KNOWING JESUS

a walk through the gospels

JAMES SPENCER, PHD

USEFUL to GOD

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CONTENT

ABOUT USEFUL TO GOD

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Have you ever confused taking a bath with baptism? I'm guessing the answer is no. But why? In part, it is because baptism involves rituals performed in community, whereas baths are normally private. Yet, we shouldn't dismiss the fact that the world has no compelling story to tell about taking baths that would lead us to confuse it with baptism. It does, however, have those stories for other things like love, politics, economics, success, and what it means to be a "good person." The world tells stories that deny God...in fact, it can't help but do so. Entertainment, the news, cultural norms, and even academic disciplines tell stories from the perspective of humans who don't know God.

Useful to God equips Christians to retell the world's stories with God at their center. Our training programs and resources provide God's people with frameworks for thinking and acting so that the difference between God's story and the world's story is as apparent as the difference between a bath and a baptism.

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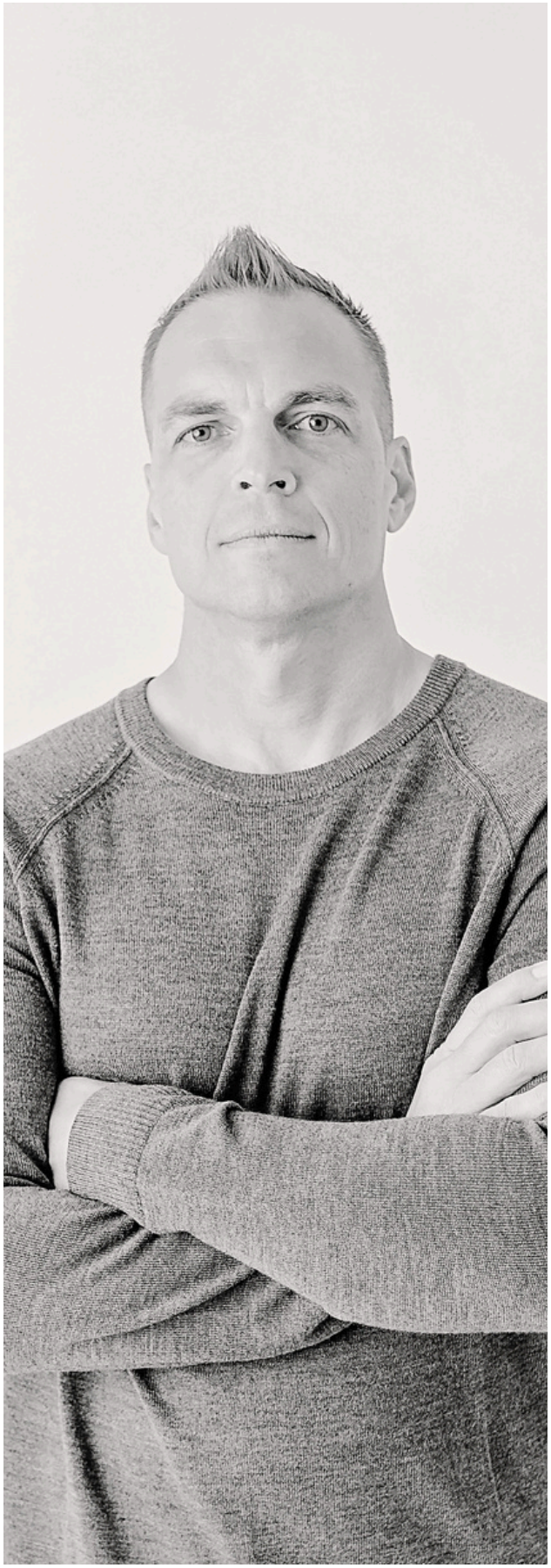

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Spencer earned his MA in Biblical Exegesis from Wheaton College and his PhD in Theological Studies from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. James has published multiple books, including *The Essential D. L. Moody Collection*, *Serpents and Doves: Christians, Politics, and the Art of Bearing Witness*; *A Praying People: Essays Inspired by Dwight L. Moody*; *Christian Resistance: Learning to Defy the World and Follow Christ*; *Thinking Christian: Essays on Testimony, Accountability, and the Christian Mind*; and *Trajectories: A Gospel-Centered Introduction to Old Testament Theology*. He also contributed to *Theology, Religion, and The Office*, *The Moody Bible Commentary* and *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*.

