

A Gift From Heaven

Why Four Gospels: Matthew

God's Son Came

Saved Through Struggle

Lesson 11

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EVANGELISM
TASKFORCE

Why Four Gospels: Matthew

The twelve disciples of Jesus were chosen by Him to be eye and ear witnesses of His work on earth. His disciples were charged to tell everybody what they had seen and heard. After the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit reminded them of their task. "... But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all I have said to you." (*John 14:26*)

Along with their new task came the new title of 'apostles' which means messengers or ambassadors.

Put Into Writing

First, the apostles gave the message they had for the world orally. The gospels have developed from these oral teachings. The word gospel means "good news". It certainly was, and still is! Fortunately for us this good news has also been put into writing.

Two of the evangelists, namely Matthew and John, were apostles. The author Luke traveled along with the apostle Paul, and Mark traveled with Peter. The authors used what they heard from the apostles as material to write their accounts. Therefore, the gospels were written later than the letters which were written by the apostles during their travels.

One Gospel or Four?

Four gospels are found in the Bible: the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The authors of the first three gospels often deal with the same material. Yet, there are marked differences. Often the order of the various events differs completely from author to author. Also, there are differences regarding the manner in which events are told. One author may tell more or sometimes less than the other.

The gospel according to John is significantly different from the other three gospels. It has its own structure and deals with different topics than the other three. Since John has its own individual style it is difficult to compare it to the others. How should we compare the first three gospels, then? Do they depend on each other? Do they contradict each other? When you are reading a gospel it is first of all important to keep in mind what the author's purpose was with his narrative. Another thing to keep in mind is with what intent he structured his gospel.

It is assumed that Mark's gospel is the oldest of the four. Most likely it was written in A.D. 65. The gospel of John is most likely the youngest, dating back to about A.D. 90. Although structured differently, the four gospels tell the same news: the good news. That is why we can use the term "gospel". There are people who claim that the gospels describe a subjective view of Jesus, a view held by the Christians of that time (*Gal. 1:6ff*). But the Bible itself counters this opinion by saying that the reliable witness of the apostles is found in the gospel accounts (*Luke 1:1,2*).

Matthew, a Jew to the Jews

"As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office." (*Matt. 9:9*) Matthew was a predecessor of the modern day taxation inspector. The gospel of Luke describes the same collector, but here he is called Levi. "After this he went out

and saw a tax collector, named Levi, sitting at his tax office..." (*Luke 5:27*) Jesus takes Matthew away from his work, just like that, and introduces him to a very different kind of work.

In his gospel, Matthew stresses the fact that what has happened, had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets. The Old Testament prophecies have become reality. We often find the expression "then was fulfilled" in Matthew's gospel. Since Matthew was a Jew, he wanted to convince his fellow-Jews that Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. He also wants to make clear to the people that after Jesus' birth, the Old Testament has not become outdated. Rather, the Old Testament becomes more meaningful because of the coming of Jesus. Jesus says, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (*Matt. 5:17,18*)

Matthew centers his gospel around five great speeches by Jesus. These sermons always end the same way: "when Jesus had finished saying these things". You really should read the following sermons of Jesus in your Bible:

Matt. 5,6,7 - The sermon on the Mount

Matt. 10 - The sermon during the sending of the disciples

Matt. 13 - The Parables

Matt. 18 - The Kingdom of Heaven.

Matt. 23-25 - The sermon against the Scribes and Pharisees

The Fulfillment of the Promise

The whole purpose of Matthew's gospel is to convince the reader that Jesus Christ is the Son of David, the Saviour, promised in the Old Testament. That is why Matthew begins his gospel with the family tree of Jesus (*Matt. 1:1*). He shows Jesus' lineage starting at Abraham, continuing through David and finally reaching Christ. Abraham had been promised, that in him, all peoples would be blessed (*Gen. 12:3*). David was promised that his royal house would remain forever. Through this genealogy, Matthew shows that these promises have become reality.

