

# Reading the Gospels Well

## Approach to Devotionally Understanding the Gospel Narratives

### Introduction

In **Matthew 16:12**, Jesus asks Peter the pivotal question “who do you say that I am?” This is one of the most important questions asked in the Scriptures for how one answers this question sets the trajectory for their spiritual life and eternal destination. The section of the Bible known as the Gospels contain the life and witness of Christ during His earthly ministry which provide testimony to who He is. Therefore the Gospels are essential and precious for the Christian to know who Christ is and what He has accomplished on their behalf. The goal of this study is to equip Christians with skills and principles for reading the Gospels devotionally—that is with the aim of worshipping and cherishing Christ all the more.

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### I. What are the Gospels?

The Gospels are not contradicting accounts but are four testimonies relaying the truth concerning Jesus Christ’s identity, mission, and life. The Gospel accounts bear both **unity** in bearing witness to the one Christ and yet **diversity** in viewing Christ in unique portraits.

#### A. Defining the Gospels

What comes to mind when you think of *gospel*? If you grew up in church, maybe you think of a musical genre? Or maybe you have heard the word but not given it much thought? Or maybe in some of your Bibles you will open to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John and your heading says, “the gospel according to \_\_\_\_\_.” Together I want us to discover what Christians mean when we describe those four books at the beginning of the New Testament as the Gospels. In its strictest sense, *euangelion* the word gospel means “good news” and is used throughout the New Testament over eighty times. The “good news” is the celebratory message of how Jesus Christ, the Son of God has reconciled sinners back to God by His death, burial, and resurrection. This is the message that Christians proclaim in hopes that hearers embrace this truth and put their trust in Jesus. This is the way the Epistles or letters generally treat the gospel message, but the Gospel authors use the word gospel in a broader sense. The Gospels of the Bible use the word gospel in three main ways: to describe a message to be proclaimed, to summarize Jesus’ teachings on the nature of God’s kingdom and generally to describe the entire testimony of Jesus’ life. Let’s examine this last usage of gospel more closely in Mark chapter 1.

In 1:1 we read, “**The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**” Notice that right away Mark introduces his book by telling us who his book is fixated on. Not only is Mark confirming Jesus’ identity as the Son of God but informs us as readers that his book will be about Jesus. He describes this book as the gospel of Jesus Christ. What does he mean by that? He is defining gospel for us as a testimony or witness about the life and ministry of Jesus. He gives us more clues into his meaning of the word gospel as we keep reading. In verses 14-15, Mark says, “**Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”**” Here Mark nuances the word gospel as something to believe. Mark’s purpose in writing is underscored here. When Mark describes the testimony of Jesus’ life, it isn’t *just* for a historical biography, but for the reader to understand who Jesus is **and** believe in His mission, works, and words for salvation. If we hope to read any of the Gospel accounts well, we must do so with this general aim of the authors in our minds. They each write from different vantage points about the life of the same man in hopes that the

readers will know and believe in him for salvation. For our time throughout this series, when we are describing the Gospels, we will define them as **the written testimonies for believing in the mission, works, and life of Jesus Christ.**





## The Gospels

### B. Why Four Gospels

In a nutshell these four Gospel accounts were written by four different men. **Matthew** was a Jewish tax collector that became one of the disciples of Jesus (**Mt. 9:9-13**). **John Mark** was a companion to Paul and Peter (**Acts 12:25, 1 Pt. 5:13**). Luke was a Gentile physician and companion to Paul several missionary journeys (**Col. 4:10**). And lastly, **John** was also a disciple of Jesus, but was one of the three more prominent (as in closeness to Christ) disciples suggested in Scripture (**Jn. 13:23**). While there were several pseudepigraphic (falsely attributed) accounts of Christ's life that circulated in the ancient world after Christ's death, these four accounts have met the proper criteria for Holy Writ: (1) written by the pen of an Apostle or (2) authorized by one of the apostles. There is much to be said about the personalities, experiences, audiences, and purpose for writing to differentiate each account, but it is important to highlight the significance of each Gospel account by stating that each is equally inspired by God. ***This means that each account is complete, authoritative, and correct on all historical accounts and references they contain.*** This however may bring about specific concerns about why we have four Gospel accounts. The accounts are not just repetitions of each other, nor do they present conflicting facts about Jesus. Rather, they are four portraits that strengthen our understanding of Christ collectively, like multiple pictures of the same person. I want to briefly address a few reasons as to the importance of these four Gospel Accounts:

#### 1. Each Gospel Writer Has a Unique Perspective

Each Gospel writer gives a different portrait (not piece) of the one Jesus; providing the reader with a united **and** unique understanding of Jesus. **See reference below:**<sup>1</sup>

Four Portraits of the One Jesus			
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
The Gospel of the Messiah	The Gospel of <b>the suffering Son of God</b>	The Gospel of the <b>Savior for all people</b>	The Gospel of the <b>divine Son who reveals</b>
Most structured	Most dramatic	Most thematic	Most theological
			
Most structured	Most dramatic	Most thematic	Most theological

<sup>1</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 23

## 2. Each Gospel Writer Has a Unique Audience

While we know that the Gospels were written to the believing community, each Gospel writer had an audience in mind to whom they were writing.

