

Preparing To Read The Synoptic Gospels Pleasant Plains 3-11-2018PM NICK ANGEL

- ***READ II Timothy 3:16,17 *** I truly hope that our reading through the Gospel of John was beneficial to each and everyone of us who were diligent to read through it over the past two months, and I hope that the reading we are beginning this week in the synoptic Gospels will be just as beneficial to everyone. I wrestled for a few weeks, last year, trying to figure out how exactly I wanted for us to attack the synoptics whether we would read one after the other or if I would sit down and try to put together a chronological reading of them at the same time. Of course, I decided on the option that would require much more time and effort, so I have broken down Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as best I could, into a reading schedule where we would be focusing each week on about the same time in Jesus's life from the three separate accounts where that is possible.
- In order to assist in our reading, We are going to spend some time tonight, as is our common practice, to prepare ourselves for the reading of the synoptic Gospels by looking at a couple of common questions that often come up when people give some time and consideration to reading and studying Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- As we read just a few minutes ago, the entirety of Scripture can serve us greatly through helping us to grow and become more mature in our faiths, and certainly the accounts of the life of Jesus would be no exception at all. I hope that we have come to know Jesus, His person, and character better through the reading of John, and I hope that we can continue growing that knowledge of Jesus while also growing in our understanding of discipleship. The next few months will have many lessons focusing on our lives as disciples, and I hope that this daily reading of the synoptics will aid in our individual growth as such. So with that in mind, let's take a few minutes to ask a couple of questions and give a couple of answers that will help us to make the most of our efforts over the coming months.

I. Why the need for multiple Gospel accounts?

A. Why would God feel it necessary to give us four different accounts of the same story?

1. This is something that some people have asked as if it is somehow a slight against God. *"If an all knowing and all power God had this book written, then how come He wasn't able to tell His story in one try?"*
2. Others might see the multiple Gospels as simply being repetitive, especially since Matthew, Mark, & Luke are so similar. What's the point of God doing such a thing? Didn't He realize These questions have been asked by man people for a long time, but I love this answer from Jacob Allee on these questions. He states, *"Well, it may interest you to know (and hopefully you were already aware) that God is smarter than you and I and He had a great purpose in the writing and preservation of the four gospels in our Bible."* Surely God did have a reason for the inspiring and preservation of the four Gospels and that reason is Jesus, His Son.

B. Jesus, being an extraordinary man, sure deserves as much written about Him as possible, right?

1. John certainly thought that the acts of Jesus worthy of note were innumerable. In fact, we remember what he says at the end of his Gospel when he says, *"there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written."* (John 21:25)
2. While John is probably using a bit of hyperbole when writing this thought, we must recognize that truly the life of Jesus, His full character, His ministry, and other aspects of his life can't comprehensively be given to us in four Gospels totaling 79 chapters. Therefore, I see the wisdom of God in inspiring four different men to write about His Son's time on earth. Beyond this however, there is a very practical reason for God inspiring the four separate Gospel accounts.

II. Each Gospel account has a different purpose.

A. They were written for different groups of people.

1. Wayne Jackson notes in his article on examining the Gospels, *"When Jesus was crucified, a superscription was placed above His head proclaiming, 'This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.' It was written in three tongues—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. These languages represented the three dominate cultures of the Mediterranean world when the New Testament was produced. It is not without significance that there is a Gospel record designated for each of these societal elements."* According to Jackson and many others, there is a clear difference in the scope of the intended audience for each Gospel account.
2. It is widely acknowledged that Matthew's Gospel was written for the Jewish reader. There is evidence that it was originally written in Hebrew and then translated to the more common Greek language. It was written so that the Jew could connect the dots and come to a proper knowledge of Jesus being the Messiah.
3. Mark's Gospel would be on the other side of the coin as it is written in such a way that the non-Jewish reader would gain interest and understand. It is written the most like a story, and is the shortest read of the Gospels. Also of note, the word "immediately" is mentioned many times throughout the account which would have appealed to
4. Then Luke's account of the Gospel, the longest of the Gospels, was also written for Gentiles, maybe even more specifically for Greek readers. Luke's account is the longest and most detailed and comprehensive of the Gospels.
5. Even with these different target audiences, the Gospel story is still being told, yet each approaches the Gospel story with some different focuses in mind.

