

This session will be primarily a study of the four biographies of Jesus which open the New Testament, known as the Gospels. The word "Gospel" simply means "good news." In ancient Rome the word was used to announce that a new emperor had come to the throne and it was a call to come and honor him. So it was no accident that the word was also used to announce the coming of the King of Kings and ultimately call all people to bow down to Him.

It's important to remember that ancient biographies like these are different than we think of biographies today. They are not claiming to tell every detail of the story in chronological order. Rather, each writer includes the information relevant to their individual themes and target audience. This is why we have four distinct biographies of Jesus. Each one rolls the story through different set of eyes.

It has been compared to how the various tv news networks, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Fox report much of the same information but each communicates to a different audience and with that in mind, each one has their own distinct style. One may include details that the others don't, or may emphasize certain things more than others, but it's still the same story.

Some ask if the Gospel writers may have researched outside sources or compared notes with each other. Sure that's possible, especially in the case of Luke's Gospel, as we will discuss shortly. Other books of the Bible openly acknowledge referencing outside sources, especially in the historical parts of the Old Testament. That doesn't diminish the Bible's inspiration at all. It simply means that God's method of inspiration can include directing the author where to find the information they need.

There are some critics who claim that the Gospels were written hundreds of years after Jesus walked the earth and cannot be reliable accounts. But that is complete nonsense because we have quotations from these Gospels in the writings of the ancient church fathers going back to the first and second centuries. So the accounts we read in the four Gospels were all written within one lifetime of Jesus' day. That in itself is remarkable because for a historical figure to have even one biography written that close to his or her actual lifetime was almost unheard of. The fact that Jesus had four of them shows all the more the impact He had on the world.

There were other books written which were called "gospels," claiming to have been written by apostles such as Peter and Thomas. Contrary to what the Da Vinci Code might claim, the reason these books are not included in the Bible is not because there was some big conspiracy to keep them out. The first century church didn't have the centralized power to do that even if they had wanted to. Rather, they were left out because from the very beginning the early Christians recognized them to be forgeries.

It's important to remember that while the four Gospels were ultimately written for all people, each one was originally written with a specific target audience in mind. Matthew was written to a Jewish audience. Mark was written to the Romans, Luke to the Greeks and John to the church, which of course, consists of people from all ethnic groups..

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels, meaning that they share a similar synopsis, or summary, of the events in Jesus' life. The fourth Gospel, John, does have its own distinctives, but it also has a very special role in telling Jesus' story, and we will talk about that as we go along.

First up is the Gospel of Mattinyahu, or Matthew: Matthew, also known as Levi, was one of Jesus' twelve original disciples. He was tax collector, which meant he had a lot of enemies even among his own people. You might remember how the religious leaders criticized Jesus for associating with publicans and tax collectors. The reason for that is because of the way that Jews were oppressed by the Roman government, a Jew who took a job working for that government was seen as being a traitor to his people. It was practically an act of treason.

Matthew's initial encounter with Jesus came when Jesus approached him and simply said "Follow me." Matthew later threw a banquet at his house for Jesus at his home and also invited some of his tax collector friends which raised the eyebrows of the religious leaders. Why would the Messiah associate with these kinds of people? Today we can be thankful that He did!

Matthew ' s Gospel is 28 chapters long, and places great emphasis on Jesus being the long awaited Jewish messiah. Matthew quotes from the Old Testament more than the other three Gospels combined.

History tells us that Matthew went on to spend more time ministeri g in the region of Judea, then moving on to Ethiopia where like all but one of the original Apostles, he died a martyr ' s death, being killed by the sword.

Mark: Also known as John Mark, was not an apostle but he was one of the earliest Christian missionaries. He worked closely with the Apostle Peter and no doubt learned much of what he knew from him. He is widely believed to have been the young man who slipped out of his coat and ran away naked when Jesus was arrested.

Mark's Gospel is widely considered to be the oldest of the four and with 16 chapters, it's also the shortest and most direct. More emphasis is placed on Jesus' actions than on His teachings. That is understandable since as we said earlier, it was written to a Roman audience and the emphasis on Jesus' miracles demonstrated where the true power is!

The Book of Acts tells us that Mark went on to assist Paul and Silas on their first missionary journey. But for some unknown reason, he abandoned the journey, which led to a serious rift with Paul. But in his final letter before his death, the book of 2 Timothy, Paul would recommend Mark to assist Timothy in his ministry, so apparently they had made amends. Eventually, Mark would be martyred in the city of Alexandria by being dragged to death by horses.

Luke: Luke was also not one of the twelve disciples. He was a physician by trade, which would

indicate that he was an educated man, a man of science. He was either a Gentile or a Jew who had adapted to Greek culture as many of them had by that time. If he was a Gentile, then he has the distinction of being the only non-Jewish writer in the entire Bible.

Luke's Gospel is 24 chapters long, and it is the most detailed of the four Gospels. Even secular scholars have acknowledged him as being a historian of the highest caliber. We see the basis for his biography in the introduction in chapter one, verses 1-4 :

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used the eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.

So Luke says up front that he has carefully researched and investigated his material. Also notice the reference to a person known as Theophilus. In other ancient literature, this was the author's way of acknowledging a benefactor, someone who sponsored their work. So it may have been that Theophilus was a wealthy Gentile convert who wanted to know more about the faith and knowing Luke's reputation commissioned him to gather it for him.

Luke would devote the rest of his life to missionary work. Being a physician, he was likely one of the earliest medical missionaries. He worked closely with the Apostle Paul. In the second letter to Timothy, which again, was written just before his death, Paul indicates that only Luke was still with him after his other friends and coworkers had abandoned him. He was later hanged in Greece, also dying the death of a martyr.

Finally, we have Jochanan, or John the Beloved, who was Jesus' closest friend on the earth. John was a commercial fisherman, working in the family business with his brother James and his father Zebedee as well as Peter. Jesus had nicknamed him the "Son of Thunder," due to his hot temper. But that did mellow over time as he matured in his faith. Throughout his Gospel, he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." We see him, along with Peter and James, in some of the most intimate moments of Jesus' life, most notably in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus went to pray before He was crucified. Also, as Jesus was dying, He entrusted John to care for His mother, which would demonstrate the deep level of friendship He shared with John.

John's Gospel contains 21 chapters, and there are some that criticize it because it was written much later than the Synoptic Gospels, and because it contains a great deal of material that the Synoptic don't. But the reasons for that are easily explained.

First, John was the only one of the original apostles who did NOT die as a martyr. He actually lived to a quite advanced age and wrote his Gospel toward the end of his life in recollection of His relationship with Jesus. And being written at a later date, it presupposes that the reader

already has some familiarity with the other Gospels, so rehashing the same events was unnecessary.

Although he wasn't martyred like the other disciples, John did still suffer tremendously for his faith, being exiled to the Island of Patmos where he experienced the visions we now have recorded in the magnificent Book of Revelation. Later he was released from Patmos and settled in the city of Ephesus where he became a prominent leader in the church there. As he grew into his old age, his consistent message to the church was "Little children, love one another."

Although these books are our primary sources for learning about Jesus' life, His presence is found all through the Bible. In our next lesson we will be looking at the Old Testament to get some insight into what Jesus did before He came to earth as well as the remarkable prophecies that prepared the way for His coming centuries in advance. So be sure to subscribe to our channel and keep it real!