He serves as president of Useful to God and the D. L. Moody Center, as well as hosting the Thinking Christian podcast on Salem's Life Audio Network and PREPPED, a podast bridging the gap between academic biblical and theological studies and practical Christian concerns. James is an adjunct instructor in Wheaton College's MA in Leadership program and teaches regularly for Right On Mission.

James is a regular contributor to Christianity.com. His work has also been featured in The Wall Street Journal, American Thinker, The Christian Post, Sojourners, and Fox News. He has also appeared on numerous podcasts and broadcasts, including Fox's Lighthouse Faith with Lauren Green, the Carl Jackson Show, CBN's Faith vs. Culture, The Eric Metaxas Show, and Relatable with Allie Beth Stuckey.

DAY 1
JOHN 1-3

DAY 2
JOHN 4-6

DAY 3
JOHN 7-9

DAY 4
JOHN 10-12

DAY 5
JOHN 13-15

DAY 6
JOHN 16-18

DAY 7
JOHN 19-21

DAY 8
MARK 1-2

DAY 9
MARK 3-4

DAY 10
MARK 5-6

DAY 11
MARK 7-8

DAY 12
MARK 9-10

DAY 13
MARK 11-13

DAY 14
MARK 14-15

DAY 15
MATTHEW 1-4

DAY 16
MATTHEW 5-8

DAY 17
MATTHEW 9-12

DAY 18
MATTHEW 13-16

DAY 19
MATTHEW 17-20

DAY 20
MATTHEW 21-24

DAY 11
MATTHEW 25-28

DAY 12
LUKE 1-4

DAY 13
LUKE 5-8

DAY 14
LUKE 9-12

DAY 15
LUKE 13-16

DAY 16
LUKE 17-20

DAY 17
LUKE 21-22

DAY 18
LUKE 23-24

DAY 19
MAKE-UP

DAY 20
MAKE-UP

30-DAY READING PLAN

INTRODUCTION TO THIS GUIDE

Consider the way you spent your time in the last week. To what did you give your attention? Can you look back on your week and identify activities that were detrimental to your spiritual life? My guess is that, if you are like me, you spent significant amounts of time doing things that hindered your spiritual growth—or at least didn't advance it.

I'm not necessarily thinking about engaging in some sort of immoral act. Clearly, participating in gossip, getting drunk, watching pornography, chasing wealth and various other activities will hinder your spiritual growth. Yet they aren't the only activities that can keep us from growing spiritually.

For instance, I can easily become consumed with research and writing. I love learning and communicating what I've learned. My hope is that my research and writing contribute to the building up of Christ's body in some small way. Yet, even well-intentioned, otherwise good activities can become a problem when they draw our attention away from Christ. They become a problem when our passions, desires, and interests push God and the Gospel to the margins of our lives. Just like Martha's serving took precedence over sitting at the feet of Jesus (Lk 10:40), our activities can hinder us from learning to observe all Christ commanded.

So, what do we do to remain focused on Christ? We take a lesson from the book of Hebrews. We "lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely." At the same time, we "run with endurance…looking to Jesus" (Heb 12:1-2). These passages offer a helpful paradigm for living in light of those who followed God "by faith," which "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1).

We are to (1) stop or "lay aside" that which hinders us from living by faith and (2) focus on Christ and living as a member of his unshakeable kingdom (12:28). As you work through this guide, the challenge is not simply to read more, pray more, serve more, or learn more, but to make a substitution. Choose something that is hindering your spiritual growth and replace it with the activities outlined throughout this study. Don't squeeze this study into your already busy life. Make time for it by eliminating something that is holding you back and weighing you down.