**Matthew:** writes with a Judeo-Christian audience in mind as he describes Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament.

**Mark:** historical evidence suggests that Mark writes from Rome among a Christian community underneath the persecution of Rome. The themes of Christ's struggles and subsequent victory underneath an oppressive State would be an encouragement to Roman Christians.

**Luke:** writes to Theophilus, who was probably a Roman Christian friend of his. This is the only Gospel account where the recipient is directly addressed (**Lk. 1:3**).

**John:** His audience is the hardest to identify. What is clear is that as an eyewitness to the events John writes so that those who read it will not only know who Jesus is but put their trust in him as the Son of God demonstrated by his exalted Christology.

## 3. Gospels were Written Apologetically

The church needed to respond to early attacks from dissenters and enemies of the faith; especially concerning issues of Christ's divinity, His humanity, and the history of the resurrection. Therefore the Gospels were written to respond to accusations made falsely about Jesus.

## 4. Gospels were Written Evangelistically

There was a need to call men and women to faith in Jesus Christ and to repentance. The Gospels while mostly written for believers, also include an implicit call to faith in Christ Jesus (**Jn. 20:31**).

## 5. Gospels were Written Historically

The Gospels were written to provide a faithful and accurate record of the words and deeds of Jesus (**Jn. 21:24**).

## 6. Gospels were Written to Catechize

There was a need to teach new converts on the core tenants of the faith. Thus the Gospels were written as summaries of Christ's life and teachings.

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## II. Gospel Distinctives

### A. Matthew

Central Theme:	Jesus the Jewish Messiah brings salvation history to its climax, saving His people from their sins.
Key Verse:	Matthew 1:21 (NASB95) 21“ <i>She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.</i> ”

### Simplified Outline:

- I. Prologue: Genealogy and Birth Narratives of the Messiah (1-2)
- II. Appearance of the Messiah (3:1-4:11)
- III. The Ministry of the Messiah to Israel (4:12-11:1)
- IV. The Responses to the Messiah (11:2-20:34)
- V. The Messiah Confronts Jerusalem (21:1-26:1)
- VI. The Messiah Though Rejected, is Victorious (26-28)

**Distinctions:**

- Strong emphasis on fulfillment of Jesus as the Christ
- Strong denunciation of Jewish religious leaders
- Interest in the OT law and relationship to followers of Christ
- Topical arrangement
- Alternates between discourses and narrative
- Emphasis on Peter’s role than in other Gospels

**Themes:**

- Promise-Fulfillment and the Climax of Salvation History
- The Kingdom of Heaven
- Jesus and the Law

**B. Mark**

Central Theme:	Jesus the Son of God obediently suffers as the Servant of the Lord to pay the ransom price for sins, and as a model of suffering and sacrifice for His disciples to follow.
Key Verse:	Mark 10:45 (NASB95) 45 “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

**Simplified Outline:**

- I. The Preparation and Announcement of the Son of God (1:1-13)
- II. The Authoritative Ministry of the Son of God (1:14-8:26)
- III. The suffering of the Son of God as Servant of the LORD (8:27-16:8)

**Distinctions:**

- Fast-moving narrative; oratory style
- Vivid descriptions of persons and events
- Prominence of Galilee as the locus of Jesus’ early ministry
- Strong Emphasis on Jesus’ authority in teaching and in miracles
- Negative view of the disciples
- Lengthy passion narrative; emphasis on Jesus’s death
- Brief resurrection narrative

**Themes:**

- The Kingdom of God
- Jesus the Servant-Messiah
- Discipleship

**C. Luke**

Central Theme:	God’s end time salvation predicted by the prophets has arrived through the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.
Key Verse:	Luke 19:10 (NASB95) 10 “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

**Simplified Outline:**

- I. The Prologue (1:1-4)
- II. The Birth of the Savior (1:5-2:52)
- III. The Preparation of the Savior 3:1-4:13
- IV. The Galilean Ministry of the Savior 4:14-9:50
- V. The Mission of the Savior 9:51-19:27
- VI. The Passion of the Savior 22:1-23:56
- VII. The Resurrection of the Savior 24:1-53

**Distinctions:**

- Historical notes and dating with references to secular leaders
- Universality of the Gospel Message
- References to Jesus as Savior, Christ, Lord and Prophet
- Jesus's special concerns for outsiders
- References to Jesus' prayer life and his teaching on prayer
- Emphasis on the ascension of Christ

**Themes:**

- The Salvation of God
- The Dawn of Salvation and the Coming of the Spirit
- Divine Sovereignty and the Purposes of God
- Salvation for Outsiders
- Prayer and Intimate Fellowship with the Father

