

Gospels & Acts



Jesus

How is Jesus simple?

How is Jesus complex?

How does Jesus fit into the Israel of his day?

What is the gospel of the kingdom?

Why did Jesus die?

What happened at Easter?

What is the Church supposed to be?

What were the two central thoughts Jesus believed and acted upon?

What was the message of Jesus?

The Jesus Way

What is our identity?

What is our mission?

How are we to go about doing that?

Mark

Who was Mark?

Where was Mark written?

Matthew

How is Matthew concerned with Jews & Gentiles?

The Eighteen Blessings | One - Five

Heal us, O God, of the pain of our heart; remove from us sorrow and grief and raise up healing for our wounds; You are blessed, O God, you who gather the banished of your people Israel

Proclaim our liberation with the great trumpet and raise a banner to gather together our dispersed; You are blessed, O God, you who gather the banished of your people Israel

May your mercies be showered over converts who are just in your eyes; and give us a rich reward, together with those who do your pleasure; You are blessed, O God, the trust of those who are just in your eyes

Be merciful, O God, with your great mercies, to Israel your people and to Jerusalem your city and to your Temple and your shelter, and to the kingship of the house of David, your just Anointed; You are blessed, O God, God of David, you who build Jerusalem

And for apostates let there be no hope; and may the insolent kingdom be quickly uprooted in our days. And may the Nazoreans and the heretics perish quickly; and may they be erased from the book of life; and may they not be inscribed with the just. You are blessed, O God, you who humble the insolent

Recommended Resource

N.T. Wright | The Challenge of Jesus

Matthew | Outline

1-7 | torah | Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (5:17)

The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy that traces Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, with stops at the exile and King David along the way. It is worth noting that, while John's Gospel famously opens with the same words as Genesis, Matthew's Gospel opens with the same words as Exodus.

Matthew then gives an account of the birth of Jesus, including the visit of the Magi and Herod's wrath at being betrayed by them, as well as his fear that a rival to his throne has been born. Joseph and Mary escape with baby Jesus to Egypt, and later return to Nazareth in Galilee. Matthew gives us no other stories from Jesus's childhood, but instead skips forward roughly 30 years to the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. John baptizes Jesus, who then goes into the desert for 40 days of fasting and temptation. After staving off the devil, Jesus calls his disciples and begins his ministry of miracles and teaching.

Chapters 5-7 of Matthew contain the "Sermon on the Mount". In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins to rewrite (so to speak) the Torah—the Law of Moses. He says over and over, "You have heard it said, but I say to you...". What underlies Jesus' teaching in the sermon is not a total reinterpretation of Torah, but rather a reemphasis on obedience to God's intentions behind the literal letters of the laws. In fact, he lays out the way of life that God had always wanted his people to live: a life of godly character, of love for one another (including one's enemies), of generosity, and of faith.

8-15 | miracles | He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. (8:26)

After the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records several of Jesus's miracles, which serve to demonstrate that he has power over sickness, disease, and even nature! In the midst of these miracle stories, Matthew places his own calling from Jesus, as well as the seeds of the religious opposition against him.

In chapter 10 Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to minister to the lost sheep of Israel. He commissions them with detailed instructions, as well as with warnings about their own well-being on account of being his followers. Meanwhile, John the Baptist is in prison because he spoke out against Herod. Resistance against Jesus continues to escalate as he preaches against the sin of Israel and doesn't heed the traditions and teachings of the religious leaders. Even his own family comes to try to talk some sense into him.

After this, Jesus changes his tactics from preaching directly to telling parables, and now he is becoming quite the controversial figure. Herod beheads John the Baptist while Jesus continues to preach in parables and defend his ministry. The section closes with three of Jesus' more famous miracles: the feeding of the 5,000, walking on water, and the feeding of the 4,000.

16-22 | transfiguration | Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (16:24)

Peter makes his famous confession that Jesus is the Messiah, and then immediately gets into trouble for rebuking Jesus when he spoke of his crucifixion and resurrection. Then Peter, James and John went with Jesus up a mountain where they saw him transfigured and speaking with Moses and Elijah. The rest of chapters 17 through 20 are full of various miracles and encounters (such as, with the rich young ruler), as well as with teachings and parables.