Matthew also reminds his readers of another prophecy in *Is. 53*. He quotes verbatim: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." (*Matt. 8:17*) This prophecy was hard to take for the Jews for they certainly did not want a suffering king. That was going too far. A strong, powerful king, yes! But a suffering one? Even Jesus' own disciples did not understand Isaiah's prophecy until Jesus explained it to them after His ascension.

Recognition by Outsiders

Matthew also recounts the fact that Jesus is recognized by outsiders. At the beginning of his gospel, wise men come from the East and pay homage to Him. At the end of his gospel, a Roman soldier makes the startling statement, "Truly, this was the Son of God." (*Matt. 27:54*).

Yet, there is irony here as well. For while outsiders come to see Jesus as the Saviour, His own people and their leaders try to kill Him. At the very beginning of His earthly life King Herod has all the little male children two years old and under massacred in Bethlehem in the expectation that this will destroy the Christ as well. All through the gospel the hatred and opposition of the Jewish leaders is emphasized. That is why he mentions the lie which the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) fabricated and spread into the world. After the resurrection of Jesus they bribed the guards at the grave to pass on the rumour that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. "And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day." (*Matt. 28:15*)

God With Us

The gospel of Matthew ends the same way it begins: Jesus as King and as Immanuel. He was born as the Son of King, and He ascends into heaven as the great King who has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (*Matt. 28:18*). He was born as the Immanuel

which means "God with us" and He leaves as Immanuel when He says, "I am with you always." (*Matt. 28:20*) All in all, it is clear that God did not let go of mankind, but that He gave salvation.

Both Jesus and God are with us today. Jesus is the Son of David, Abraham, and God (*Matt. 1*). This is not easy to comprehend, but if you read and think about it, it is a wonderful truth. One of the wonderful results of this is that in Him all people on earth may be blessed.

Matthew's gospel forms one unit. The end matches the beginning. Matthew introduces the Saviour of the world, and concludes with the faithfulness of God. His words are sure. His promises are being fulfilled.

God's Son Came

Article 2

Is it really possible for a human being to change what is happening around him? Is it possible that social reform can save humanity? Can we unite and build a better world with our own human hands?

Time and again this earthly life disappoints us. Our highest expectations are shattered, and in the end we all die.

What pessimistic questions and what a pessimistic answer! The world tells us to have a little more confidence in man's abilities and potential. However, a true believer does not put his confidence in man, but in Christ.

Vanity of Vanities

There is a book in the Bible which mentions thirty-seven times that life on earth is senseless, useless, pointless, and purposeless. This book is called Ecclesiastes. It also features the well-known expression "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (*Eccl. 1:2*). It is striking how the author of Ecclesiastes continually points out that our life on earth always turns out to be one big disappointment. He does not believe that labour and study have lasting value. Why, then, should man work his fingers to the bone? What does he expect from the future, anyway?

Some people treat this book as an old cynic's opinion of the world, but it gives us some very down-to-earth, and contemporary advice. In numerous places this book warns us not to be taken in by illusions. When the high and mighty are busy wheeling and dealing the man in the street does not get his share. Is accomplishment not often the result of competition? (*Eccl. 4:4*) Will the next generation reap the rewards of our toil? (*Eccl. 2:12,18*)

We could give other examples, but it all comes down to this: man cannot control his own circumstances (*Eccl. 5:13,14*). Experience teaches us that there are too many unknown factors for us to make solid plans. One should not, therefore, be so foolish as to organize and calculate to such an extent that one does not get around to doing his daily work (*Eccl. 11:4*).

The writer of Ecclesiastes considers everything we do and do not do in this world, worthless and senseless (*Eccl. 3:15*). Whatever is done has been done before, even that which is still to be done. Perhaps you agree with the views of Ecclesiastes. Perhaps you still find the writer an arch pessimist. Is Ecclesiastes telling the truth? And if so, how can we reconcile this with the rest of the Bible? Are these really the words of God?