**D. John**

Central Theme:	Jesus is the divine Son of God who reveals the Father, providing eternal life to all who believe in Him.
Key Verse:	John 1:14 (NASB95) <sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

**Simplified Outline:**

- I. Prologue 1:1-18
- II. The Book of Signs 1:19-12:50
- III. The Book of Glory 13:1-20:1
- IV. Epilogue 21:1-25

**Distinctions:**

- Emphasis on Jesus's identity as the Son who reveals the Father
- Simple vocabulary but deep theological significance
- Key thematic terms like: life, believe, abide, light
- Miracles identified as signs revealing Jesus' identity
- I AM statements
- Personal interviews
- Teachings concerning the Holy Spirit as Advocate
- Chronology based on the Jewish festivals, especially Passover

**Themes:**

- Revelation of the Father through the Son
- Salvation as Knowing God, Eternal Life in the Present

- The Paraclete
- Christological Identification

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### III. Genre of the Gospels

**Genre** is a way of categorizing different literature by common or intersecting traits. Traits may differ according to cultures, but each genre includes rules and patterns that are commonly accepted. For instance, if I started a story with “Once upon a time”, you would immediately know I was starting a fairy tale. However, you would be surprised to open your algebra textbook and among the explanation of multiplying fractions to find that phrase. Why? Because they are different genres each with their own characteristics. What genres of literature can you name?

Genre is important for understanding any literature. When you understand the characteristics of the material you are reading then you can properly make an informed decision about what you’re reading. When we misunderstand literature, the results can lead to bad and even dangerous decisions. Imagine driving on the highway and seeing a sign that read, “Caution, sharp turns up ahead. Reduce speed.” How would you respond? If you read that and determined it was only a poem, you can end up in a pretty bad crash. Unfortunately, many times we “crash” when reading the Bible because we don’t understand it’s genres and the characteristics within them.

#### A. Understanding the Gospel’s Genre

What makes understanding the genre of the Gospels difficult is that they often include many mixed elements from many genres. For example, we have established that the Gospels are about Jesus like a biography, but Jesus also teaches in parables, which are short stories that reveal big truths. Here is how Dr. Wellum describes the gospel’s genre, “These Gospels are more than mere biographical or historical records, although they record both history and the basic content of Christ’s life. They are theological history that accurately describes and interprets who Jesus is and what he has come to do according to God’s eternal plan .”<sup>[12]</sup> While it is difficult to pin a genre on the Gospels, but let’s examine the three aspects of the Gospel account’s genre. The Gospel accounts are:

##### 1. Narrative

The Gospels function as biographies; especially like biographies produced in the ancient Roman world. Biographies or narratives include similar elements such as setting, characters, conflict, and resolution. The Gospel narratives aren’t just sayings of Jesus or a collection of writings about him but are told through intricate stories that have plot devices. Each gospel focuses on the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus but they do not contain the same details or even tell the stories in the same order. This shouldn’t concern us though as this is common in most narrative literature. You could pick up four different biographies about Martin Luther King Jr. and bet that they won’t tell his stories in the same way or even with the same details. If we can trust those writings, how much more faith can we put in God’s inspired Word.

##### 2. Historical

The Gospels aren’t just telling stories, but they are meant to be historical events. Maybe you have read the 6 Harry Potter books, which are great examples of narrative writings, but they are also fiction. Reading those books as great examples of narrative, but if you get on your roof with your broomstick, you will be very quickly and painfully disappointed. Contrary to many skeptics, the Gospels aren’t fiction, but are trustworthy historical accounts.

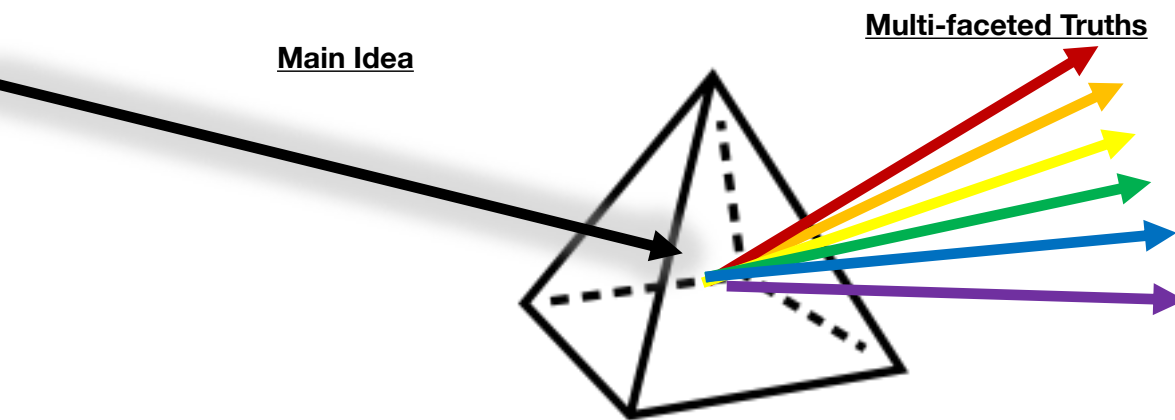
##### 3. Theological

Theology is simply the study of God. The gospel didn’t set out to simply write a historical account about Jesus (even though he is the most interesting man who has ever lived). The

gospel writers mean to teach and reveal theological truths to us. This means that through narratives, we are to learn more about God and his expectations for his creation. The Gospels are incredibly unique pieces of literature for us to know and believe Christ. Understanding how the Gospels are narrative, historical, and theological are incredibly important for understanding what they mean.