In chapter 21 Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. He then goes to the Temple and drives out the money changers and extortionists. This puts him into direct conflict with the religious leaders, whose power is directly connected to the Temple. They continue to question him, trying to entrap them, but he turns the tables on the religious leaders, infuriating them.

23-28 | crucifixion | And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. (27:50)

Jesus goes apocalyptic in chapters 23-25, telling parables of the final judgment and giving various signs of the end of the age. The plot thickens as the religious leaders make plans to arrest him and Judas agrees to betray him. After celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus goes to Gethsemane, fully aware of what is about to happen. Judas shows up with a large crowd, intent on arresting him and bringing him before the religious leaders. There, he is questioned and ultimately condemned. Because they did not have the power to execute anyone, they sent Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate, who reluctantly agrees to crucify him. Jesus is beaten and crucified, dying just a few hours later. He is buried and placed in a tomb, out of which he arose three short days later. When he met with his disciples again, he commissioned them to tell the world about him, and to make disciples of others as he had made disciples of them.

Mark | Outline

1-9 | galilee | So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. (2:28)

Just about everything Matthew writes in his Gospel Mark writes in about half the space. Mark skips the genealogy and goes straight to John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism and temptation. Then there is a run of miracles embedded with the call of his disciples. Large crowds begin to follow Jesus in Galilee as he gains in popularity. In chapter 4 Mark records several parables, as well as the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Then in chapter 5 Jesus heals a demon-possessed man, a sick woman, and he raises a woman from the dead. In this short span, Mark shows Jesus to have power over nature, spiritual realms, disease, and even death. In chapter 6 Jesus encounters resistance in his hometown of Nazareth before sending out the twelve disciples. As Jesus faces dishonor at home, John the Baptist loses his head in Herod's palace. But the ministry of Jesus moves forward as he feeds the crowds, walks on water, and heals many more people. At the end of chapter 8, and in the beginning of chapter 9, Peter realizes that Jesus is the Messiah, rebukes him for teaching that he must die, and then sees him transfigured, speaking with Moses and Elisha. Jesus' ministry in Galilee ends with a teaching that we find in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

10-16 | judea | "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

The last half of Mark's Gospel, like the first half, looks very much like Matthew's. Jesus is questioned about divorce by some religious leaders trying to entrap him, and he meets the rich young ruler who can't manage to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. In chapter 11 Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed immediately by the clearing of the Temple. Just as in Matthew, the religious leaders are greatly disturbed by Jesus's actions, and so they question his authority to do such things in such a holy place as the Temple. Jesus then has several encounters with these men until they no longer had the courage to ask him any more questions.

Chapter 13 is a mini version of Jesus' apocalyptic sermon in Matthew 23-25, the greater part of which is taken up with the signs of the end of the age. Jesus then shares his final meal with his disciples and is betrayed by Judas in Gethsemane. While being questioned by the Sanhedrin, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus three times. Jesus is then shipped off to Pilate to be executed, and Pilate does so reluctantly. Jesus dies on his cross, is buried, and then rises again three days later.

Luke | Outline

1-4 | preparation | And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins... (1:76-77)

Luke opens with possibly the most vibrant retelling of the first coming of Jesus, beginning first with the foretelling of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel takes Zechariah's ability to speak due to his initial doubt over the future birth of John. It is also Gabriel who tells Mary of the plan for Jesus to be born of her. Under the order of census by Caesar Augustus, Mary and her husband Joseph travel to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born to them in a stable, being laid in a food trough, attended not by nobles and kings but by angels and shepherds. Jesus is taken to Simeon to be circumcised, who announces him as the salvation of the God for all people. Jesus is then shown as a small child, full of wisdom and authority in the things of God. John the Baptist returns as an adult, preaching repentance and baptism; Jesus also comes to be baptized by John before beginning his own ministry to the nation of Israel. Jesus, after his baptism, is taken to the desert, the wilderness, to be tempted, to continue to live out the story of Israel. After his temptation, Jesus begins his public ministry, with both acceptance and rejection by the people.