B. They were written with differing focuses.

1. Matthew, being written to Jews, is very focused on the Old Testament. In fact, many have referred to Matthew's Gospel as the "bridge" between the Old and New Testaments. This makes sense seeing as how the Jewish audience would be well familiar with the Old Testament teachings, prophecies, and events. Around 50 Old Testament quotations can be found in Matthew along with around 75 allusions to the Old Testament. The kingdom is also mentioned around 35 times which could feel the Jews with some encouragement that God had not forgotten about them.
2. The belief that Mark's Gospel is addressed to non-Jews is helped by the focus of this Gospel to make sure that the reader understands the ins and outs of the Jewish people. Mark takes time to explain different Jewish customs so that the reader might understand, and he doesn't include a genealogy because a Roman reader wouldn't find much value in reading through a genealogy of a Jewish man. Mark also gives a lot of attention to Jesus being a servant. 14 times within this Gospel, Mark refers to Jesus as such. Mark also puts great emphasis on the actions of Jesus which creates the story type structure of the Gospel. Another way to appeal to the Romans was to continually use the word "immediately" which shows the Romans that Jesus was a man of action. Mark wants for the reader to be able to easily read through his story of Jesus while coming to know the man Jesus and His purpose for coming to earth.
3. Finally, we find Luke focusing on the details. His focus is made clear in the first few verses of his Gospel. **(Luke 1:1-4)** Luke, probably being the only non-Jewish author in the New Testament focuses intensely on the humanity of Jesus, how God became man. He gives the most detailed and complete record of Jesus's birth and childhood, which still isn't much. He then takes time to trace Jesus's blood lineage all the way back to Adam. He focuses on Jesus's humanity by detailing His emotional and physical state at different points. He also records 11 out of the 15 prayers of Jesus in His Gospel account. This attention to detail surely makes Luke's Gospel a masterpiece of a testimony concerning the Lord Jesus.

III. But...what about the contradictions??

- A. Bible skeptics have always looked for discrepancies that would help to discredit the Bible.
1. Their logic is simply and sound. If the Bible claims divine inspiration (It does...II Timothy 3:16,17), then there should not be any sort of inconsistencies within it. Any mistakes, inconsistencies, or contradictions would be solid evidence that this book could not be supernaturally inspired by an all-knowing and all-powerful God.
 2. This type of reasoning is logical and if one was able to prove legitimate inconsistencies in Scripture, then that would give much weight to the idea that the Bible isn't all that it claims to be. This is one reason why so many skeptics give so much time to trying to prove the Bible as having these mistakes.
- B. A favorite hunting ground for inconsistencies is the Gospel accounts and the alleged inconsistencies found within them.
1. Here are a few examples of the skeptics supposed inconsistencies and contradictions:
 - a) The differences between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke give some skeptics supposed ammunition to doubt divine inspiration. Matthew includes women while Luke does not. Doesn't that show that one of the writers got it wrong? Surely that is a possibility, but it is also possible that Matthew and Luke are doing the genealogies from different sides of the family. Matthew focuses on Joseph (and includes women for the benefit of the Jews) while Luke focuses on Mary's lineage.
 - b) Another alleged contradiction stems from whether it was Jesus or his dad who was a carpenter. Mark (**Mark 6:3**) refers to Jesus as a carpenter while Matthew (**Matthew 13:54,55**) refers to Jesus as the carpenter's son. The skeptic was claim that someone has their facts mixed up, but the easy and simply answer is that both of them were carpenters. It was not out of the ordinary at all for sons to follow in their father's footsteps. No contradiction, just complementary information.
 - c) Our final alleged contradiction is cited when it comes to the death of Judas. Matthew records that Judas hung himself (**Matthew 27:5**) while Luke in **Acts 1:18** (a continuation of the Gospel of Luke) states that he fell to his death. This is a clear contradiction right? Well... it if had to be one of the other then, yes, it would be a clear contradiction...but couldn't both be true? Couldn't they be complementary instead of contradictory? I believe there is certainly room for this. Judas could've hung himself and then the rope broke causing him to fall and be opened up as Luke records.
 2. If one is willing to take a step back and try to work through these "contradictions" then we will come to a logical solution. The most simple explanation for these alleged contractions is to remember that each of these accounts were written by people from different perspectives.