## B. Tracing the Big Picture

Each gospel account has a main idea or point the writer is communicating that can be traced through several multi-faceted and complex truths throughout the book. You can think of this as a prism that is hit by a beam of light (main idea) and refracts many colors on the other side (complex truths). The multi-faceted truths must support and undergird the main point suggested of the book.



Let's do an example of tracing the main idea with its supports in the Gospel of John.

<b>Main Point:</b> Jesus is revealed as the Son of God who brings eternal life to those who place their trust in Him.	1:14, 3:6, 5:18, 20:30
<b>Support Evidence 1:</b> Jesus does miraculous signs and works that uncover His divinity.	2:1-11, 6:10-13; 16-21
<b>Support Evidence 2:</b> Jesus alludes to His own divine nature.	6:35, 9:5, 10:30
<b>Support Evidence 3:</b> People respond to Jesus' miracles by believing in Him.	2:11, 4:28-29

Each supporting evidence offers complex truths that are worth exploring on their own, but they serve to support the main idea about the Son of God who came to give eternal life.

## 1. Tips for Finding Main Point

### **Read the Accounts**

As mentioned before, the best way to understand the big picture of any book of Scripture is to simply be immersed in it. It bears repeating that there is no substitution in reading the Gospels well for much time and familiarity in personal study. Knowing the roads well always help you to navigate better.

### **Look for Repetition**

A helpful way to understand the big picture of the book is to look for repeated words or themes. When words and themes are frequently used, the author is signaling what he wants to either inform or persuade you. For example, words and phrases like “eternal life” and “believe” show up frequently in the Gospel of John. He clearly wants to communicate something to his reader about these two topics. Also, do due diligence to look for more complex themes beyond simple word studies. For example, there are many references to the Jewish festivals in the Gospel of John. **What reasons could John have for highlighting those details?**

### **Read the Gospels looking for Jesus**

When reading the Gospels, remember that the writers are primarily teaching us something about the person and work of Jesus. If you were to flip through any of the Gospels and stop on a page, you can be sure to learn something about Christ on that page. This presumption is the bedrock for faithfully understanding the Gospels. Here me clearly, the Gospels have much to say about all sorts of topics, however they are to be understood in light of the revelation of Jesus and his ministry. The second we think the Gospels are about anything else, we will begin to come away with all sorts of misunderstandings. Let’s look at one such example in a text:

#### **Matthew 17:14-20**

**Let’s start by making some observations.** What is going on in this text? While this admittedly a difficult text, we must remember the principle that Matthew is teaching us something about Jesus in this text. Some people use this text to suggest that the reason you maybe don’t get your way in prayer, or the outcome of your circumstances is unfavorable is because you didn’t have *enough* faith. This is a view that points to the adherent and says that bad things happen to you or around you because you ultimately aren’t working (faith in this way becomes a work to do) enough. But what if the size of faith isn’t the issue in this text, since Christ makes the point in chapter 13 that a mustard seed is tiny. However, maybe Christ is pointing out a wrong kind of faith; one that isn’t founded upon the revelation of himself as in the transfiguration account earlier. The little faith demonstrated by the disciples may demonstrate a wrong attitude or motivation of heart, not properly focused on Christ and his ability to heal.

## 2. Tools for Finding Main Point

With all the resources and information, we carry in our phones, there are plenty of tools to also aid in finding the main points of the Gospels. My first suggestion is a good study bible. A good study bible will have notes and suggested outline for each Gospel account that will act as a guiding map. I would also say a good bible dictionary will help point out words or themes that may be unfamiliar to us 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. Lastly, I would recommend commentaries. While helpful, always remember that sources are not authoritative and can’t replace the time you spend reading the Word for yourself.

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## **IV. Narratives in the Gospels**

## A. What are Narratives

Narratives are accounts of information told in stories. As mentioned in a previous lesson, the Gospels are narratives, meaning that they convey truths through stories. The Gospels are in fact told mostly through narratives. These stories can be difficult to understand because the purpose of a story might not be evident, but hopefully by the end of this lesson we will have a greater understanding of how to read them in the Gospels.