Why This Approach
Our approach at Useful to God is rooted in the following beliefs:

- We believe that when God's people obey Him, God will open up opportunities for them to participate with Him in building His kingdom beyond anything they could accomplish through their own wit and wisdom.
- We believe knowledge without discipleship is dangerous. We can't simply "learn about" God. We have to "learn to" follow Christ and His teachings.
- We believe God's people are too often and too easily distracted by the world's worries and wealth.
- We believe that God's people grow best in community—when they recognize that church membership is not voluntary but an organic connection forged between all those united in Christ.. There is certainly a time to step away from others (Mt 14:13, 23) but Christians are members of a common body and cannot neglect the benefits that come from being together (Rom 1:11-13; Heb 10:24-25).

God's people will experience greater spiritual growth if they replace activities hindering

them from following Christ with activities designed to help them follow Christ.

Hindering Activities
Hindering activities reinforce stories that deny God or push him to the margins of our lives. These activities tend to make us think that God is less important to our daily lives than He actually is. They inflate our sense of self-sufficiency (Deut 8:11-20; James 4:13-17), encourage us to trust in something other than God (Ps 40:4; Prov 3:5-6), or heighten our concerns about the challenges we face or our desires for the comforts the world offers (Mt 13:18-23).

Helping Activities
Helping activities reinforce a biblical and theological perspective. They remind us that God is the most relevant Actor and Factor in any situation. They are activities that remind us that obedience to God is never a secondary strategy. It is what we do even when it may not make sense at the time.
Helping activities train us to respond to God and to live under the authority of Christ.

Choosing What to Set Aside
As you think about what to set aside, consider the following:

- Don't Go Too Big- Choose something you think you can actually live without for the duration of the study.

- Be Prepared for Setbacks- I don't think I've ever achieved a goal without failing a time or two (or more). The trick is not to be perfect but to understand why you failed, make changes as needed, and recommit. Remember that confession of sin—admitting our flaws and failures—is a mark of true Christianity (1 Jn 1:9).

- Maximizing Convenience- We often do what is convenient. For instance, when I stand in line, I generally pull out my phone to search the internet. If I want to replace random surfing with Bible reading, I might move the internet browser app to a separate screen or a different folder, making jumping on the internet less convenient. I might also carry a pocket Bible or a folded sheet of paperwith a Bible passage written on it, making it more convenient to pull it out to read. The idea is to make it easy to do things that will help you grow spiritually.

- Kill More Than One Bird- There is nothing that says you have to sit down with a print Bible to read through the Gospels. You could just as easily listen to the assigned chapters and the lectures provided at usefultogod.com while taking a walk or doing some other activity. As long as the activity doesn't draw your attention away from the Scriptures, you may be able to "kill two birds with one stone."

- Be Accountable Somehow- Accountability can take many forms. For instance, when I work out, I record my weights, sets, and reps so that I can compare them over time. Some people would call this "tracking," but it is actually a form of accountability. I can't "lie to myself" about how often I'm working out, how many sets I'm doing, or how much weight I'm putting on the bar. I can clearly see when I've been less-than-consistent. Beyond this sort of self-accountability, you can also share your goals with others and ask them to keep you honest about how you are doing. In the end, you just need to find some way to keep yourself on track.

Identifying Hindrances
It is easy for us to become accustomed to activities that end up holding us back. Our "default settings" seem to be givens that we cannot change. For instance:

- I have to answer texts immediately.
- It's important to watch the news every day to keep up on current events.
- If I don't stay up late, I'll never have time to myself.
- I need to drink/smoke to cope with the stressors of the day.

We may believe these (or other things) are true; however, I have found that when we make these sorts of assertions, we aren't really

saying “this is true,” but “this is what we’ve become accustomed to.”

When you are trying to identify a hindrance, don’t just look for obvious problems or moral issues. Instead, consider something like the following:

- **Make a list**- In my experience, people don’t really have a good idea of how they spend their time. If they don’t know how they spend their time, it is difficult for them to understand why they spend their time the way they do. Making a list of activities you do during the day can be quite helpful.

- **Think about Why Your List Looks Like It Does**- The second step involves reviewing your list to determine why you do what you do. For example, I watch television to relax. Relaxation isn’t a bad thing and, depending on what show is on, watching television isn’t a bad thing either. Still, if I want to grow spiritually, I need to ask myself whether there is some other way I could relax that will, unlike watching television, also help me grow spiritually. Figuring out why we spend our time the way we do is crucial to identifying the activities that are hindering our spiritual growth.