IV. Each Gospel account gives a different perspective.

- A. It is very possible for the different people to view the same occurrence in different ways.
1. We have all heard of the examples where people are standing on the street corner and they witness an auto accident. The police begin to gather statements and none of the people's stories are exactly the same. One person said it was two cars. Another person said it was a car and a truck. One person says it was two dark vehicles, and another says it was a black car and a blue car. One person says the car came from the right, while the other says it came from the left. This means that these people are contradicting each other, right?
 2. Of course this isn't the case. Some of the people are just more specific than others. One person calls a vehicle a car while the other refers to it more specifically as a truck. One person is standing on one street corner and the other is on another which is why they use different directions.

3. What we have is different perspectives being written and recorded. All of these witnesses are being honest and truthful. It is just that they saw it differently from where they were standing. Additionally, the fact that they give different details shows that there was no collusion, and that they were all thinking and processing independently. These same things are true for the Gospel accounts.
- B. The Gospel accounts give us the different perspectives of the different men concerning what had taken place in the life of Jesus through their own eyes and the eyes of others.
1. Consider the backlash if all three of the synoptic Gospels were nearly exactly alike word for word. What would the skeptic scream if that was the case? *“These men simply copied one another and didn’t actually see or talk to anyone! They just shared the same information from the same source!”* We must recognize that this shows literary independence which helps to strengthen the case for the Gospel story being true and accurate.
 2. *“Taken together, the four perspectives provided in the four Gospels provide a more complete picture of the person, teachings, miracles, and life of Jesus Christ. In addition, the multiple attestations of these accounts from very early sources provide stronger evidence for the truthfulness of their claims. For example, each of these four books was likely written in different locations and at different times, in addition to being authored by four different individuals. While they sometimes record the same events with different details, their message is consistent, indicating a level of truthfulness and accuracy that strengthens their testimony. These four Gospels ultimately provide one clear message that Jesus is the one, true, perfect, divine Son of God.”* (compellingtruth.org)
 3. The Gospel writers were coming from different perspectives and places and they had different purposes and focuses in their writings, yet the message was still consistent and clear. This Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God. He was the Messiah and is God. Regardless of the differing details, which can be logically explained, the message remains clear and concise.

These questions we asked and answered tonight are good and worthwhile considerations. I hope that each of us might even be more able to answer these questions if they are ever posed to us. Beyond that, I am excited about reading through the synoptics over the coming months. Reading, studying, and meditating upon the life of Jesus will never not be beneficial, and I hope that this lesson will get us excited to get into the text to read the details and even see what the different focuses and purposes might show us in the different accounts. May God bless us to be diligent in the reading of His Word so that we might come to know Him and His Son all the more.

PRAYER Jehovah God...may Your name be praised and honored all throughout the earth for You are a loving God who only wants for all men to know You and Your Son. We are so thankful that You have inspired men to record and preserve the story of Your Son for us. Please help us to be dedicated to the reading of the Gospels over the coming months, and we pray that You would bless us to grow in our knowledge of and faith in Your Son who came to this earth for us. Be with us as we go throughout this week. Help us to overcome the temptations of Satan, and help us to love You always. In Jesus’s name we pray...amen.