## B. Guidelines for Narratives

Before we do some narrative examples, here are just three helpful guidelines we must keep in our minds when approaching narrative accounts:

- **Context**- To understand what the author truly means; we must always read passages in its context. Everything the author writes is intentional to the point he is conveying. When we lift a passage from its context, we are tempted to make our own meaning from the text. **For example, let's look at John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."** Who do you think the thief that Jesus mentions here is? Some may think this is a reference to Satan, who is certainly the adversary of God's people. However, the context helps us to understand who Jesus is talking about. As Jesus is in his discourse on the being the Good Shepherd, he identifies the thief in verse 8, **"All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them."** Jesus doesn't describe a spiritual agent of evil here, but he has in mind false religious or messianic figures who have preached or taught a false message of eternal life. We can rightly understand and better identify these false preachers and teachers because we have rightly understood this verse in context.

- **Editorial Comments**- From time to time, the Gospel writers will give the reader specific details or insight to something happening in the text. When we find these moments in the text, we should highlight them, because the author includes these details as a key of interpreting the entire passage. **Let's look at another passage in John; chapter 12:4-5, "But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"** Notice what John tells us in the parenthesis. Not only is John signaling to us that Judas isn't truly concerned about fiscal responsibility (vs. 6) but prepares the reader for Judas' ultimate betrayal of Jesus in chapter 18. Remember that throughout John's account, the disciples weren't aware that Judas was a traitor (13:22). He sat at the feet of Jesus with them, ministered with them, and was called by Christ with them and yet he betrayed them. John helps us readers not to think that any believer just falls away in an instant, but a betraying Jesus of this extent is evident that they were never truly of Jesus in the beginning.

- **Thematic Statements**- The Gospel authors may use thematic statements that unravel throughout their work. Thematic statements are sentences that contain themes that can be traced throughout the book. Doctor Luke does this well. **In Luke 2:29-32, Luke records these words from Simeon:**

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel."

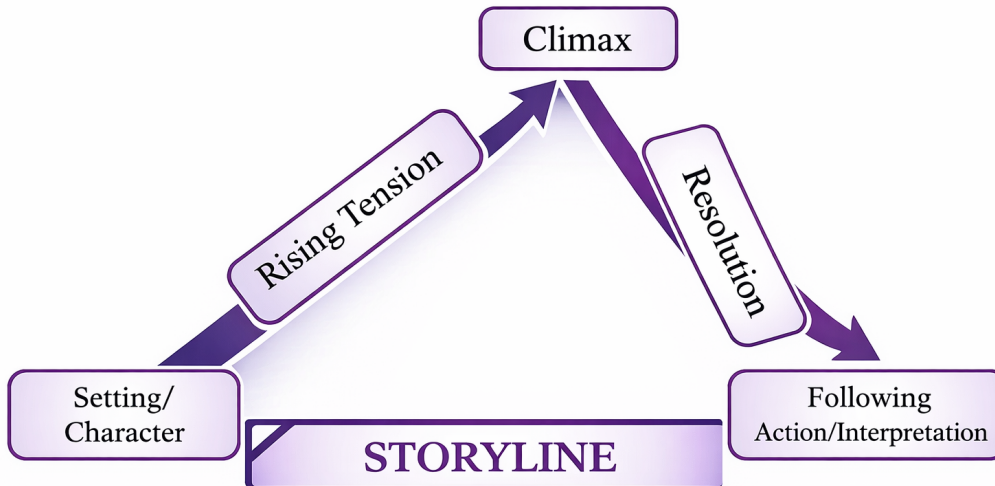
In this praiseworthy prayer, Luke records the coming of salvation for all people. The birth of Jesus is the announcement that God's eternal plan predicted by the prophets has commenced. This theme of an inclusive salvation for Jews and Gentiles is a theme that Luke demonstrates throughout his account.<sup>[15]</sup>

### C. Parts of a Narrative Analysis

To help us understand Gospel narratives, I want to introduce and walk through a helpful method, a narrative analysis<sup>[16]</sup> and how we use this frequently in many forms of literature. Narrative analysis' help us to understand the storyline of what we are reading by understanding the sequence of events or *scenes* that occur. This is true for all literature including movies. Here are the parts of a narrative analysis (see diagram below):

1. *Setting/Character*- Those who are doing or receiving the action in the plot and the place(s) where the story takes place. The setting could also be the world the story takes place in.
2. *Rising Tension*- The development of some conflict or problem between or within the characters. More complex stories may have multiple conflicts, but its best to follow the events of the main characters in a plot.
3. *Climax*- The point where that rising tension is the highest. This is the point where the entire story will turn after the events of the climax.
4. *Resolution*- The solution to the climax. Solution may not mean a happy ending, but it's how the climax is resolved.
5. *Following Action/Interpretation*- This is how the characters move forward after the resolution. This may be where characters are contemplative of their actions throughout the storyline or how characters may have changed considering how the scenes have unfolded. This is also where the author will interpret the meaning or purpose the storyline was trying to convey.