You can find an answer to questions of this nature in the book of Ecclesiastes itself. When you start to count, you will find the expression "under the sun" some 29 times. That little expression is the key to the answer we are seeking. What does this expression mean? "Under the sun" means: as far as our observations on earth permit us to see. The expression refers to the limitation of what we as human beings can see in this world. On the basis of what we see "under the sun", there is plenty of reason for pessimism.

Whoever relies on the light of his own observations is, indeed, unable to find meaning in life. Since the fall in paradise, human existence seems to have become worthless (*Gen. 3*). There are no longer any real, lasting values.

However, thanks be to God, there is more light than the flickering flame of man's intellect. That is the message of Ecclesiastes. There is more than our own experiences. There is the light that God gives us in His Word. The writer of Ecclesiastes knows this, and he tells us that. The Word of God supplies the light for life's pathway. It is the beacon in our lives which shows us how we ought to obey God (*Ps. 119:105; Eccl. 12:13*). This Old Testament metaphor is continued in the New Testament. It foreshadows Christ Jesus who promises to bring us to heaven where the sun will not shine because God's glory will provide the necessary light (*Rev. 21:23*).

The Word of God with His promises brought a new light to this world. The Son of God came!

Life Makes Sense Again

You may agree with Ecclesiastes that the world "under the sun" is really as it is described in this book: purposeless, senseless. This sounds depressing, but there is more. God in His great mercy did not abandon this world. He has not, and will not, give up on creation. Already from the very beginning He intervened. Immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve God promised salvation (*Gen. 3:15*).

The section of this course on redemptive history deals extensively with how God remained true to His promise. God was not under any obligation to continue His covenant relationship with man. Man had failed to do his part. Man thought that he did not need God and could do without Him (*Gen. 3:1-7*). Man did not want to take God at His Word and did not want to obey Him, so the very last thing he deserved was God's favour.

Yet there is salvation for man. This is strange and incomprehensible. God's goodness is so overwhelmingly great that He promises salvation to sinful man. In such a context life starts to make sense again. It is no longer futile and purposeless. He promises salvation to people who have been born sinful. That is called grace (*Tit. 2:11*). The Son of God came to bring salvation to all those people of the Old Testament who, in faith, awaited His arrival (*John 8:56*). He came to bring salvation to all those people of the New Testament who, in faith, accepted His arrival. He came to bring salvation to you!

The Saviour Is Proclaimed

As far back as the days of paradise God proclaimed the Saviour, each time providing more details. The Saviour would be man, a descendant of Eve (*Gen. 3:15*); He would be a great prophet (*Deut. 18:15*); He would be a king and priest (*Ps. 110*).

In Isaiah it becomes evident that the Saviour, who was to be born as a child, would at the same time be God. He is called "the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (*Isa. 9:6*).

In this way God slowly prepared the world, especially His nation Israel, for the arrival of the Saviour. He made it known who that Saviour would be and how He would be born. And at the appointed time the Messiah, the Christ, was born in the little town of Bethlehem (*Mic. 5:2; Luke 2:1-7*).

The Son of God Became Man

The Son of God, who is and remains eternal God, became man at God's appointed time. God insisted that His Son become man because His justice required that if a man sinned a man had to pay for sin. So Christ paid all our debts for us. But no man, not even a sinless man, could do that without perishing under the load of God's wrath. The divine nature of Jesus Christ was required to support His human nature. God's wrath, which was intended

for us, came down upon Him (*Isa. 53:4,5*). His divine nature withstood the wrath of God and now He can renew and re-create us through His Spirit (*Eph. 1:1-10; 1 Cor. 1:30*).

The Son of God became man. No one can comprehend the miracle that He is both God and man at the same time. But we do not have to understand that either. It is simply a most wonderful and comforting truth. God has revealed this to us in His Word. There are many things we are unable to grasp with our minds. Just believe the miracle of God's incarnation. It is for your own salvation's sake!

Saved Through Struggle

Genesis 26-28, 32-35

No doubt you have asked yourself the question, "How can God, if He is really loving, still let people perish?" You cannot help feeling that these two facts do not agree with each other. And yet you want to understand this issue, just as we all do. However, the Bible reverses the question and asks, "How is it possible that people are being saved?"

