

Introduction to the Bible

Week 4: The New Testament Gospels & Acts

Introduction

Briefly review the CHART. **(POSSIBLE POP QUIZ: FILL IN BLANKS IN CHART)**

Tonight we will transition from the Old Testament (the period of promise) to the New Testament (the period of fulfillment). We will survey the first five books of the New Testament (BOOK-SHELF). The first four are called the “gospels” and cover the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The fifth book is called “Acts” and narrates Jesus’ ascension and the birth and expansion of the early church.

The gospels

The Greek word for “gospel” is *euaggelion*, which means “good message.” Roman rulers used this word to describe certain official and definitive announcements. Specifically, a Roman “gospel” announced an important event and summoned people to align their lives to this event. For example, during Caesar Augustus’ reign (9 BC), a provincial assembly in Asia Minor proclaimed the “gospel” of Caesar’s uniquely peaceful reign and summoned all subjects to reckon time from a new calendar based on his birthday:

“Whereas the Providence . . . has brought our life to the peak of perfection in giving to us Augustus Caesar . . . and who, being sent to us and to our descendants as a savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and . . . whereas . . . the birthday of the god (Caesar Augustus) *has been for the whole world the beginning of the gospel (euaggelion) concerning him*, therefore, let all reckon a new era beginning from the date of his birth.”¹

It is in this context that the early Christian movement announced a greater gospel. This gospel announced the coming of a much greater Ruler who has brought a much greater salvation.

BOOKS INCLUDED: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

TYPE OF LITERATURE: The gospels are historical narratives. They are highly selective accounts of Jesus’ life, focusing mainly on His public ministry and especially on its final week when Jesus was arrested, crucified, and resurrected. Between 25% and 35% of their material is devoted to this period, emphasizing its importance.

TIME PERIOD: Jesus lived from approximately 4 BC to 33 AD. The authors wrote their accounts between approximately 60 – 90 AD. Mark is probably the earliest gospel, and John is probably the latest. Matthew and Luke probably used Mark’s gospel as their basic framework, to which they added other eye-witness material (see below).

HUMAN AUTHORSHIP: All four gospels are apostolic – they were written either by one of Jesus’ apostles or by someone closely connected to an apostle. The apostles were selected by Jesus as witnesses of His resurrection, and were personally authorized by

¹The Priene Inscription (9 BC), included in Wilhemus Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* (1905).

Jesus to be His official spokespersons (Matt. 10:40). This establishes their authority and the inspiration of their writings. Matthew and John were two of Jesus' 12 apostles; Mark wrote Peter's memoirs; Luke interviewed many eye-witnesses and was a close associate of Paul, who was an apostle.

HISTORICAL ACCURACY:

150 years ago, many biblical critics held that the gospels were written in the second century AD, and that they were filled with historical inaccuracies. Today, even biblical critics acknowledge that the gospels were written in the first century AD (unlike other accounts like the so-called "Gospel of Thomas," which is not a historical narrative and was written no earlier than mid-second century AD). Historical and archeological research has repeatedly confirmed the historical reliability of the gospels.

"Archaeology confirms a whole raft of details susceptible to artifactual or epigraphic corroboration—the existence of the pools of Siloam and Bethesda in Jerusalem, the latter with five porticoes just as John 5:2 describes, Pontius Pilate as prefect of Judea, Roman crucifixion by driving nails through the ankle bones, fishing boats large enough to hold 13 people (like Jesus and his 12 disciples), the tomb of Caiaphas, the probable ossuary (bone-box) of James, brother of Jesus, and so on. And all of these details in the Gospels were once doubted before the archaeological confirmation came forth."²

WHY THE GOSPELS ARE IMPORTANT:

They are the earliest surviving written accounts of Jesus' life, and they are eye-witness accounts. Therefore, they are the primary source documents for the historical Jesus. By contrast, other accounts like the so-called "Gospel of Thomas" were written no earlier than mid-second century AD.

Each author wrote to a different original audience. While all of them agree on the main outline of Jesus' life, each author includes different aspects of Jesus' actions and teachings to persuade and/or strengthen their respective audiences. (See "The New Testament Gospels" CHART.)