### Narrative Analysis Model



### D. Biblical Narrative Analysis Exercise

Now that we have had some fun applying this model to a medium we ingest regularly, let's use this model to help us better understand God's word. Here are ways we can apply this narrative analysis when reading **Mark 6:45-52**:

1. First, I will divide you into groups and amongst yourselves read the passage over and over and brainstorm observations. When making observations, no detail is too small or too obvious. Try to stay away from explaining what the text means, but simply describe the events in the story.
2. Next, I want you to examine **Mark 6:1-43** and **53-56**
3. Next, with your group we will separate the different actions into scenes. This will help us to organize the details of the storyline.
4. After thinking through some simple observations and organizing the scenes, we can effectively complete the Narrative Analysis:  
\*My Analysis of Mark 6:45-52

<b>Setting/Character</b>	45-46
<b>Rising Tension</b>	47-48
<b>Climax</b>	49-50a
<b>Resolution</b>	50b-51a
<b>Following Action/Interpretation</b>	51b-52

After doing the work of the narrative analysis, we are better prepared to understand what Mark is teaching us. This story of Jesus walking on water follows other stories that Mark records about Jesus demonstrating his divine authority. He demonstrates his power over the body (1:29,40-43, 2:1), sin (2:5), demons (5:7-13) and now nature (4:35-41, 6:51). His demonstrations of power reveal his divinity to be seen but even the people closest to him were at time still blind to the identity of Jesus, the Son of God. Mark writes of these awesome stories about Christ so that we won't be blind like many of the witnesses to Jesus' power, but instead we might look at his authority and miracles and recognize that he is no normal person, but the Second member of the Godhead sent to save humanity from their sin and the wrath of God.

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## V. Parables in the Gospels

Learning to read Narratives and practicing the narrative analysis will take you far in understanding the Gospels, however the authors didn't just record the actions of Jesus. They didn't just write for us the works and miracles and testimonies from others around him. In the Gospels, we also have Jesus' sayings and teachings as well. To understand the Gospels in its entirety, we must also grow in understanding the teachings, sayings, and speeches. of Jesus. Just like we do today, Jesus spoke in a variety of ways using the common language and expressions of speech common to his day. Since we are so far removed from the ancient Greek language, we tend to always interpret Jesus' language literally without regard to context and common expressions of speech. If you see coming from outside with an umbrella in hand and I exclaim, "it's raining cats and dogs!", you wouldn't *actually* be concerned about canines and felines falling from the sky. We understand that to be an idiom to describe how heavy or hard the rain may come down. We should expect to see Jesus doing similar things when he speaks as well. It is the goal of this lesson to examine the different types of expressions Jesus uses in order to better understand the Gospels.

## A. Parables

One of the most common ways Jesus speaks to us in the Gospels is through Parables. The parables are generally short stories used to communicate some sort of moral principle. The illustrations in the parable are a way of communicating truth visually as the stories are given to help readers remember the lesson. **Have you ever heard of the tortoise and the hare? Can someone tell me that story? What is the moral lesson there?** Maybe it's that the quickest do not always win the race or that it is better to work slowly and steadily instead of being rushed and careless. One important feature in this parable or fable is the idea that the characters or items in the parable represent some real-life lesson. What do you think the tortoise and the hare characters represent? What do you think the finish line represents? Thinking through these symbols is the key for understanding the moral principle the parable is teaching. While not a one-to-one correlation, Jesus' parables function similarly. **The biggest difference is that the parables of Christ are not just for teaching us a moral lesson, but in his parables, Jesus is demonstrating what God and his coming kingdom looks like.**

Let's look at this in the short Parable of the Hidden Treasure; **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."**<sup>[18]</sup> Notice that Jesus is already telling you what this parable is about; "the kingdom of heaven." This should tell us that Jesus isn't trying to teach us about where to put our money or to find treasure or about investing, but he is teaching us *something* about the kingdom of God. We can also see that "treasure" in this verse is representing the kingdom of God (evidenced by the metaphoric indicator "is like"). By comparing "the kingdom of heaven" to a treasure, Jesus is demonstrating how valuable God's kingdom is and the extent to which those who find will sacrifice to protect and enjoy God's kingdom. Jesus portrays the kingdom of God as a truth to be possessed, not simply a reality to be known. The symbol of the treasure and the clear focus on the Kingdom of God are the keys to understanding the meaning of the parable. A parable like this may be simple because there is only one symbol, but how do we understand more complex parables? Here are some general principles that will help us read the Parables better.

### 1. Read the Parables within their literary context

If you find a Parable hard to understand, it is always helpful to take a step back and read the larger context that Parable sits in. When we remember that the parables were attached to specific moments in Jesus' ministry and addressed to specific groups, they become easier to understand. Look at

### 2. Do not Allegorize every element in the Parable

It can be tempting to try to find connections in every small detail in a parable, but this can end up distracting us from Jesus' main point instead of clarifying his intention. The more you read parables, the more you will see reoccurring symbols used in Jesus' teachings. For example, it is safe to assume that every master, father, judge, or king in a parable is probably symbolic of God.<sup>[19]</sup>

### 3. Try to Summarize the main point of Parable in one sentence

One helpful way to concentrate on the main point of the parable is to practice condensing the main point of the parable in one sentence. This practice can help focus your understanding on one overarching teaching instead of many truths that may simultaneously exist in the parable. Let's try this with the popular **Parable of the Good Samaritan**.<sup>[20]</sup> In groups, you will read the parable multiple times and work on writing one sentence that captures its main point.