How is it possible that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were saved? Abraham believed, you may say. He trusted God. When God called him from his familiar surroundings to the "insecurity" of Canaan, Abraham went. Abraham also believed when God promised him things that humanly speaking were not only improbable, but impossible. But Abraham was not a superman. Just like us he was a weak and sinful man, and sometimes he took refuge in his own craftiness and his own solutions, instead of trusting in God. Think only of his marriage to Hagar or of his journey to Egypt when he called Sarah his "sister" to save himself (*Gen. 16,12:10-13, 20:1-18*).

Abraham, the patriarch was a very weak man at times. Sometimes he did not even live totally out of faith. If it had been up to him, even the little faith he had would have been abandoned. By nature Abraham would have resisted instead of accepting God's grace. It was a continuous struggle, a struggle in which God had to conquer Abraham time and again.

Resisting God

Just like his father Abraham, it becomes apparent that Isaac was a weak and sinful man. When Isaac felt his life was threatened he resorted to exactly the same schemes as his father (*Gen. 26:2-5*). In spite of the fact that God had just confirmed His promise to Isaac, he used deceit and called Rebekah his "sister" to protect himself (*Gen. 26:7-11*). Isaac ignored God, and yet he was indebted to this same God for not perishing in this situation. Both Abraham and Isaac were obviously men with weaknesses. God had to work faith in their hearts by testing them. God had promised Isaac and Rebekah children. But, just like Abraham and Sarah, they had to wait for the birth of their first child. And then, when they were about to think that it had, humanly speaking, become impossible, God fulfilled His promise. It had to be clear to them, too, that it was not because of their own merits, but only by God's grace that they received children. God wants to take care of a people that will serve Him, therefore He works obedience in them.

When you continue reading the story of Isaac and Rebekah and their sons you will see time and again how people try to interfere in God's plans by using trickery and deceit. You see how they fight against God's good intentions. There is Isaac, for instance, who fights God's will because of his preference for Esau. And there is Rebekah, who tries to help God by being deceitful. God's covenant children use the wrong ways to accomplish their own ends.

By nature people always want to oppose God's will. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God" (*Rom. 8:7*). "Flesh" means sinful man. It is no wonder that all who are sinful desire to perish. It is, on the other hand, a wonder, that people are actually saved. This only happens because of God's mercy.

The Conflict

What people want goes directly against God's will. That is also true for Jacob. He wanted the birthright, but it was Esau's not his, and he did not hesitate to use trickery and deceit to obtain it. In those days, the birthright implied that the first-born son would

receive a double portion of the inheritance. After his father's death, he would become head of the clan and would receive, and that is most important in this context, the cherished paternal blessing. It was the blessing which God had given to Abraham. As Isaac's first-born son, Esau was entitled to the promise that his descendants would be a blessing to all people.

But already before the birth of Esau and Jacob, God had turned things around. It was not Esau, but Jacob who would receive the blessing (*Gen. 25:23*). God had decided that the older would serve the younger. This does not mean that Jacob was a better human being than Esau. Jacob resisted God just like Esau. It was simply God's choice to give Jacob the birthright.

Both Jacob and his mother knew of God's decision, and they should have left it up to God. However, in an underhanded and devious way Jacob took possession of the blessing. First, he used Esau's hunger and his indifference. Later, with Rebekah's help, he also deceived his blind father (*Gen.27*). The result was, that both Jacob and Esau suffered losses because neither one believed strongly in the Lord. Esau gave up the birthright and Jacob stole his blessing. As a result, Esau harboured such hate against Jacob that Jacob had to flee to save his own life.

Jacob and Esau were both sinful people who had to learn that they did not deserve to be saved. They had to learn, that they were completely dependent upon God, upon His mercy and grace. Jacob had to learn that he did not deserve the birthright and, therefore, had no right to confiscate it as he did, and Esau had to admit that God was just in taking it away from him. They had to reform themselves, a job which neither one started voluntarily.

