

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

The New Testament's 29 books, formally assembled in mid-2nd century, was at that time placed alongside the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), creating a Christian Bible. About 200 A.D. a priest named Tertullian coined the phrase *Novum Testamentum*.

The O.T. was written primarily in Hebrew -- the N.T. in Greek, the language of the first century Graeco-Roman world.

Together, these two testaments comprise the book that's unique among the sacred literature of all religions because:

- It's the *only* written revelation from God Himself.
- It's *God-breathed*, meaning -- its writers were inspired directly by God unlike any others in literature. (II Timothy 3:14-16)
- It reveals God's plans and purposes for all of time and eternity.
- Its central figure is God-in-the-flesh, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. (Hebrews 1:1-2 and Philippians 2:5-11)

The Old Testament consists of the following:

- **The Pentateuch or Torah** (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) covers Creation thru God's downloading The Law to Moses.
- **The books of History** (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther), take us from the Jews' arrival in Canaan (the Promised Land), fresh from the Red Sea escape from their Egyptian slavemasters, through the administrations of the judges and later the kings.
- **The books of Poetry** (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon) contain God's practical wisdom for the ages, examining a range of real-life situations, demonstrating how God *acts* and man *reacts*.
- **The Major Prophets** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel) tell of the Jews' coming defeats and exile -- as well as their coming liberation and exaltation. Isaiah speaks in graphic detail of the coming of Messiah some 750 years prior to that miraculous first Christmas. Daniel lays out, like a roadmap, the Bible's breathtaking, most complete panorama of what will happen down through the ages to come, charting the changing world empires. He literally unveils history in advance!
- **The Minor Prophets** -- minor in that these books are shorter -- (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) are God's courageous foot soldier-spokesmen. They fearlessly warned the Jews of the consequences of their individual and national sins, predicting the punishment God would mete out to them at the hands of their foes, yet foreseeing a day of deliverance not only for Israel but for all who place their faith in God.

The Jews are called "God's chosen people." If God loves them so much, why did they suffer such carnage and persecution at the hands of intruders? Ezra explains this in his prayer (Ezra

9:5-7): “O my God, I’m too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you because our sins are higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.”

The very foundations of English literature were built on the holy Scriptures. Chaucer demonstrates his intimate familiarity with the Bible in *The Canterbury Tales*. Someone with a great deal of time on his hands -- or a lot of RAM in his PC -- said Shakespeare’s writings contain 1,200 + references to the Bible. John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and other works focus on Biblical themes. Generous doses of Biblical references are replete in hall of fame writers like Edmund Burke, Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Lamb, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Rudyard Kipling.

These scribes -- like millions before and after -- saw in God’s Word His promise to send his only Son Jesus Christ to earth, born supernaturally to a Jewish, teenaged virgin, as Isaiah had prophesied 700 years earlier!

Let’s read Matthew 1:18-25.

Jesus was Joseph and Mary’s first child, born during their engagement. After consummating their marriage, they gave birth, by the time-honored method, to another four sons and at least two daughters (Matt. 13:55,56). Jesus, totally-God-yet-totally-man, would live 33 years and pay the ultimate price -- death by crucifixion -- so that you and I could receive His Father’s complete forgiveness for all of our sins -- past, present and future.

This priceless gift of utter forgiveness, given with no possible way to *earn* it, comes with no strings to all who, by a simple act of faith, agree with God that he/she is a sinner, woefully unequipped to meet God’s requirement of perfection in order to spend eternity in His presence. As we’ll see later in Paul’s letter to the Romans (5:8), “God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were *still* sinners, Christ died for us.”

Matthew, The Tax Man

The word “gospel” means “good news.” The N.T. begins with four books known as “The Gospels.” Matthew, Mark, Luke and John describe Jesus’ life on earth, each from a slightly different angle.

Matthew shows us Christ as King. Mark sees Him as Servant. Luke calls Him the Son of Man. John portrays Him as the Son of God. William H. G. Thomas says, “Matthew is concerned with the life of a *promised* Savior. Mark is concerned with the life of a *powerful* Savior. Luke is concerned with the grace of a *perfect* Savior. John is concerned with the possession of a *personal* Savior.”

Each of these four writers covers what he believes is relevant to his respective take on Christ. All of them had an 18-year gap in their biographies, omitting details of Christ’s life between ages 12 and 30. As any parent will attest, those teens and Gen X’ers can be invisible at times!

This “Fearless Foursome” is a band of *evangelists*, a Greek word meaning “bringer of good news.”

The first three give a synopsis of Christ’s life, primarily His career in Galilee in northern Israel. Matthew, Mark and Luke are like news reporters on “the Jesus beat,” covering His miracles and addresses in an action-packed format. John, the fourth Gospel, zeros in on Christ’s work in and around Jerusalem, sketching Him in intimate conversations and in prayer, talking to His Father in heaven.

It’s no coincidence that the Gospels are in the very center of the Bible. All the prophets before them told us Christ *would* come. The Gospels describe *when* and *how* He came. The books that follow tell us *why* and *for what*.

In Christ’s day there were basically four demos who made up mankind, each with its counterpart today. First, the Jews who were extremely religious. They knew the O.T. better than they knew their own lottery numbers. **Matthew writes especially for the Jews.**

Second, the Romans -- masters of the universe who didn’t know the O.T. from up. There were into power, leadership, performance, resumés. They heard about this strange Nazarene who did superhuman feats, audaciously claiming to be God’s Son. **Mark wrote primarily to the Romans**, a tough audience.

Third, the **Greeks**. Luke was a Greek physician who, like his ancestors, valued beauty, poetry, big ideas and, above all, truth. They saw truth as the key to happiness. **To these Greek seekers, Dr. Luke wrote.**

Fourth, **everyone else**. **John** comes at his gospel wanting *all* peoples to embrace Jesus as the Son of God and accept His free offer of eternal life.

