



3

The Gospel Truth

Key Theme

- God used men to record His words.

Key Passages

- Luke 1:1–4; Matthew 14:24–33; John 6:16–21, 20:30–31

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the intent of the Gospels.
- Describe how the parallel accounts help us to trust the Gospels.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Write on the board, “Why are there differences in the Gospels?”

Students will review the memory verse by working on the Memory Verse Puzzle and reciting the verse to a friend or to the class.

- Memory Verse Puzzle for each student from the Resource DVD-ROM



Studying God's Word

The four Gospels are books that were written about the events of Jesus's life, death, and the events after His death. They were written so that we would believe. Each is different, with different details and perspectives from eyewitness accounts. Their differences serve to confirm the truth of God's Word.

- Study the Prepare to Share section.
- Go Before the Throne.



Activity: Four-part Harmony

You will lead students as they look at a very small harmony of the Gospels and answer some basic questions.

- Student Guides
- Pencils



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages listed above with this background.

God has been pleased to give us the gospel, meaning “good news,” of the birth, life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ for the redemption of sinners. This news is found in the four books we know as the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

We know that all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God (2 Timothy 3:16). And God in His infinite wisdom ordained the Gospels to be written by men. Through Luke, God was pleased to set in order a narrative of the things seen in Christ and His life. Luke recorded his testimony from eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word so followers of Christ would know that what is heard about Jesus is certainly true (Luke 1:1–4). Similarly, John stated that he wrote his Gospel account so the reader may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing he may have life in His name (John 20:31).

As we study the four Gospels, we find that they are not identical in content or style. In fact, each is unique to the man who penned it. Consequently, each Gospel is focused on different details of Christ’s life. For example, each of the Gospels begins at a different point in the life of Jesus, and they each end in a slightly different way.

However, the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in that they record the same basic events—although not all three men recorded each event in exactly the same way. These books are referred to as the synoptic gospels because they often take the same point of view.

The Gospel of John is very different from the other three. John included information not recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus’s early ministry in John 2–4 and the account of Jesus raising Lazarus in John 11 are examples of events recorded exclusively by John. John also left certain events out of his work that the other Gospels did document. Some of the accounts John left out include the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the Sermon on the Mount, and the narrative parables.

All four Gospels primarily focus on the three years

of Jesus’s public ministry and largely skip over the early years of His life. We have very little information about the early years apart from the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke and the trip to Jerusalem in Luke 2. After that, all of the writers jump forward to the time when Jesus was about 30 years old and entered into His formal ministry.

Many Bibles have headings indicating references to the same account in the other Gospels. For example, in the New King James Version being used to write this background, the account of the feeding of the 5,000 is recorded first in Matthew 14:13–21. The Bible has a heading at that reference where this account can be found in the books of Mark, Luke, and John. Understanding how your Bible cross-references passages can help as you continue your study of the full counsel of God’s Word.

Each of the Gospels reveals something unique about the life of Jesus Christ. The entire picture cannot be seen without seeing all four Gospels presented side by side. This is called a “harmony” of the Gospels. Your Bible may have a section or a chart—a harmony of the Gospels—that shows the events of Jesus’s life and where those events are recorded in each of the Gospels.

The Gospels are another example of God’s amazing revelation to His people. That these four unique men could each write a personal account of his Savior Jesus Christ, and that all four of these accounts would complement each other, is evidence of the inspiration of their writings through the Holy Spirit to present to His people a complete and perfect testimony.

HISTORICAL/APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

Many skeptics point to the apparent inconsistencies in the parallel accounts in the Gospels to suggest that the Holy Spirit could not have inspired the writings or else they would be exactly the same. Well, how do they know that is the case? To make that assertion, they have to know how God thinks and how He would do things—the very thing they are denying we can know by reading the Bible. This attempt by the skeptic to discredit the authority of the Bible is simultaneously an

elevation of man's word above God's Word as he sits in judgment over what God has revealed to us.

