

SOUL FOOD: The Gospels

Welcome! You have come to feed your souls from “The Gospels”. Glad you’re here!

A couple things: (1) You should have a Bible! We’re gonna send some time in some texts. (2) You should have something to take notes on!

I am SO excited about this!! Just finished a multi-year study of the gospel of Mark, and it changed my life. And it all started because back when I was a student in CCF, someone taught me in a setting like this, how to study the Gospels, and I’ve never been the same since.

I hope this is helpful to you.

Let’s begin. **The Gospels:** Are the 1st 4 books of the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

They are PASTORAL. BIOGRAPHIES. of JESUS. And we’ll unpack EACH of those terms in that definition, and why they’re important later on.

But first, I want to do **a couple exercises** together. Let’s start with this one (**share screen**):

Exercise #1: 4 Paintings



Tell me some things you notice about these pictures of the D-Day Normandy invasion – what do they tell us about that day? Tell me what you see.

- **Top left:** Painting of a famous photograph of Eisenhower talking to soldiers – depicts events before D-Day, but the artist has decided to make the soldiers FACELESS that he’s talking to – why do you think that is? (could be anybody!)
- **Bottom-left** doesn't seem very hopeful - “good guys” still in the water, geysers going up, not much progress made.
- **Top right** – sort of an “over-arching”, symbolic view about the powers in play on D-Day, right?

Includes many of the details about D-Day all in the same picture, highlights the relationship between 2 leaders – Churchill is “above” Eisenhower, but what's the backdrop of the entire painting? The American flag... Interesting.

- **Bottom right** – soldiers have crested the hill – approaching victory. Heavy casualties all around, but it's obvious who's winning.

Which of these pictures is “more true” about the D-Day Normandy invasion? [None! They just tell different stories — with different imagery, angles, points of view, and goals — of the same larger story]

Do any of these pictures contradict the others? How so? [Nope. Again, they're telling different stories in different ways, within the same story!]

Now: from what you have read of the The Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — how is looking at these 4 paintings, and what they tell us about WW2 INSTRUCTIVE to how we should think about the 4 Gospels?

[Neither are “more true”]

[None of them “contradict” the other - they just tell different stories, angles, and moments within the same broad story of Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection]

Exercise #2: English Lit. exercise!

How many of you are coffee drinkers? How many of you are non-coffee drinkers? Ok – I want each of you to try to convince the other side to adopt your value towards coffee.

But here's how I want you to try to convince us – tell us a TRUE story that illustrates your point. I want you to write a 1-paragraph (just a few sentences) TRUE story, convincing people about your view of coffee. Okay? Tell us a true story from your life, or someone else's, that illustrates your point. **(5 min)**

Why didn't you mention what pants you should wear while you drink coffee?

Why didn't you talk about your relationship w/ your Mom in your story?

Why didn't you talk about the value of energy drinks? Similar value... similar application...?

Again: from what you have read of the The Gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — how is looking at these 4 paintings INSTRUCTIVE to how we should think about the 4 Gospels?

Ok - turn to the gospel of Mark. How many chapters? How long do you think it would take you to read this through in one sitting?

Now — Jesus' life was about 33 years long. And His ministry was about 3 years long. Based on our “coffee drinker” exercise — what does that tell you about WHY Mark wrote what HE wrote?

SO - I told you before that we would talk about our definition of what “a gospel” is - we said they are PASTORAL. BIOGRAPHIES. of JESUS.

So - let's talk about our definition of what a GOSPEL is. David said it's SO important to know WHAT you're reading, right? What genre are we reading? What rules does THAT genre expect to play by?

So - a GOSPEL is a PASTORAL. BIOGRAPHY. about JESUS.

Let's start w/ what we mean by **PASTORAL**:

Written by pastors. Sometimes they're called “evangelists”. Which is another way of saying “messengers of the good news”.

Which means - they're written by SOMEONE. They didn't just fall out of the sky. And they're written TO someone - or someoneS.

There's a REASON the gospels were written. There's a SITUATION the gospels were written INTO.