Matthew collected taxes for Rome which occupied Israel at this time. A tax collector could bleed the citizens for as much as he could get, pay Rome their cut and keep the net. Can you say, “IRS?” Tax collectors were wealthy but not on many party guest lists. One day Matt met Jesus, and his life was never the same.

He sees Christ as Messiah, King of the Jews -- but certainly *not* the type of leader the Jews were expecting. His writing shows how Jesus’ teachings were closely related to the O.T., pointing out that Jesus Himself fulfilled all the prophecies about the coming Messiah who would be the Savior of the world. Matthew was convinced that the same Jesus Christ of Nazareth who walked the dusty roads of ancient Israel was actually God in the flesh. And he took great pains to show that “being religious” is *not* synonymous with having an authentic relationship with God.

Right from the first sentence of his book Matthew is out to prove to the Jews that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah. More than any other Gospel writer, he connects his writings with the O.T. Jews clung tenaciously to two sacred promises God made to two of their forefathers. To King David, God promised that one of his offspring would sit on his throne *forever*. That, of course, will be Jesus after He returns to earth to reign for the rest of eternity. To Abraham, God promised to bless the entire world through his progeny. Christ later did that by offering to have a personal relationship forever with all who will place their faith in Him.

David's son Solomon was a King. Abraham's son Isaac was a Sacrifice. So, Matthew begins his book by positioning Christ as King -- and closes by showing Him as our Sacrifice.

Between the last book of the O.T., Malachi, and the first book of the N.T., Matthew, are 400 hundred years not written about in the Bible. The Roman empire dominated Israel as these four centuries came to a close. No descendant of King David had been allowed to sit on Israel's throne for 600 years. The ruler at this time was Herod, not a king, but actually Judea's governor, subordinate to the emperor of Rome, Caesar Augustus.

Jesus' ministry was announced by His advance man who outwardly might remind you of a crazed, First Avenue homeless dude. His name was John the Baptist, and his arrival and mission-critical role in history was prophesied by both Isaiah (40:3) and Malachi (3:1).

Now let's read Matthew ch. 3.

Matthew records many of Christ's spectacular miracles, the kind that would make today's TV healers sweat right through their Armanis if pressured to replicate them. The Bible tells us He performed these amazing feats because "the Jews demanded a sign." He did it to establish His position in the marketplace. It was the "show" of His "show and tell." But His "tell" is equally fascinating. And people flocked to hear Him. He often spoke to them in parables which were word pictures about earthly situations that carried spiritual truths. They were not designed to test not the intelligence of His audiences, but their spiritual understanding.

Let's read Matthew 13:1-43 and 53-58.

Never "the teflon man" when facing skeptical or hostile audiences, Jesus stepped right up and handled the toughest questions. He even *posed life's most important question* Himself. It came right after He'd been confronted by some religious stuffed shirts who were demanding that he pull off one more miracle. The Pharisees were a pious party, popular in Christ's day. They were fanatical in their knowledge of and adherence to the laws of Moses. But their Achilles heel was their self-righteousness and pride. They were bitterly opposed to Christ and couldn't stand up against His withering, insightful questions and His responses to *their* questions.

The Sadducees included many who were in the ruling religious class of those who sat in the Sanhedrin. They too hated Jesus and denied the existence of angels and the resurrection. Christ referred to them as "a wicked and adulterous generation." These two religious sects were instrumental in stringing up Jesus.

Shortly after one of His encounters with them, we pick up Matthew's narrative. Let's read Matthew 16:13-17:8.

When it became apparent that the Jewish leaders were not about to accept Christ as Messiah, an act which would've ushered in the beginning of "the kingdom of heaven" here on earth, Jesus braced Himself and His disciples for His coming execution.

After "the last supper," Jesus took His disciples to the Mount of Olives.

Let's read Matthew 26:31-75.

Every person who dangles a cross from his rearview mirror or around his neck is actually a traveling billboard for God's condemnation of their sin, His providing a way out through the death of His Son -- and His offer of complete, unmerited forgiveness and eternal life.

As we wrap up Matthew, Jesus has been crucified on that cross, and His body laid in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Let's read Matthew 28.

In closing, let's flash back to Rabbi Ezra who lived during the reign of Persia's King Artaxerxes. Well-versed in the laws given to Moses, Ezra was a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron, the Jews' first high priest.

Five times during Ezra's book we read "the hand of God was on him;" God was definitely high on Ezra. God protects all who seek and worship Him, but Ezra wrote that He targets His anger at those who abandon Him -- because He *is* a God of principle (8:22). The Bible clearly teaches there's a heaven and a hell. That may seem harsh and extreme, a bit too black and white for this Age of Relativism, but, hey, He *is* God. And we *aren't*.

God's hand was on Ezra (7:9) because he'd committed himself to seek and know the words of God, to walk his talk and to teach God's Word to his countrymen. It's a no-brainer; we can't learn about God unless we study His Word. If we're "too busy" to do that, we *are* too busy. Time to rejigger our priorities.

To be a person of godly principle, we might follow Ezra's example (7:9):

- He pursued God.
- He put into practice God's Word.
- He proclaimed God's Word to those around him.

Each of us can spend our life:

- Seeking God or
- Struggling with God, ourselves and others to explain life's mysteries.

Etched above the exit at the Dachau death camp we find: "They who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past." God has much to teach us in the Bible about life and living in the 90's. We can learn and profit from it. Or ignore it and repeat the mistakes of the past.

"The two greatest things you'll ever discover in life are (1) the truth about yourself and (2) the truth about God. Both are in the Bible."

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Mar. 10, 1998

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