5-8 | disciple | "Follow me," Jesus said to him. (5:27b)

Jesus begins calling out his disciples from among the people of Israel, beginning with Peter, James, and John. Once the disciples have been chosen, Jesus gives his Sermon on the Mount. These chapters are littered with stories of men and women who are looking for, who need the Messiah. Those who should follow Jesus, the Pharisees, continually test and argue with him, ignoring the message, while the unlikeliest of people, epitomized by the Roman centurion, display great faith in Jesus. Story after story is told of those having faith in Jesus finding healing and forgiveness.

9-18 | teaching | He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (14:34b)

If you own a "red-letter edition" Bible, you're going to see a lot of it here. This section opens with the sending out of the twelve disciples. The apostles return, the 5000 are fed, and Peter, James, and John are witnesses to the Transfiguration of Christ. Luke then records a substantial string of parables and stories in which he teaches the disciples how to live: how to pray, how to be a neighbor, what it means to love, to be a disciple, to be recognized, and much much more. Interestingly, after all this teaching, the section ends with the story of a blind man regaining his sight.

19-24 | triumph | ... why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! (24:5b-6a)

Jesus comes to Jericho and encounters Zacchaeus, showing again the dramatic changes that takes place upon an encounter with Christ. It is then that the events of the passion begin: Jesus enters Jerusalem to much fan fare, cleanses the Temple, shares the Passover with his disciples (the Last Supper), is betrayed by Judas and arrested; he is found guilty in a mockery of a court case, is crucified and buried. Jesus is then resurrected by God, he appears to travelers on the road to Emmaus and to the disciples at various times and places. He promises to send them the Holy Spirit and, as the book closes, He ascends into Heaven.

John | Outline

1-5 | life | For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. (5:21)

The Gospel of John famously begins with the same phrase as the Book of Genesis: "In the beginning". The first 14 verses of John 1 are an exalted, almost poetic, ode to Jesus. So much of what we know about Jesus, theologically-speaking, comes from this short introduction to John's Gospel.

John's Gospel is different from the other three in many ways, one of the most glaring being that it doesn't follow a set timeline. Like any good postmodern storyteller, John jumps around in time. While John the Baptist and Jesus' disciples appear at the beginning of the book, the clearing of the Temple, which occurs at the end in the other three Gospels, is found in chapter 2. After the Temple clearing, Jesus has a long discussion with a well-respected Pharisee named Nicodemus, who is unsure about Jesus at the beginning of the book, but who comes to place his faith in him at the end. In chapter 4 Jesus has another long discussion, this time with someone on the far end of the spectrum from Nicodemus--a Samaritan woman who can't keep a husband. This conversation is followed by two miracles and a short sermon by Jesus on life through the Son of God.

6-10 | light | When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (8:12)

The one miracle (besides the resurrection) that appears in all four Gospels--the feeding of the 5,000--leads off chapter 6. John's story, however, is much more detailed than the other three. The people don't just go home satisfied, they want to make Jesus the king of the Jews. In order to avoid this catastrophe, Jesus literally walks straight across the Sea of Galilee to the other side; but the crowd catches up with him. So he preaches a truly disturbing sermon about how he is the bread of life, and that people must really eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life. Needless to say, all the disciples but the twelve abandon him. After this, Jesus goes to a festival in Jerusalem and teaches in the Temple courts. The crowds are amazed, and many wonder if he is the Messiah. But the religious leaders don't think so, and they begin to challenge him openly. Jesus stands up for himself in several powerful interactions, which ends with him saying, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" This, of course, was considered blasphemy, and the people tried to kill him but he slipped away.

Chapters 9 and 10 are a long episode that begins with the healing of a man born blind, which happened on a Sabbath. The religious leaders were furious about this because Jesus was breaking the Sabbath by healing people, and hilarity ensues. The poor, formerly blind, beggar shows quite a bit of moxie to the religious leaders, who then throw him out. Jesus later uses the healing as a metaphor for spiritual blindness, and accuses the Pharisees of having such an affliction. Jesus then stokes the fire further by saying things that mortal men ought not to say, and again escapes certain death at the hands of the religious leaders.