Stop and think about this for a moment: If you heard a news report of a car accident on the TV news, read about it in the newspaper, and then heard about it from a friend who witnessed it, would you expect the three accounts to be exactly the same? Would differences cause you to doubt the truthfulness of any one witness? For example, if one report said it happened in front of Taco Town and another said it happened across the street from the mall and your friend said it was on Third Street, would that mean there was a contradiction? Not at all if Taco Town is on Third Street right across the street from the mall. This is analogous to the subtle differences we see in the Gospels. These subtle differences actually help to corroborate the truthfulness of the accounts. If a police officer was investigating the accident and two witnesses told about the collision in exactly the same words, he would likely think they were working together to conceal something. Matthew and Mark didn't have a meeting to decide how to tell the same story—the Holy Spirit directed their writing. When we examine the books carefully, the apparent contradictions disappear, despite the claims of the skeptics whose hearts are hardened to the truths of God.

Another irony of those who are skeptical about the truthfulness of the Gospels is the number of witnesses. Four witnesses recorded the same basic information of the life of Jesus, and we have reliable records of their initial reports. From the biblical perspective, a matter is established on the word of two or three witnesses, so the four we have in the Gospels is more than sufficient to lead us to trust what they record (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16). No one else from Jesus's time has such a rich historical record as that of Jesus. And no one could because it was God the Holy Spirit who directed the recording of the earthly life of God the Son who was sent by God the Father.

It did not take long for false gospels to appear and cause confusion about what was true and what was false (2 Peter 2:1). Many writers tried to take portions of the real Gospels and blend them with mystical teachings. These mystical ideas developed into what we call Gnosticism. Some of these false gospels have been

popularized in movies, novels, and documentary-style films that seek to discredit Jesus as God or redefine His teaching and work in some blasphemous way. Other false gospels blended Jewish and Christian ideas, and others tried to fill in the "gaps" of the true Gospels.

One such false gospel, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, was written more than 100 years after Jesus died. This gospel reveals a young Jesus who was an infant prodigy, performed miracles, breathed life into clay birds, cursed a boy who then died, healed a man's foot, and other acts. These ideas directly contradict the true nature of Jesus we see recorded at the direction of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were directed by the Holy Spirit to record the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And through God's providence, we have the truth of those accounts in the first four books of our New Testament. We can absolutely trust these as true regardless of the attacks that come from skeptics and regardless of the doubts that may even arise in our own minds. As we study the Scriptures, asking the Holy Spirit for wisdom, we can know the truth and be emboldened to share that truth with others.



BEFORE THE THRONE

Precious Lord, thank you for your Word and the truth of it. My understanding of how you put the Gospels together has grown. You have perfectly woven the truth about Jesus into these four Gospels through imperfect men who were eyewitnesses to the accounts they have written about—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As you open my eyes to the truth of this Word, I realize that it was written so that I would believe! May my students walk away from this lesson with more confidence in your Word—that it is the true, inspired Word of God by which men can be saved! And may they one day believe all that is written in it. To you be all the glory, Lord!

► **Pace your lesson!** Use the clocks to mark the time you want to finish each section. This will help you stay on track and finish on time. You may need to shorten or drop sections as necessary.





Review

Last week we talked about the reasons we could trust the New Testament as true. Primarily, we have the witness of the Holy Spirit revealing the truth to us, but there are many sound confirmations of the words we have in our Bibles. As the Holy Spirit directed the writers of the New Testament to record these truths, the original inspired manuscripts held those words. As the truth was copied and passed along through the generations, the copies were preserved. We have thousands of those copies available to study today. Despite the variations that we see in the copies of the copies, we can be confident that we have the very words of God in the Bibles we have in front of us today. And, new evidences to confirm the accuracy of Scripture are being uncovered all of the time.

? Did anyone have an opportunity to have a discussion about manuscripts evidences with a skeptic or another person? *Allow students to share any experiences.*

Despite the attacks of skeptics who challenge the truthfulness of the Bible, we can trust that we have an absolutely reliable Bible and the life-giving message it gives us can be trusted.

Today we are going to continue looking at the New Testament, specifically in the Gospels. We often talk about the Gospel of Luke or the Gospel of John, but what we are really looking at today might more accurately be called the “Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John,” or “according to Luke.” As we have mentioned before, *gospel* means “good news” or “good report.” So, these books are not the good news of John, but the good news of Jesus Christ told by John. Our goal today is to begin to get a grasp on the purpose of the Gospels and how the similarities and differences assure us of their authenticity.