Critics often claim that the four gospels contain many contradictory accounts. But "different" does not necessarily mean "contradictory" (e.g., 1 or 2 demoniacs/blind men in Mark & Matthew). Other alleged "contradictions" can usually be resolved by allowing for the authors' loose chronological framework (e.g., Matthew's grouping of miracles in Matt. 8,9), or by additional historical information (e.g., old & new Jericho).

Also, their accounts are complementary – often interlocking to explain things that are otherwise puzzling. EXAMPLES:

² Craig L. Blomberg, "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels," <http://www.4truth.net/fourtruthpbible.aspx?pageid=8589952775>. For more examples, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 1987), and F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Stellar Books, 2013).

How does Matthew know what Herod Antipas told his servants (Matt. 14:1,2)?
Joanna's husband Chuza was Herod's steward (Lk. 8:3).

What miracles had Jesus done in Bethsaida (Matt. 11:21) – Matthew doesn't say. Why does Jesus ask Philip where to buy bread for the 5000 (Jn. 6:5)?
Because Bethsaida was the location of the feeding of the 5000 (Lk. 9:10),
and Philip was from Bethsaida in Galilee (Jn. 1:44; 12:21).

Why does Jesus ask Peter "Do you love Me more than these?" (Jn. 21:15)
Because Peter boasted that he was Jesus' most faithful disciple
(Matt. 26:33).

Fictions and forgeries aren't like this. They would answer these questions.
Actual history is like this. Passing details interlock in records told by
different people who saw the same real events (or knew those that did).

How can you control what other people write to make it interlock with what
you have written (internal undesigned coincidences)?

They present Jesus as the One who fulfills many of the specific Old Testament
Messianic prophecies. EXAMPLES:

Born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matt. 2:1-6)

Ministry begins in Galilee (Isa. 9:1,2; Matt. 4:12-16)

Healing ministry (Isa. 53:4; 35:5,6; Matt. 8:16,17; 11:5)

Non-ostentatious and uncontentious public ministry (Isa. 42:1-3; Matt. 12:15-21)

Jews' response of unbelief (Isa. 53:1; Jn. 12:37,38)

Enemies casting lots for Jesus' clothing at His execution (Ps. 22:18; Jn. 19:23-25)

Piercing of Jesus' side by His enemies (Zech. 12:10; Jn. 19:32-37)

His resurrection (Isa. 53:10; Ps. 16:10; Lk. 24:44-46)

Most of these are either impossible or undesirable to intentionally self-fulfill.

The odds of chance fulfillment of even these eight predictions are so high that it
takes blind faith to believe this!³

They present Jesus as the One who fulfills the key Old Testament covenants:

He is the "seed" of Abraham who brings the "blessing" of redemption to all of the
nations (Matt. 1:1ff.; Jn. 8:56?).

He fulfills the righteous requirements of the Mosaic Covenant (Matt. 5:17), and His
death fulfills its animal sacrifices as the ultimate Sacrifice which pays the
penalty of humans' sins (Mk. 10:45; TEMPLE VEIL TORN).

³ The odds of 8 of these predictions being fulfilled by chance is 1 in 10¹⁷. Think of an area the size of Texas, covered 2 feet deep in silver dollars. What are the odds that a blindfolded man would select one marked silver dollar on the first attempt? The answer is 1 in 10¹⁷. Peter Stoner, cited in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), p. 167.

He is the promised King from David's line (Matt. 1:1ff.; etc.).

His death provides the basis for inaugurating the New Covenant (Lk. 22:19,20).

TIPS FOR READING:

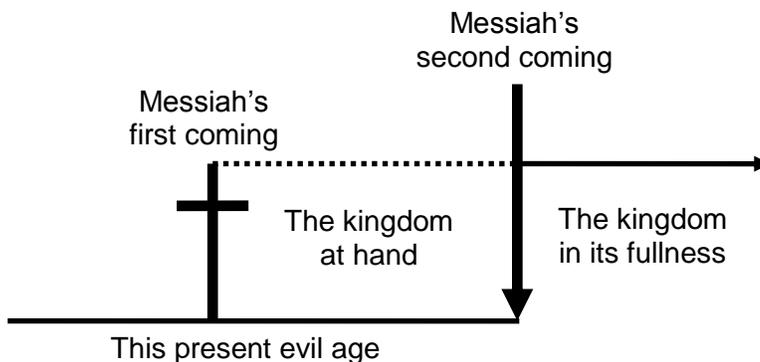
Like Old Testament narrative, read sections at a time and look for main themes (e.g., Matt. 8,9; Jn. 14-16).