Right? You with me so far? So we have to take into account *why* the gospel was written, and *who* the gospel writer is talking to.

For example, it's very clear that Matthew is writing to a primarily Jewish audience. He structures his gospel like a re-telling of the Old Testament story of Israel. He puts much of Jesus' teaching together in 5 places in his gospel - just like the 5 books of the Law in the Old Testament. A non-Jew would NEVER pick up on those imitations. But a Jewish audience would go "aha!"

In fact, if you look at Matthew's genealogy - turn to Matthew chapter 1 - **where does Matthew "begin" his family tree of Jesus?** Abraham. The Father of Israel.

BUT Luke is writing HIS gospel, to a different audience. Look at HIS intro: Could someone read **Luke 1:1-4**?

That's not a Jewish intro — he even names a Greek guy "Theophilus" (which could be a specific name, or a general term for any "God-studier").

Look also where Luke traces his genealogy back to: **Where does Luke's family tree of Jesus start? Luke 3:23-38** Adam - the father of all humankind.

Luke is NOT writing to a Jewish audience — he's trying to write an inclusive, global Gospel (which makes sense, since Luke is not Jewish himself! But he knows he belongs to Jesus' people as much as the Jews do).

So we have to take seriously WHO is writing, and WHO they're writing to, and WHY they're writing.

The gospel writers are also clear that they have "an agenda" for WHY they're writing what they're writing. (**Luke 1:4, John 19:35, 20:31**). They're not trying to hide anything. They're not being sneaky or manipulative about what they're writing — they're pretty up front about it.

They're also **selective in what they tell us**. Clearly, these Pastors, these Evangelists who wrote these gospels — they obviously don't include EVERY SINGLE detail of Jesus' life ever. Right?

Just like in your coffee paragraph — there are details you didn't include because that wasn't your point, right?

The Gospels are the same. None of them talk about what Jesus had for breakfast the morning before John the Baptizer baptized Him, right?

Even in the texts THEMSELVES, the gospel writers testify that there's more could be said (**someone read: John 20:28**).

So how DOES a gospel writer pick which stories to tell? And if you're trying to communicate something — what story do you want to open with? And what story should you tell next? In fact, what arrangement of ALL the stories *best* fits the writer's pastoral goals?

That's why the gospels are **NOT always chronological!** The Gospel's don't even claim that their stories are all in historical order.

And that probably SHOULDN'T be all that surprising to us. Communicators, entertainers, and educators — do this often, especially when they're trying to make a point.

How many of you have seen the documentary, "**Free Solo**"? It won the Oscar for best documentary

in 2019 — it's incredible, and it's about the first ropes-free, rock climb EVER of El Capitan in Yosemite. Just let that sink in for a minute. "Ropes-free, rock climb, of over 7,500 feet of sheer granite wall.

And I want to **show you the opening clip from "Free Solo"**.

What did you feel as you watched those first two and a half minutes of film w/ Alex Honnold in mid-climb ?

Why do you think the documentarians wanted us to feel those things right away? He doesn't climb wall until later in the documentary — so why show us these opening 2 minutes?

The Gospel writers do the same thing! They want to us think and feel and experience things at certain points of what we're reading.

Example: In Mark, Jesus cleanses the Temple towards the very end of his ministry.

Read Mark 11:15-19. This happens only 4 chapters before the end of Mark's Gospel.

But John wants to tell this story differently! He wants us to experience THIS episode of Jesus' life RIGHT AWAY! **Read John 2:13-22**

Mark wants us to experience this as one of the "climax" events of Jesus' ministry. But in John, it's part of how he INTRODUCES us to Jesus.

Just like in Free Solo, the documentarians want us to feel and experience Alex Honnold free-climbing RIGHT AWAY — and then we'll get to know him, and what drives him to do this extremely dangerous, adventurous thing.

The writers of the Gospels ARRANGE their stories like good documentarians. They don't tell us EVERY story about Jesus. In Free Solo, we don't know when Alex Honold got his drivers license. It's not part of the story they want to tell.

In the same way, the Gospel writers are compiling COMPOSITE narratives, depending on the point THEY'RE trying to make, to their audiences about who Jesus is.

