

TOP 10 THINGS ABOUT THE GOSPELS

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When we travel to a foreign city, the guidebook is a really useful resource to help us to know what to look for and visit. It often gives us the top ten things to see if we only have a few days. Reading through the gospels is a bit like visiting a foreign city: so what are the top ten things you need to know as you take others on this journey of exploration?

1. 'Gospel' simply means 'good news': used here, the four Gospels tell the good news about Jesus Christ. They are not simply biographies of a past spiritual teacher: they intend to introduce us to a risen, living person in whom salvation and new life are to be found, and who is to be worshipped and served (John 20.31). The Gospels were written by believers, who selected their material to serve this great purpose: to bring other people to know and love Christ. In this sense, they give us no mere objective historical account of Jesus' life and ministry, but four impassioned 'sermons' based around his life, miracles, teaching, death, resurrection and ascension, to bring people to faith.

2. This does not mean that historical accuracy and contexts were not important to the Gospel writers: in fact, the opposite is the case! Luke, at the start of his Gospel (speaking for all four of the evangelists) clearly explains the careful research he has done, based on the evidence of eye-witness accounts and reliable oral (and written) traditions that had been passed down (Luke 1.1-4). He then sets the story of Jesus firmly within the historical and social context of the Near East (Luke 1.5, 2.1-2, 3.1-2). In short, he is keen to show that the story of Jesus is about real events that involved real people in real places, at a particular moment in history.

3. Each Gospel reflects the particular interests of the audience for whom they are written. Matthew is writing to a predominantly Jewish readership, so his Gospel is packed full of Old Testament quotations and he is keen to explain how Jesus fulfilled the Jewish hopes of a Messiah. Mark and Luke were writing to mainly Gentile audiences (Luke being a Gentile himself). So their Gospels reflect Jesus' compassion for those outside the boundaries of Israel. John's Gospel is a more theological piece of writing aimed at Greek and Jewish readers, based around seven 'signs' (miracles of Jesus), each one prompting an extended discourse, and each culminating in one of the famous 'I am' sayings.

4. The four Gospels portray Jesus as having a universal appeal, which is what you would expect for someone who claimed to be the Saviour of the world (John 3.16). While he gives time to enter into debate with the religious leaders of the day and to challenge the rich young ruler, he has a particular concern for those who felt marginalised by mainstream Jewish society: Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers, beggars, the immoral and demon-possessed. Women and children (considered second class citizens in Jewish society) are welcomed and embraced and given dignity.

5. All four Gospels contain stories of amazing miracles that Jesus performed, some in the area of the natural world (the stilling of the storm), some in the area of physical healing (the healing of the 10 lepers), and some in the area of releasing people from spiritual bondage (the exorcism of Legion). None of these should surprise us if Jesus was who he said he was: the divine Son of God, working with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. However, these miracles were not done to impress people like a magician, but to reveal his identity (John 1.11), and to show the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in his own life and ministry (Luke 11.20). The world is being put to rights in his life and ministry!

6. The Gospels (particularly the first three) **contain many intriguing stories called parables**, often taken from real life and intended to convey important messages for those 'with ears to hear' (Luke 8.8). The usual definition of a parable ('an earthly story with a heavenly meaning') is not really adequate: they are better defined as 'windows of light to illustrate what is going on in the life and ministry of Jesus.' Some of them have Jesus' explanation attached so we are given the definitive interpretation; others are left for us to puzzle out carefully, based on the context of the passage and the wider thrust of Jesus' teaching. The latter two act as important 'controls', because the last thing we should do is try and guess what Jesus meant to teach us without referring to the immediate context and his teaching as a whole.

7. The Gospels have discipleship intentions as well as the evangelistic purpose of bringing people to have faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord. They



intend to help new Christian believers grow in their relationship with Christ and understand what is involved in following Jesus, including the cost of laying down your life for him. A classic example of this discipleship training is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus teaches his disciples about the Christian characteristics, lifestyle and values: how to love your enemies, how to deal with anger, how to pray and fast, how to give generously, how to make a difference in the world. A whole discipleship manual in one sermon!

8. Each of the Gospels have a disproportionate amount of writing on the events at the end of Jesus' life: his entry into Jerusalem, the institution of the last supper, his betrayal by Judas, his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, his trial, his crucifixion, his burial, his resurrection on Easter Sunday, his appearances to the disciples over 40 days, and his ascension back to the Father after the great commission. This is deliberately done because it was believed that Jesus dying and rising not only fulfilled the ancient prophecies about the Messiah being the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, but also because they were the central events that brought salvation to the world. They therefore need to be described in great detail.

9. Scholars think that Mark was written first (between AD 60-70, drawing on earlier sources) and that Matthew and Luke relied heavily on him while also independently adding parts from older sources that were unique to their own accounts. John is thought to be written last (in about AD 90) and this is reflected in the more theologically reflective approach. Early fragments of the Gospels have been found in the 2nd century, and before the end of the 2nd century an early Christian scholar (Irenaeus) takes it for granted that there are four main Gospels.

10. The Gospels are only part of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus. The Old Testament starts with God's good purposes for his creation and tells the story of the fall of humankind from the closeness of relationship with God. This prompts the cosmic rescue plan to restore the whole of creation to those original purposes which God had intended, starting with the call of Abraham and his descendants from whom would come a Saviour, the messiah. The Acts of the Apostles is Luke's portrait of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost and how the gospel spread throughout the ancient world, while the Epistles reflect on the saving work of Christ through the lens of the early Christian communities that were formed. There is much more to enjoy!

For a fuller overview, please see Reading the Gospels in the New Bible Commentary by Dr RT France (IVP, Revised 2005, pp. 896-903)

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