- **Use Tools Wisely**- There are actually some technologies that can help you see what you are doing. For instance, my iPhone will break down screen time for me. As you make the list, don’t forget to think about how your activities are “layered.” If, for example, you are driving to work, what are you listening to on the radio or your phone? Are you making work calls on your commute? Take stock of those times when you could be doing something to deepen your awareness of God’s presence (which can often mean doing nothing).

- **Build a Test**- Scientists design experiments to test hypotheses and theories. We can do something similar when it comes to our behavior. If, for example, I think I will be more productive if I go to bed and get up earlier, I can test that hypothesis fairly easily. I just need toestablish a realistic timeframe for the experiment and be disciplined about going to bed and getting up early. The key is to choose something you think will make a meaningful impact on your life and give it enough time to make a difference.

- **Consider Your Story**- If our activities reinforce stories about God, it seems appropriate for us to consider what those stories are. We need to think about what our activities say about God. For instance, think about the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments aren’t just about abstract morals. They are intended to help us tell a truthful story about God as we live under God’s authority and in God’s empowering presence. For instance, what story do we tell when we covet? Coveting is the act of desiring something that someone else has. To put it differently, when we covet, we accuse God of giving someone else something that we should have. God becomes a poor distributor of gifts. We know better than him how the world should be arranged. God got it wrong.

Scripture and Practice
Reading the Bible is always going to be helpful. Consider the following biblical passages:

- Psalm 1:1-6
- Ezra7:7-10
- 1 Timothy 3:16

While reading scripture is always helpful, our approach to scripture matters. For instance, over the years there has been a great deal of emphasis placed on “applying” the Bible. We are to be “hearers and doers” of the word (Rom 2:13; Jam 1:22) but not every biblical passage lends itself to a direct application.

For instance, Paul sites Deuteronomy 25:4 (“You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain”) in 1 Corinthians 9:9

and 1 Timothy 5:18. If you happen to own oxen or live on a farm where you still use animals to perform work, this verse may have a more direct application. Most of us, however, are more like Paul: the passage doesn't point to a direct application but to a pattern. In this case, Paul recognizes that the law regarding oxen is about ensuring that those who labor are not deprived but share in the abundance of the community.

While Deuteronomy 25:4 probably isn't a "go to" devotional passage, it provides insight into a pattern of life that is crucial in the church. As Paul asks, "Is it for oxen that God is concerned"(1 Cor 9:9)? Deuteronomy 25:4 point to an underlying pattern—a sort of story. We can adopt that pattern through a variety of practices.

Hearing and doing feed each other. We need to listen closely to the scriptures. We need to deeply understand who the Triune God is, who we are in relation to Him, and what He is doing in the world. We listen so we can participate. As participate with God, we will come to be better listeners.

Approaching This Study
As you participate in the Knowing Jesus study, don't anticipate making thirty changes in thirty days. Instead, think of the thirty days as the change you are making. By setting aside a hindrance and choosing to participate in this course, you are already opening yourself up to God's word. You are taking a step of obedience.

The study guide doesn't cover all of the Gospels. The intention is not to get you reading the guide, but to get you reading the scriptures. The guide is intended to help understand how to study the gospels while leading you through certain Gospel narratives.

If you find that you want more, you can enroll in Useful to God's "A Walk through the Gospels" Course at usefultogod.com or by scannig the adjacent QR code.

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INTERPRETING THE GOSPELS

For centuries, the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were often read as a single, unified account of Jesus' life. It wasn't until the work of J. J. Griesbach in the 18th century that scholars began to seriously investigate the theological nuances of each gospel individually. His comparative study of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—now known as synoptic study—highlighted both their similarities and their unique emphases.

Today, biblical scholars recognize that each gospel writer crafted their account with a specific audience and theological purpose in mind. By paying attention to parallel passages, literary forms, historical context, and overarching themes, we can develop a richer understanding of these texts.

