

JESUS

THREE PORTRAITS, ONE STORY

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

REGULAR BAPTIST PRESS

The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, Editor

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Preface

God chose to have four Gospels written instead of one. That seems like overkill. But Jesus' life on earth was not ordinary. He is multifaceted, so it took four different writers to capture what we need to know about His life and ministry on earth. One Gospel would not have been adequate.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptics because they cover roughly the same material. But each one is nuanced to present Jesus in a different light. This study will focus first on the portrait of Christ in each of the synoptics. Taking time to understand how each Gospel presents Christ is important. That is part of sound study of God's Word.

This study will then combine all three synoptic Gospels in a presentation of the one story of Christ in a somewhat chronological manner beginning with His birth and ending with His resurrection and ascension. Not every aspect of Christ's life could be thoroughly covered in a course this length. Such an endeavor would take many volumes if done to its fullest. But the study will challenge you and expand your understanding of Christ. The knowledge you gain will be the basis for your growth in Christ. Pray that you would have your relationship with Christ strengthened as a result of studying the synoptic Gospels.

Three Reliable Portraits

Scripture Focus

Matthew, Mark, Luke

Theme

The synoptic Gospels are reliable records of Christ that help us get a complete understanding of Him and His ministry on earth.

Memory Verses

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20, 21).

GETTING STARTED

Norman Rockwell painted a famous triple self-portrait of himself for the cover of an edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*. A thoughtful examination of the portrait reveals that Rockwell painted with a masterful plan in mind. He used angles and lines to draw the viewer’s immediate attention to the picture of his face on the canvas. Of course, Rockwell was being a bit vain by drawing so much attention to himself.

Even more masterful than Rockwell’s triple self-portrait is the triple portrait of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each told Jesus’ story but from different angles. The result is three similar but different portraits of the Master. This lesson will help you appreciate the emphasis of each of the synoptic Gospels.

1. Have you learned to appreciate the different portraits of Christ in the Gospels?

2. If so, how have the different presentations of Christ helped you to know Him better?

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The first three Gospels are often studied together because they are the *synoptic Gospels*, a term derived from Greek words that mean *to see together*. Scholars believe that these three Gospels were written between AD 52 and AD 68. The *synoptic problem* is a matter of questions raised by the similarities and differences within these Gospels.

Inspiration of the Synoptic Gospels

How were the synoptic Gospels written? First, Matthew, Mark, and Luke had access to oral tradition. In societies where printing did not exist or writing was scarce, men took great pains to accurately learn and remember the records they desired to preserve.

Second, personal contact contributed to the content of the gospel accounts. The apostle Matthew associated closely with Christ throughout His earthly ministry. Mark lived in Jerusalem, engaged in missionary work with Paul and Barnabas, and was closely associated with Peter, from whom he would have received firsthand accounts of the life of Christ.

Third, the writers had access to the apostles, who had moved to Jerusalem. They would have shared the information they knew about the life of Christ, and others would have repeated it.

Fourth, the gospel writers would also have taken care to examine written records, as Luke specifically stated he did (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–4). There was probably even some examination of the Gospels themselves.

3. Describe your confidence level in the veracity of the Gospels if the authors wrote solely based on the four sources discussed above.

Most significantly, the disciples had the Holy Spirit, as Christ had promised (John 14:26). The Spirit led the authors to record their accounts exactly as God wanted.

4. Read John 14:26. What did Christ say the Holy Spirit would do for the disciples?

If the Spirit wanted the writers of the Gospels to record a particular account, they never had a moment in which they could not remember exactly what happened or what Christ said. And they never recorded what they thought they heard or remembered; they were sure of the accounts they recorded. The Holy Spirit enabled the writers to discover the written records, to evaluate them, to remember from personal contact with Christ or from those who had heard Him, and then to relate those things to us accurately, without error.

5. Read 2 Peter 1:20, 21. How do we know the writers weren't just putting their personal spins on their records of Christ's life and ministry?

6. Read 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. What is the result of the inspiration of the Gospels?

The superintendence of the Holy Spirit in the writing of the Gospels gives us confidence in their veracity as we read them. Without the inspiration of the Gospels, we might be tempted to view them with skepticism for being repetitive and even seemingly contradictory.