► Write on the board, “Why are there differences in the Gospels?”



Studying God's Word

READ THE WORD

We are going to start our look at the Gospels today by looking at Luke's introduction to his Gospel. Let's read Luke 1:1–4 together. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? Who is this writing addressed to? *Theophilus, an unknown Roman man.*
- ? Who is the author of this writing? *The author never states his name, but from other sources we understand this to be written by Luke, and this was the universal acceptance of the early church. Luke was a companion of Paul as we see clearly in passages like Acts 16:10–17 and 20:4–6.*

Luke 1:1–4

- ? **Who was Luke? What do we know about him from other passages?** *Paul mentions Luke in: Colossians 4:14 (Luke the beloved physician); 2 Timothy 4:10–11 (Luke alone stayed with Paul); and Philemon 24 (Luke was a fellow laborer with Paul).*
- ? **Did Luke write any other books?** *The book of Acts opens in the same manner, referring to the former account written to Theophilus. As with his Gospel account, Luke is surely the author of Acts.*
- ? **Is this the only writing about the life of Jesus?** *Verse 1 states that there were other narratives describing Jesus's life.*
- ? **What was Luke's goal in writing?** *To write an orderly account of the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word so that Theophilus could know with certainty the things he had learned about Jesus.*
- ? **What does the phrase "those things which have been fulfilled among us" refer to?** *This is a reference to the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the life of Jesus, the things in which Theophilus had been instructed.*
- ? **How did Luke and Theophilus come to know about these fulfilled prophecies?** *The eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, the apostles and other disciples, delivered these teachings to them.*
- ? **How well did Luke understand these things?** *He states that he had "perfect understanding" of all things.*
- ? **Was Theophilus a believer?** *It would seem so from verse 4, since he had been instructed in the fulfilled prophecies.*
- ? **How does Luke's purpose for writing compare to John's purpose in John 20:30–31?** *John's words are a bit more explicit, pointing directly to Christ as the Son of God and the source of eternal life. This is very similar to the idea in 1 John 5:13.*

John 20:30–31

Discover the Truth

Luke had a very clear intent in writing his Gospel. He wanted to give Theophilus a very clear and orderly account of the things Jesus did and the prophecies He fulfilled. This was intended to encourage the faith of Theophilus and confirm the things he had been taught about Jesus.

We know that Luke was writing under the direction of the Holy Spirit and that his message was not only intended for Theophilus, but for millions who would read the accounts through the millennia. Luke's recording of the fulfilled prophecies and the works of Jesus should give us great hope and confidence in our faith in Christ.

It can also be a great tool to share the truth of Christ with skeptics. By many accounts, Luke was a first-rate historian. He recorded these details in a meticulous way. His account relates what the eyewitnesses saw and does it in a very reliable way. However, many skeptics attempt to judge the Gospels by a modern standard of historical precision that they were never intended to convey. We do not learn every detail about the life of Christ, but we do get a portrait of our Savior in enough detail to trust in all that is said about Him.

SOVEREIGN

WISE

? **What attributes of God are demonstrated in the writing and preservation of Luke's Gospel?** *Sovereignty and wisdom: God wisely and sovereignly used Luke, a top-notch historian of his day, to record the words that we have. These words point us to who Jesus is and what He did while He was on the earth. As we talk with others, we can point them to the Gospels to seek to know who Jesus is, trusting the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts to open their eyes to the spiritual truths found there.*

Some skeptics often try to criticize the Bible, and especially the Gospels, by suggesting that they were written long after Jesus and the apostles lived. This is not the case with Luke's Gospel—it was written much earlier.

One thing that helps us understand when Luke was written has to do with the destruction of Jerusalem. Luke records the prophecy Jesus made about the destruction of the Temple, but never mentions that the prophecy was fulfilled. This seems to clearly indicate that the Gospel was written before AD 70, with many scholars accepting a date between AD 50–70. Rather than being written by someone else claiming to be Luke, we can trust that Luke, the companion of Paul, wrote these words under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and we can trust his words.