The story becomes even more confusing. God left Esau to his indifference, and drew Jacob out of his unbelief and made him believe. God chose to instruct Jacob in the way he should go. This happened, for instance, at Bethel (*Gen. 28:10-22*). There God spoke to Jacob in a dream. In response, Jacob vowed to return to Bethel if God protected him. Jacob's education continued at Peniel (*Gen. 32:22 -32*). Here Jacob wrestled with God. The stubborn Jacob fought with a man, who was actually God, all through the night. By daybreak he had succeeded in winning. However, God broke his confidence by dislocating his hip. Now Jacob realized that he had to submit to the Almighty God, and he asked for a blessing. God granted him the same type of blessing Abraham had received: a name change. He is now called Israel. Jacob received a new position, one that signified a complete allegiance to God.

After the episode at Peniel Jacob finally returned to Canaan with eleven children and much cattle and restored his relationship with his brother (*Gen. 33*). Although Jacob had learned his lesson and now trusted God, his sons did not. The horrible happenings related in *Genesis 34* are ample proof that these men wanted to take things into their own hands. Read the story for yourself and see how the sons of Jacob caused their father problems because of their action. In order to purify his family Jacob returned to Bethel to make good the promise he had made to God in Bethel (*Gen. 28:20*). In answer to Jacob's trust in God, God confirmed His promise to Jacob (*Gen. 35:9-15*).

Trusting in God

At last, Jacob learned to trust fully in God. He learned to live through God's grace only. Esau was excluded from the inheritance. He could not accept the fact that God chooses whom He wills, that God is not accountable to man. He was left to trust in his own strength.

In contrast to Esau living out of his own strength we find Jacob living out of grace. That meant he expected everything in his life from God alone. You have to make the same choice in your life. You can live out of God's grace, or you can live in your own strength. And when you learn to trust in God alone, it means that you recognize at the same time that it was God who taught you to trust and believe in Him in the first place. You will even say, "This is too hard to fathom. Why me? Why me, and not others?"

Incomprehensible

God chose Jacob. From his descendants the Saviour Jesus was born. Why not from Esau's? Why from Jacob the deceiver? No one can understand this. God chooses according to His good pleasure. He does not owe us any explanation. We can only be thankful that God teaches us to trust in Him (*Rom. 9,10,11*). The apostle Paul writes about this "election" of Jacob and about the election of the people of Israel. He does not understand it either. But this he does know: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (*Rom. 11:33*)

Questions for Lesson 11

Why Four Gospels: Matthew

1. *Matt. 9:9-13* describes how Matthew was called. Why are the Pharisees irritated by this? What is Jesus' response?
2. *Matt. 22:41-45* tells us how Jesus tries to show the Pharisees that He is not only the Son of David, but also the Son of God. How does He do this? (*Ps. 110:1*)
3. Matthew frequently refers to passages from the Old Testament. Can you list some of these passages by using the first four chapters of Matthew?

God's Son Came

1. What does Christ do in order that we may believe in Him as the Saviour who was promised to us? (*Luke 24:25-27; 24:32-45; Acts 16:14*)
2. What does Paul have to say about the necessity of the incarnation of the Son of God? (*Rom. 5:12,19*)
3. In the Old Testament you can find many places that announce the coming of the Saviour. Please look up the following texts and put in your own words what they tell us about the coming Christ. (*Numbers 24:17, Deut. 18:15; Ps. 2:7; Ps. 110:1,4; Isa. 9:6,7, Isa. 11:1-5; Mic. 5:2*)

Saved Through Struggle

1. Compare *Gen. 12:1-3, Gen. 17:4-8, and Gen. 35:10-13*. Which promise is not mentioned in *Gen. 35*?
2. From Jacob's life, give examples showing that he did not always completely trust in God (*Gen. 29-33*).
3. How is it shown that in Laban's and Jacob's house idol worship took place? (*Gen. 31:19-35, Gen. 35:1-5*)