Though the Spirit's inspiration of the Gospels gives us confidence in them, the reasons for the repetitions and variations in the Gospels are worth considering.

Why the Repetition?

7. Read Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; and Luke 3:21–23. What reasons might you give for the inclusion of Christ’s baptism in each of the synoptic Gospels?

If there had been no repetition within the gospel accounts, critics would say that an editor had corrected the manuscripts to make sure that each one contained new material. However, where repetition does occur, critics say that two of the writers must have simply copied from the third. This speculation reduces the inspired Scripture to a human level and attributes to an unknown editor what the Bible attributes to the superintendence of the Holy Spirit.

The repetition in the synoptic Gospels is valuable in that it emphasizes certain themes and provides more than one witness to the event. Scripture tells us that the testimony of two or three witnesses will establish a matter (Deut. 19:15; cf. Matt. 18:16). God has given us three witnesses plus one extra (John) in some cases! Each writer did not *need* to consult the others but independently wrote what the Holy Spirit led him to write.

Furthermore, each Gospel is written for its own purpose. Since each Gospel is based on Christ’s life and ministry, it stands to reason that specific events in Christ’s life would serve the purpose of more than one Gospel. Read any two news stories about the same event and you will realize a similar phenomenon. Some of the facts reported by both stories will be essentially the same. Yet the writers’ purposes for their news stories are most likely different. Consequently they will neither include the same facts nor arrange them in the same order.

When we find parallel accounts in the Gospels, we should ask: Why does each writer included the account in his Gospel? How does the account fit into the overall context of the particular Gospel we are studying? And what specific details of the account might help us better understand the writer’s purpose?

We should not conclude that the less informative accounts are necessarily less important. All accounts in the Gospels play the same role in that they all help to shape the message of each Gospel.

Why the Variations?

Some of the parallel passages in the Gospels seem to present conflicting reports. Critics use these as proof that the Bible contradicts itself and therefore cannot be trusted.

8. How do you respond when you find apparent contradictions between the Gospel accounts? Do they ever make you feel uncomfortable?

A closer look at some of the most commonly criticized passages in the Gospels shows that the apparent contradictions can all be satisfactorily explained. The explanations actually serve to build our confidence in the Gospels and the Bible in general.

9. Read Matthew 28:2–7 and John 20:11, 12. What is the apparent contradiction in these two accounts?

The apparent contradiction about the number of angels at Christ's tomb is not hard to explain. According to John, there were at least two angels there, but Matthew recorded the presence of only one. Yet just because Matthew's account is narrower in scope does not mean it is wrong. The same goes for all Bible accounts. An account is not automatically wrong because it is missing facts recorded in a parallel account.

10. Read Matthew 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; and Luke 18:35–43. What differences in these accounts might a critic claim are contradictory?

The difference in the number of blind men reported in the accounts is merely a matter of writers choosing to report different details. The accounts do not contradict each other.

The location of Jesus in relation to Jericho has a plausible explanation too. Archeologists have uncovered two cities named Jericho from about the

time of Christ. The cities are near each other making it plausible that Jesus visited the one and then made His way to the other. Meeting the blind men in transition between the two cities would fit the descriptions of Jesus both leaving Jericho and approaching Jericho.

The timing of the Passover meal at the time of Christ's arrest and crucifixion is another apparent contradiction. It appears from Matthew's account that the meal was the night before Christ's crucifixion (Matt. 26:18–20) while John records that some Jews observed Passover after Jesus was arrested (John 18:28). This is perhaps best explained by the use of two different calendars. So Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples before His arrest according to one calendar while the Jewish authorities followed another calendar and celebrated it the next day. Both accounts are accurate and neither is a contradiction.

The time of Christ's death is another source of apparent contradiction between Mark and John. Yet it is simply related to the different first century understandings of when a day began. Mark employs the *Jewish* method for noting hours of the day (Mark 15:24–26). The Jewish day began at 6 AM. John used the *Roman* day which began at midnight (John 19:14–16). So both men were right in the times they gave in relation to Jesus' death.

