourselves testifying to the truth of Jesus Christ, we are likely to encounter the same kind of resistance, if not the same degree of persecution
3. we must be willing to face the slings and arrows of those who do not want their evil exposed that we might win the few who will listen to Jesus and obey him

## **Conclusion**

John writes from the perspective of the disciple whom Jesus loved, an intimate friend who well understood the savior's sacrifice and anguish. Jesus has done everything for us; what are we willing to do for him?