Four-part Harmony

MATERIALS

- Student Guides
- Pencils
- Harmony of the Gospels

INSTRUCTIONS

Students will be looking at a very small harmony of the Gospels and answering some basic questions. Try to bring several examples of harmonies for the students to look at if time allows. Your pastor or others may have hard copies, and you can find several versions online or in digital Bible study tools.

? **We have talked about a harmony in the past. Does anyone remember what a harmony is and how it might be related to the four Gospels?** *When discussing the parallel accounts in the historical books of the Old Testament, 1 Samuel through 2 Chronicles, we talked about harmonies*

that help to set the accounts given in one book to another. For example, 1 Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9 both give an account of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon. For the Gospels, a harmony seeks to line up the parallel accounts in each of the four books.

Sometimes, Bibles include a built-in harmony within the headings. Turn to Luke 4.

? **What heading does your Bible include above that chapter?** *Probably something like "The Temptation of Jesus."*

? **Does anyone's Bible have a Scripture reference with that heading?** *Some Bibles place the parallel passages here. In this case Luke 4:1–13 is parallel to Matthew 4:1–11 and Mark 1:12–13.*

You can find a chronological harmony in the MacArthur Study Bible and in various online resources searchable as "harmony of the Gospels." Some Bible reading plans will follow a chronological harmony of the Gospels.

Other Bibles may include a harmony of the Gospels section as an appendix in the back or in a section between the Old and New Testaments. You can also find harmonies online and in various printed forms.

In your Student Guide you will find an activity called Four-part Harmony. Work in groups to complete that activity, and we will discuss it in a few minutes. *If time is short, you may ask the students to examine a particular row in the harmony table.*

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

- ? How did the parallel accounts you read compare to one another? *Have several of the groups report on their findings.*
- ? As you examined the table, what stood out to you? *The students might notice the following: The events in Matthew are not recorded chronologically; the sections of Mark and Luke seem to be chronological; John doesn't record many of the events in the synoptic Gospels.*

Each Gospel was written by an eyewitness or someone who spoke to eyewitnesses. This is actually an important aspect of the reliability of the gospels.

- ? Imagine you are watching the evening news and hear a story about a car accident. The next morning you read of the same accident in your news feed, and then you hear about it from someone at work who was actually at the scene. Would you expect all three of these reports to agree with one another in every detail? Why or why not? *They would not all be the same. Some are presenting a report from eyewitnesses while one person was actually there. They may have been observing the accident from different perspectives. Each individual notices different details and has different emotional responses to such things. Some witnesses might be attentive to different aspects such as the people involved*

rather than the color of the vehicles. One might describe a black SUV while another recognizes it as a black Ford Explorer. Unless there is a true contradiction, these differences actually add validity to the truthfulness of the witnesses reporting exactly what they saw. In fact, police investigators would expect such differences and too many identical details would lead them to suspect the witnesses were working together to deceive the investigators.

As you think about the four Gospels, you may have noticed in the table that the events in Matthew, Mark, and Luke line up fairly closely while John has many differences. We often refer to Matthew, Mark, and Luke as the synoptic Gospels, with John having some different characteristics.

Another form of harmony comes by blending the four texts into one single account. This has been done in various forms, such as *One Perfect Life* by Dr. John MacArthur and *Jesus Christ: The Greatest Life* by Cheney and Ellison. This can be a very helpful tool for getting the chronological flow of the life of Christ since the Gospels don't always present events in the same order.

It is important for us to remember that God the Holy Spirit chose to give us four separate Gospels, not a conglomeration of the four. There are important distinctions in each, and we should study them with that in mind. Using a harmony can be very helpful to understand some chronological issues and answer questions from the skeptics about apparent contradictions, but each of the Gospels stands on its own as a masterful portrait of Jesus. We will talk more about the chronology and the aim of each of the Gospels in future lessons.