11-17 | spirit | But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (14:26)

Now comes the ultimate miracle: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead--four days after he had died! This is what gets Jesus into serious trouble, because the Jewish leaders rationalize that, if someone who can raise the dead leads a revolt against Rome, surely that would alarm the great empire. And if they were to be alarmed, they would surely come through and wipe out the entire nation. So Jesus must die for the sake of the people.

Chapter 12 recounts events similar to the other Gospels, and chapters 13-17 expound on their final meal together. It begins with Jesus washing his disciples' feet, which serves as an example for them once he is gone. In chapters 14-16, Jesus's tone is very tender and warm. He knows what is before him, and that this will be the last time they see him before he rises from the dead. He promises that it will be better for them if he goes because he will send the Holy Spirit to be with them. Chapter 17 is Jesus's long prayer for his disciples, as well as for everyone who will ever put their faith in him.

18-21 | love | When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

John's account of the trial leading up to the crucifixion is more detailed than the others, but follows the same basic storyline. Judas betrays him and takes him to the high priest, who then sends him to Pilate to be crucified. Pilate, again begrudgingly, agrees to execute Jesus. So Jesus is led out to the place of the Skull where he is crucified and dies. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus both put themselves as followers of Jesus when they asked Pilate for Jesus's body. They gave him a king's burial and placed him in a tomb. Three days later he appeared to Mary Magdalene and then to his disciples alive! In the last chapter of the book, Jesus restores Peter, who had denied him three times, in a wonderfully tender moment following breakfast.

Acts | Outline

1-12 | Peter | Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. (2:14)

Acts, the second volume of Luke’s Gospel, begins right where Luke ended, with the ascension of Jesus. The disciples choose Matthias to replace Judas and they continue to wait for the power promised by Christ in his last words to them. The awaited gift is given on the day of Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit comes and fills all those in attendance in the upper room. Peter is completely turned from the man who denied Christ and now delivers an incredible sermon on the work of Christ, resulting in the conversion of 3000 plus people! The Church is born out of the ministry of the disciples as they seek to carry the message of Jesus to the people and more and more are added to the body. Persecution begins to rear its head in the martyrdom of Stephen, and it continues to increase (not least of which due to the work of a man named Saul); the persecuted Jews scatter, taking their faith to other areas in Judea and Samaria. The great persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus and is converted, transformed into the great missionary Paul. Peter continues his travels and along the way also has visions from God, in which God convinces him of the need for the Gentiles to also know the salvation of Jesus. He is later imprisoned by Herod but is miraculously delivered from his chains by the work of an angel. As more and more Gentiles are coming into the fold of the Church, the scope of the Acts begins to shift to another character, whose work for God will be almost beyond belief.

13-28 | Paul | Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!” (13:16)

The remainder of the book of Acts is dominated by the events and trials of Paul’s three documented missionary journeys. He travels with various partners: Barnabas, Mark, Luke, Silas, etc. working and living amongst the people he encounters. As he travels about he proclaims Jesus to both the Jews and Gentiles living in the cities he comes across, seeing some come to know Jesus and experiencing much persecution and opposition from those unwilling to listen or modify their beliefs. Each journey seeks to push further west into the Roman Empire and Paul begins to plant the churches we see him writing to in the epistles of the New Testament. With the addition of the Gentiles into the Church, Paul debates with his peers about whether or not it is necessary for them to come under the Jewish laws to be followers of Christ. As he continues in his travels in the Empire, Paul endures great hardships such as beatings, shipwrecks, and numerous arrests. Through it all God is faithful and the Church continues to grow and be encouraged. The book actually ends with Paul preaching in Rome under guard, essentially under house arrest. The fact that the book does not have a “close” allows us as Christians to continue to write the Acts of the Apostles as we seek to make Christ known as well.