### 4. Believe what Jesus says about the Parable

In some parables, Jesus gave the meaning to that parable to his disciples. When we see this, the Lord has made our jobs easy! What Jesus says the parable means is how the parable is to be understood. We can examine this happening in the **Parable of the Sower**.<sup>[21]</sup> Notice that Jesus tells us what each symbol means and explains how different people hear and respond to the word offered about God's kingdom.

### 5. Remember that the central theme of the Parables is the Kingdom of God

Always remember in that the parables are teaching us what God's kingdom looks like. In this way, the parables of Christ serve as descriptions on his central message throughout his ministry; people should repent of their sins because the kingdom of God has arrived.<sup>[22]</sup> Let's look at the **Parable of the Unforgiving Servant**<sup>[23]</sup> and consider together what this teaches us about God and his kingdom.

If we find ourselves confused about the parables, we find good company with the disciples. With much prayer, patience, and other trusted Christians, we can be sure to understand and apply the parables of Christ in our lives.

## B. Other Forms of Discourse

While Jesus uses many parables to teach us truth, he also speaks in many other forms of discourse. He preaches sermons<sup>[24]</sup>, uses sarcasm<sup>[25]</sup>, idioms<sup>[26]</sup>, hyperbole<sup>[27]</sup> and more. For the sake of understanding and interpreting often difficult language from Jesus, we will briefly examine a few types of discourse he used to convey truth in the Gospels.

*Sarcasm*- Jesus sparingly used sarcasm as a method of teaching. As a master teacher, Jesus knew how to use language in different ways for his listeners to understand. *Sarcasm* is defined as, "a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain."<sup>[28]</sup> Jesus uses this type of irony, maybe not to "give pain" but certainly as an indictment for the recipient of this device. One example is found in **Mark 2:16-17**, where Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees, **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."** Jesus uses sarcastic language to call out the false sense of self-righteousness among the religious leaders. They were the ones blind to that fact that they were indeed sick and in need of a physician.

*Hyperbole*- Jesus also used hyperbole or extreme illustrations to communicate biblical truths. One example of this in **Matthew 5:29-30**, **"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."** Jesus didn't expect his followers to *literally* gouge out their eyes or cut off their hands when they sin (since there were no self-mutilated disciples!). Instead, Christ uses hyperbole to convey the deep commitment and sacrifice believers exhibit to obey God's word. His hyperbole is a charge that asks us how much are we willing to sacrifice for holiness? The answer is we should be willing and prepare to sacrifice much for God's glory.

Now you may be thinking how we can interpret other examples of hyperbole. Learning to distinguish between hyperbole or when Jesus is to be taken literally (not to assume anything Christ says should be taken flippantly) is important in understanding Christ's teachings.

Thankfully, Dr. Plummer has provided a helpful guideline for identifying hyperbole in the Gospels:<sup>[29]</sup>

1. The statement is literally impossible
2. The statement conflicts with what Jesus says elsewhere
3. The statement conflicts with the actions of Jesus elsewhere
4. The statement conflicts with the broader teaching of Scripture
5. The statement is not always literally fulfilled in practice
6. The statement's literal fulfillment would not achieve the desired goals
7. The statement uses a particularly literary form prone to exaggeration
8. The statement uses all-inclusive or universal language

Dr. Plummer's tips can be used as a tool whenever you run across a saying of Christ's that seems difficult to understand. As always, look for clues in the immediate context of the

discourse. The Gospel writers are intentional in what and how they record their stories. Then ask yourself what kind of language is the Lord using and why would he use such a rhetorical device? Read and search deeply so that you may mine the richness of the teachings of Christ.

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## **VI. Reading the Gospels for Yourself**

### **A. Why we Need the Gospels**

Every inspired book in our Bible points to Jesus. The Old Testament pointed forward towards the coming Messiah, while the rest of the New Testament points backwards to explain the significance of his life and how we ought to live in response. But the Gospels accounts are uniquely significant because they are the only section of the Bible that contain historical, eyewitness accounts about the life of the central figure of Scripture. Dr. Jonathan Pennington gives 9 incredible reasons why Christians need to study the Gospels<sup>1</sup> but I will only highlight a few specific reasons for our time together:

#### **1. The New Testament Writers build on the story and teachings of Jesus**

The events that take place in the Gospel accounts CHANGE EVERYTHING. The rest of the New Testament is dependent upon the incarnation and atoning work of Jesus. As Paul writes, “and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins.”<sup>[10]</sup> There are no legs for the New Testament writers to stand without the testimony of the Gospel accounts.