READ THE WORD

Now that we have looked briefly at the idea of parallel passages, let's take a minute to examine a pair of them and talk more about how they work together to give us different aspects of the same picture. We are going to look at Matthew 14:24–33 and John 6:16–21. As we read, listen for similarities and differences in the accounts. *Have someone read each passage aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Observe the Text

- ? **Who is writing these two accounts?** *John and Matthew, the apostles.*
- ? **Where these men present as eyewitnesses?** *Matthew and John were both in the core group of 12 disciples, so there is nothing in the text of either passage that would indicate they were not. Matthew 14:22 says the disciples got in the boat, but Peter is the only one specifically named in the passage. John 6:16 says the disciples had gone to the sea, so we can assume both Matthew and John were present as witnesses.*
- ? **What is the biggest difference between these two passages?** *The Matthew passage records Peter walking on the water.*
- ? **What other differences are there in the passages?** *John says the disciples went down to the sea while Matthew 14:22 says that Jesus sent them away; Matthew identifies the time as the fourth watch of the night and the boat was in the middle of the sea while John gives a specific distance from the shore; John describes how the boat was immediately on the opposite shore while Matthew just says they crossed over; Matthew says the sea was calmed while John omits that; Matthew records their worship of Jesus and John does not; etc.*
- ? **What similarities do the accounts share?** *Both record a great wind; the fear of the disciples; the storm; Jesus getting into the boat; etc.*
- ? **How do the words of Jesus compare in these passages?** *Matthew includes "Be of good cheer!" but the rest is identical.*
- ? **If these two writers were both eyewitnesses, why are there differences in their records?** *Discuss various answers, pointing to the fact that different witnesses notice different details and often focus on different aspects of an event.*
- ? **Are there any real contradictions in these two accounts?** *No, there are differences, but no contradictions.*
- ? **What could you imagine as a true example of a contradiction in these two accounts that would lead us to think one or the other is false?** *A contradiction occurs when two things cannot be true in the same way at the same time. If John had said that Peter was not in the boat and Mathew described him in the boat, that would be a contradiction.*

➤ If time allows, you can also read Mark 6:45–52 for the third account by Mark, who was not an eyewitness as far as we know.

Discover the Truth

These types of differences in the parallel passages have led many skeptics to claim the New Testament contains unreliable and conflicting reports. But the Gospels just give us different angles on the same basic storyline. If

Matthew and John were talking about the same events and gave truly contradictory details, or one of them talked about crossing in a hovercraft, we would have reason to doubt them. But they do not do so, nor could they since they both ultimately have the same author—the Holy Spirit.



Applying God's Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

God the Holy Spirit, in His infinite wisdom and sovereign working, chose to give us four separate accounts of the life of Jesus. Each of these accounts gives us different details and sometimes in a different order, but all filled with truth about who Jesus is and what He did while he was here on earth. The Gospels tell us how He fulfilled prophecies from former prophets and prophecies He made about himself. They are in absolute harmony with one another and with the rest of Scripture. Rather than leading us to doubt the truthfulness of any one of the authors, these differences show us that the Holy Spirit directed these men, allowing their personalities to come through in their writings, giving us a sure testimony.

GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

- ? **How do you see yourself using the information in this lesson as you interact with other people, believers and unbelievers?** *Discuss various ideas including the edification of other believers and interacting with those who are skeptical of the Bible's claims.*
- ? **What should we do with the claims of missing gospels like the Gospel of Mary or Barnabas or Thomas?** *All of these claims should be examined primarily on their agreement with the rest of the Bible and then on their historical reliability. The four Gospels we have are in perfect agreement with both of those tests while all other supposed gospels fail both of those tests—they either contradict the Bible or were written much too late to be what they claim.*
- ? **If you are challenged by a skeptic with the charge of contradictions between the different Gospels, what is the best way to respond to those accusations?** *First, ask them show you the "contradiction." If they can, many times the claims are resolved by simply reading the two passages and showing that there is no true contradiction. Many people hold a false standard of 100% agreement between the two texts, a standard they would not hold any other text to.*
- ? **What questions do you still need to have answered about the Gospels?** *Discuss various answers, reassuring the students that those answers are available with careful study and assurance of the Holy Spirit.*





MEMORY VERSE

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Praise God that by His sovereign inspiration we have the Bible to read and study so that we can know Him.
- Thank God for assuring us that the Gospels are true.
- Ask God to help us to believe in and love Jesus more and more as we learn about His life and all He has done for us.