Note the many ways Jesus claims to be God (e.g., "I am" statements; Mk. 2:1-12; Jn. 8:58; 10:30; receiving Thomas' worship; etc.). His claims are especially significant since He makes them to a strictly monotheistic audience.

Note (especially but not exclusively in John) how Jesus' miracles are "signs" (Jn. 20:31). On one level, they are supernatural acts that meet physical needs of specific people. But on another level, they illustrate and validate Jesus' Messianic claims to meet the spiritual needs of all humanity (e.g., Jn. 6,8 & 9,11).



Note how Jesus insists both that God's kingdom *has* come in His Person (e.g., Matt. 4:17; Lk. 21), and that God's kingdom *will* come in its fullness when He returns at the end of the age (e.g., Matt. 24:29-31). Many of Jesus' parables explain the first kingdom phase as the "mystery" phase because it was not clearly foreseen by the Old Testament prophets (1 EXAMPLE FROM MATT. 13).



Note how Jesus uses the Old Testament Law. At first glance, it appears that He is saying that people can earn entry into God's kingdom by their good works. But actually He is trying to convict self-righteous people of their need for God's forgiveness (e.g., Matt. 5:20-48; Mk. 10:17-22).

Jesus is the perfect expression of God's love and wisdom. Notice how He loves people in different ways according to their need. Some of these love-expressions we expect, while others may surprise us. EXAMPLES:

Jesus speaks words of positive vision to Peter (Jn. 1:42), but He also rebukes Peter and calls him “Satan” (Matt. 16:23).

Jesus invites the Samaritan woman to receive the gift of living water (Jn. 4:10), but He also exposes her sexually immoral life (Jn. 4:16-18).

Jesus weeps over Lazarus’ death (Jn. 11:35), but He is also very angry over it (Jn. 11:33,38).

Jesus urges people who know their sinfulness to receive His free gift of forgiveness (Jn. 3:16), but He tell the self-righteous rich young ruler to keep the Law and give all his money away (Mk. 10:21,22).

As you read interactions between Jesus and individuals, compare how you might respond with how He responds. This will yield greater insight into what it means to love wisely.

Acts

BOOKS INCLUDED: Although our Bible separates Acts from the gospel of Luke, they form a two-part work written to “Theophilus” (see Lk. 1:1-4; Acts 1:1). “Most excellent” implies that Theophilus was man of some rank. He may have been a Christian patron who sponsored this work, or he may have been Paul’s defense attorney.

See “**HOOR-GLASS**” CHART, which shows the chiasmic geographical structure of Luke-Acts.

TYPE OF LITERATURE: Acts is historical narrative. It is a highly selective account of the spread of the early Christian movement *westward*.

TIME PERIOD: Acts begins with Jesus’ ascension – probably 33 AD, and it ends with Paul imprisoned in Rome, probably 60 AD.

HUMAN AUTHORSHIP: Although the author does not name himself in either Luke or Acts, he is almost certainly Luke, the physician who was a close associate of Paul (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11). That the author was a companion of Paul is clear from the numerous “we” passages (beginning in Acts 16:10). By deleting Paul’s other companions who are mentioned in the third person, Luke is the best remaining candidate. Early church leaders also say that Luke was the author of both works.

HISTORICAL ACCURACY:

This author claims to have interviewed multiple eye-witnesses of the events he records (Lk. 1:1-3). 150 years ago, many biblical critics held that Acts was written in the second century AD (which would make the author a liar), and that it was filled with historical inaccuracies. Today, even biblical critics acknowledge that Acts was written in the first century AD. Historical and archeological research has repeatedly confirmed the historical reliability of Acts.