11. How does providing explanations for apparent contradictions affect your confidence in God's Word?

There are other variations in accounts between the Gospels. All of the variations have plausible explanations.

Compiling all the information recorded in all four Gospels to form one cohesive account of the life of Christ is a profitable exercise. It helps us get a full picture of Christ. But we should not seek a harmonization of the Gospels without also considering each of the Gospels on their own. We should learn the message of each Gospel. The rest of this lesson will introduce each of the synoptic Gospels. The next three lessons will provide a more detailed look at the authors and content of each one. Lessons four through thirteen will cover the life of Christ.

Matthew's Message

Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to persuade them that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah/King.

12. Read Matthew 1:1. Why would this verse be particularly important to a Jewish audience?

Lineage was of utmost importance to the Jews when considering whether someone was the Messiah. It made sense for Matthew to start with Jesus' lineage in his Gospel. Jesus will one day sit on the throne of David as God promised the king. And the salvation Jesus provided on the cross is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him.

Matthew went on to present the proof that Jesus had the credentials of the Messiah. The writer linked Old Testament prophecy to events happening in the ministry of Christ. He quoted from the Old Testament more times than any other Gospel. Sixteen times Matthew stated that a certain Old Testament statement or prophecy was *fulfilled*. Matthew also made many more references to the kingdom than the other gospel writers did.

Matthew recorded the message of John the Baptist as *Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* (Matt. 3:2), while both Mark and Luke reported it as *repentance for the remission of sins* (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). Both messages are right, but the difference emphases show how intent the Holy Spirit was on presenting Jesus as the Messiah/King through Matthew's Gospel. That will become more apparent in the following lesson.

Mark's Message

The book of Mark, the shortest of the Gospels, begins with Christ's public ministry without a word about His birth and early life. Mark seemed to be in a hurry as he moved from scene to scene. His favorite word appears to be *immediately* or one of its other forms, *straightway* or *forthwith* (used a total of forty times). Mark recorded only four of Christ's parables, preferring to present Christ through His works rather than through His teaching ministry. This presentation seems to support the

view of many Bible teachers that Mark addressed his book specifically to the Romans because of their respect for action and efficiency.

The Romans were more impressed by deeds than words, and Mark presented a Man of power to them. Mark also presented Christ as the Servant.

13. Read Mark 10:45. Why might a Roman audience be particularly intrigued by a suffering servant?

The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus as a Man of action, constantly on the move in His devotion to serve the needs of the people.

Luke's Message

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus goes back to Abraham to emphasize that Jesus was identified with the Jewish people. It also traces the line of Joseph and is thereby Jesus' legal record. But Luke carried the genealogy back to Adam to emphasize that Jesus identified with the entire human race (Luke 3:23–38). Luke's genealogy seems to present Mary's line, which would be Jesus' natural record that connects Him directly with humanity.

Luke emphasized Jesus' perfection as the God-Man: *the Son of the Highest; in favour with God and man* (Luke 1:32; 2:52). Pilate, after questioning Him regarding all the charges made against Him, announced, *I find no fault in this man* (Luke 23:4, 14) and further answered Christ's critics, *I have found no cause of death in him* (23:15, 22). The centurion, watching His composure in death, *glorified God, saying, Certainly this was a righteous man* (23:47).

Luke conveyed Christ's claim to royal heritage and His manifestations of miraculous power, but he also conveyed the feeling of Christ's love enveloping the world.

14. Read Luke 9:56 and 19:10. How do you respond when you read these statements about Christ?

15. How might it affect your outlook on lost humanity?

While among the Gospels distinctions exist in the choice of content and the manner of presenting it, the three books stand united in their record concerning one Man, His ministry, and His mission. There are three distinct portraits but only one story of redemption.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Looking at the Lord Jesus Christ through the threefold synoptic Gospels provides a picture of Him that is truly three-dimensional. We see the height of His human perfection, the breadth of His miraculous ministry, and the depth of His divine love.

16. How might you respond to Christ as the Messiah/King in Matthew's Gospel?

17. How might you respond to Christ as the Suffering Servant in Mark's Gospel?

18. How might you respond to Christ as the Perfect God-Man in Luke's Gospel?