SO — the gospels are PASTORAL documents. But they're also **BIOGRAPHIES**.

In other words — they're TRUE STORIES. Any of you who've ever read a good biography knows the author of that biography is telling TRUE stories.

The selection and arrangement of the stories the biographer is telling is up to the author — but the stories they tell, are true ones. Or else it's not a biography — doesn't make it bad, just makes it fictional.

And the Gospels claim to be factual biographies of the life of Jesus.

And we know this, because The Gospels — as a "genre" — are closely related to 2 genres of 1st century literature that were very common.

It's quite clear when we look at surrounding types of literature, that the gospel writers are writing something that was meant to be a cross between Grecco-Roman "heroic" biographies – called *beoi* – and Hellenistic histories.

(1) Grecco-Roman *beoi* – were biographies of famous, influential people, designed to preserve the memory and influence of that person. We have these from the 1st century for philosophers, political

figures, etc. And they were particularly useful for ADVANCING, or CONTINUING the teachings of this heroic figure. So you can see how a gospel fits into that genre.

(2) But the Gospels also have all the marks of a Hellenistic history – like further down in Luke’s prologue that we read, makes it abundantly clear that it’s NOTHING like the narrative fiction of the time, or legend material of the time. If you read other Hellenistic histories — like “Josephus” for example, when he writes “The Jewish Wars” — he always locates his stories in the political present – there are reference points mentioned so you can locate it in history. Luke’s gospel does this, too — at the time of Herod so-and-so, in the city of such-and-such, when the Governor so-and-so was in charge of such-and-such a place.

So – the gospels, as a genre, are a highly sophisticated combo of two popular genres – one that elevates a particular character in history that the author thinks is worth remembering, and one that is very concerned w/ presenting a nonfictional account of events as they actually happened.

Which makes sense, right? The Christian faith is built on a person – a singular character — who actually lived and died and came back to life, in history.

Even the New Testament itself says, “The events in the Gospels have to actually have happened, HISTORICALLY, otherwise the whole message falls apart.

Let’s do another quick exercise: How would you handle this question: “I read Matthew 5:1, and Luke 6:17 — and they contradict each other. **What do you say about that?**”

- Different authors, different goals.
- If you had the most important message in all the world, do you think you would say it more than once? Do you think every time you said it, you would say it the exact same way to ever crowd in every situation?

Ok - let’s do a little study from one particular gospel...

Exercise: 3 Kinds Of Questions when studying the Bible — the Gospels in particular: Observation. Interpretation. Application. Has to be in that order! You can’t apply a text before you know what it means! And you can’t know what a text means without carefully observing what it actually says!

Mark 8:22-38 -

Observation:

- How many episodes do you see in this passage? [3-4]
- How much time has passed between v.21 and 22? Or between v. 26 and 27?
- In fact, how much time does v.27 account for?

We have no idea! Could be an hour – could be weeks! There could be ALL KINDS of details Mark chooses NOT to include between these episodes. So, in light of that...

Interpretation:

- Why do you think Mark arranges these stories this way? Why start w/ a bizarre story about a man who needed a “double healing” from Jesus — RIGHT before these other 2-3 episodes?
- How much does Peter understand about Jesus in the middle episode? How much does he understand about Jesus in the 3rd episode? Is Peter’s understanding of the Messiah fully healed yet...?
- Why do you think a message like this would be encouraging to Mark’s readers?

Application:

- THEN, after you’ve gotten your head around what Mark is trying to, do — THEN we can start asking application questions for ourselves!
- What does this story tell us Jesus can give us, today?

- How should we treat people “don’t quite get it” yet when it comes to understanding Jesus?
- Why do you think it’s important that we let JESUS define His mission, and tell us what to do, rather than trying to define what following Him looks like for ourselves?
- (Personal reflection) What is Jesus trying to say to YOU through this passage in Mark?

For even more fun: Go to **The Bible Project’s** Youtube Channel, and type in “Mark” — there are 2 videos there: a 5min dramatic overview, and a 9min structural overview — both are very informative, especially the 9min one.