EXAMPLE: Sir William Ramsay, one of greatest archaeologists who ever lived, researched much of Asia Minor in an effort to disprove Luke's history by demonstrating inaccuracies. He entered his research with the assumption that “Acts” had written almost 100 years later than he claimed, inferring that it wasn't written by an eyewitness at all. He found that Luke names key historical figures in

the correct time sequence, and assigns correct titles to government officials in various areas (e.g., Thessalonica, politarchs; Ephesus, temple wardens; Cyprus, proconsul). After 30 years of archaeological research, Ramsay concluded: "Luke's historicity is unsurpassed in respect to its trustworthiness . . . Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy . . . this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."⁴

WHY ACTS IS IMPORTANT:

Imagine if your New Testament went directly from John to Romans. You would have many questions, such as: "Who is Paul and why is he an apostle?" "How did Christianity get all the way to Rome?" "How did Christianity come to include so many Gentiles?" Acts answers all of these questions by:

Explaining Paul's conversion and Jesus' personal commission of Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

Explaining how God took dramatic measures to move the Jerusalem church to reach out to Samaritans and Gentiles.

Explaining how God worked through Paul to plant churches across the northern Mediterranean Basin.

Explaining how God allowed Paul to be arrested and ultimately transferred to Rome as a prisoner.

Acts 1:1-8 tells us that Acts should not be called "the Acts of the Apostles," but rather "the continuing action of Jesus by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles and others." The resurrected Jesus is building His church (Matt. 16:18) by His Spirit through the people who believe in Him. In this sense, the book of Acts continues right up to the present day, and will continue until the Great Commission is fulfilled.

TIPS FOR READING:

1:8 provides a basic outline for Acts. Chapters 1-7 describe the growth of the church in Jerusalem, chapter 8 describes its expansion to Samaria, and chapters 9-28 describe its expansion to the beginning of the "uttermost parts of the earth."

Acts is kind of a "highlights" film of the first three decades of the church. Luke records many of the overtly supernatural ways God worked through the apostles and others. He also records Jews, possibly Samaritans, Gentiles, and disciples of John the Baptist speaking in tongues when they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2,8?,10,19). While it is tempting to read Acts as recording the answer to the question: "What is the normal activity of the Holy Spirit?," we should look rather to the clear teaching of the New Testament letters for the answer to this question. EXAMPLES:

Whole groups of people speak in tongues (e.g., Acts 2:4; 10:46), so we might conclude that all Christians should do so. But 1 Cor. 12:10,30 teach that speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift that not all Christians have.

⁴ W. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1953), p. 222.

Sometimes there is a delay between belief in Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit (e.g., Acts 1:5; 2:4; 8:15-17), so we might conclude that this is normal. But Eph. 1:13,14 teaches that Christians normatively receive the Holy Spirit when they believe in the gospel.

By asking the following four questions of each chapter through Acts 21, you can learn a lot about Luke's emphases:

“What does this passage teach about *the Holy Spirit*?” Note how the Holy Spirit consistently gave all of the Christians every resource they needed to spread the gospel. See how the same Christians received repeated “fillings” to this end. Is Luke tracing the fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Lk. 11:13? This same Holy Spirit is available to each of us! We can be repeatedly filled with the Spirit so that we can be effective witnesses for Christ!

“What does this passage teach about *prayer*?” Note how often the church prays out loud together – especially in times of crisis. Note how God grants fresh fillings of the Holy Spirit in answer to their prayers. Is Luke tracing the fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Lk. 11:13? Certainly there is a clear connection between the church's corporate praying and their empowering for witness. Do you want this empowering? Do you pray regularly with other Christians for this?

“What does this passage teach about *evangelism*?” Note the many and varied kinds of people who come to faith in Jesus, and the many and varied ways they do so (e.g., 3 converts in Acts 16:11-34). How should this affect your willingness to witness to “tough cases?” Note how merciful God is in using people who have many flaws and prejudices (e.g., Peter in Acts 10). How should this affect your willingness to let God work through you despite your many sins and weaknesses?

“What does this passage teach about *the church*?” Although the New Testament letters teach us normative truths and principles for the church, we can glean a good sense of the dynamism of the early church from Acts (vs. a building, an institution, etc.). Note how the early church was organized, how it chose its leaders, how it set its priorities, etc. Consider how different this may be from your own church background.