#### **2. We gain a better understanding of the Bible’s story line**

Without the Gospels, the Old and New Testament may *feel* disjointed, even though they aren’t. The Gospel instead helps us to interpret and trace the Bible’s big story as they describe the fulfillment of Old Testament promises and the significance of the people Christ inaugurates in the New Testament Epistles. The Gospels are the glue often uniting the rest of Scripture.

#### **3. Reaffirms narratives as a means of receiving truth**

We are trained to receive truth from prescriptive methods. Whether in school, home, or church we are typically told what is true through clear and direct commands. This is certainly one way the Scriptures communicate truth via discourse and logical arguments; however, the Gospels aren’t *only* communicating historical facts, but truth statements to be embraced. The Gospel accounts train us to receive and understand truth from narratives.

#### **4. They present us with a personal encounter with Jesus**

The Gospels don’t simply list attributes of Jesus or describe what he was like. Instead, they record his actions and sayings directly so that we can experience him for ourselves. The Gospels immerse us into an ancient world that we can embrace the fullness of Christ’s humanity through his detailed decisions and how those around him reacted to his presence.

### **B. Reading the Gospels for Yourself**

So far in our study, we have explored the road map to understanding the Gospels and becoming better interpreters of the Gospels. We have ventured to define and understand the nature of the Gospels. We have explored and utilized tools to help us understand the genres of the Gospels. We have even looked at methods for tracing the main point of the Gospels. It is my hope that in our time together, you have methods and a plan for reading the Gospels successfully. There is however, one crucial piece to interpretation we have yet to explore. That is, YOU! A part of understanding the Gospels (or any segment of Scripture) well is learning to approach the Bible well. In this last section, let us examine the proper approach to the Gospels.

#### **· Approach the Gospels in Faith**

Every person is tempted to bring their own presuppositions (even unconsciously at times) into the texts of Scripture. The methods and tools we have discussed throughout this study will aid you in objective interpretation of the Gospels, however no tool can help the one who approached the Scriptures in contempt. This is the person looking for danger by trying to overturn every page of the Bible looking to unravel it. Hear me clearly, we are invited to think and wrestle with the Scriptures critically<sup>[30]</sup> but we wrestle in the hopes of believing more deeply in Christ. We are not free to read the Scriptures cynically and expect to understand the Lord faithfully.

- **Approach the Gospels as God's Word**

We much approach the Gospels having assumed that it is a part of God's inspired Word.<sup>[31]</sup> This may seem like a rudimentary fact, but even well-meaning Christians may unintentionally read the Gospels as if they are not breathed out by God. When we think the details of any two Gospel stories contradict or that some historical point is wrong, we are essentially saying that the Gospels cannot be inspired because they are full of inaccuracies. We approach the Gospels with the presupposition that the words they contain were placed intentionally and were preserved by Jesus, himself.

- **Approach the Gospels in Prayer**

Interpretation of the Gospels is no mere literacy or grammar excursion. Even the best critical minds do not read the Gospels once and immediately absorb all of its information. We should not rely on our intellectual prowess alone as our basis for understanding. We need the Lord to reveal his Word about himself to us.<sup>[32]</sup> Therefore, to approach the Gospel's correctly we need to humbly ask the Lord for his wisdom and guidance. We need the heart to be open for the Word to correct whatever needs to be corrected in us and encourage our faith in whatever ways it seems to fail. Pray earnestly to "behold wondrous things"<sup>[33]</sup> about the Gospels.

- **Approach the Bible in Faithful Obedience**

Imagine your mom leaves you with written instructions to clean your room before she gets home. Upon her arrival she comes into your dirty room and asks you what happened, as she left you with clear instructions. If your reply was that you had taken time out to study and interpret all her instructions, then clearly you have missed the point! The Gospels aren't just for us to know more, but the Gospels encourage us to live more faithfully.<sup>[34]</sup> True understanding of any Gospel text, is not in what we confess to believe, but how we live in alignment with that biblical truth.

- **Approach the Bible expecting to Know Christ**

Some people read the Bible in order to receive a message from Jesus. Understandably, we are people who need the word of God for help in our daily struggles. I would like to submit, however that when approaching the Bible, asking, "what does this say for/to me" isn't the best question to ask. The best question to ask when approaching the Bible is, "what is this teaching me about Christ." As he is the center of the Gospels<sup>[35]</sup> we should expect to know him from studying its contents. Christ should be known, he should be enjoyed, and he should be exclaimed to a world that doesn't know him. We read the Gospels in hopes that our souls will be ignited to love and delight in Christ all the more.

Prayerfully, I hope these approaches to reading the Gospels cause a bit of pause before rushing to dutifully read its accounts. Take your time when reading these narratives. Think well, read deeply, and expect the Lord to graciously reveal himself to you as you read the Gospels.