There are three simple steps that will help you in reading and understading the gospel narratives: (1) comparing parallel accounts, (2) identifying literary forms, and (3) exploring historical and biblical backgrounds. Using these steps will give you insight into a given passage's message.

Comparing Parallel Passages
A defining feature of the synoptic gospels is their shared material. Many passages in Matthew, Mark, and Luke closely resemble one another in wording, sequence, or theme. However, the differences between them often reveal each author's unique theological emphasis.

One of the best ways to study these parallels is by using a gospel synopsis, a resource that arranges corresponding passages side by side. Synopsis of the Four Gospels by Kurt Aland and Gospel Parallels by Burton Throckmorton are excellent tools for this type of analysis.

For example, let's compare the account of Jesus calming the storm, which appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The three accounts are similar; however, they also exhibit differences that provide clues as to what the gospel writer is trying to convey with the story. Note the following:

Matthew 8:23-27
Matthew 8:23 uniquely includes the verb follow, a key term in his gospel's theme of discipleship. This suggests that Matthew sees this event not just as a demonstration of Jesus' power, but as a lesson about trusting Him in the journey of faith.

This is further emphasized by the narrative preceding the stilling of the storm in which Jesus teaches about the cost of following (note the use of the same verb in 8:18-22) him. By placing these two sections together-unlike Mark and Luke-Matthew is able to convey a unique truth about following Jesus: following Him is not easy but, given who he is and the authority he wields, following Jesus is our best (and only!) option.

To compare the accounts, you may find it easiest to cut and paste parallels into a chart so that you can see them side-by-side. An example is included at the end of this guide. Remember that when you are comparing, it is important not to look only at the parallels, but what stories precede and follow them in a particular gospel.

Identifying Literary Forms
The gospels contain differnt types of stories. For instance, there is a clear difference between a parable and the sermon on the mount. Understanding what sort of story you are reading and the points such stories tend to emphasize can provide useful insight into what the gospel writer is attempting to convey.

Continue your study of the Gospels with the
Knowing Jesus online course.

KNOWING JESUS ONLINE

A WALK THROUGH THE GOSPELS

Knowing Jesus: A Walk through the Gospels is an introductory course taught by Dr. James Spencer. The Course provides an overview of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ through an study of the four Gospels. By examining key events, messages, and themes in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, students will gain deeper insight into who Jesus is and how his ministry transforms and informs the Christian life. Over 20 video sessions, students will explore Jesus's incarnation, identity, miracles, parables, major discourses, death, and resurrection. Emphasis is placed on developing skills in biblical exegesis and synthesizing the unique perspectives offered by each Gospel writer. The course aims to spur spiritual growth and equip students to better understand and articulate the significance of Jesus's life and work.

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The following is a partial list of the sort of stories found in the gospels and what they tend to emphasize. In evaluating the literary form of a given story, it is important to remember that the literary form is only one factor that may inform how a text is interpreted-the literary form doesn't necessarily determine the texts meaning.

Recounting Miracles
These accounts put Jesus's supernatural works in the spotlight. In general, these narratives have (1) an introduction that describes the setting of what is about to take place, (2) a description of a specific need, (3) the performance of a miracle, and (4) a record of the various responses to the miracle.

The stilling of the storm in Matthew 8:23-27 tends to fit this pattern. We have (1) the setting where we find out that Jesus and the disciples are entering a boat (8:23), (2) the storm that threatens the boat and the lives of the disciples (8:24), (3) the miracle of Jesus rebuking the wind and the waves (826), and (4) the response of the disciples (8:27). This miracle story, as noted above, highlights Jesus's authority in the context of considering what it means to follow Him.

Words on Discipleship
These narratives highlight Jesus' teachings about the nature of following Him. They focus not on the outcome of an individual's decision but on the expectations for all disciples.

For example, Matthew 8:18-22 records Jesus' challenging words about the cost of discipleship:

- "The Son of Man has no place to lay His head."
- "Let the dead bury their own dead."

These statements emphasize that discipleship requires radical commitment.

Controversy Narratives
In these passages, Jesus engages in debates-normally with religious leaders. These narratives tend to include the following elements: (1) Jesus is challenged or questioned by an opponent, (2) Jesus responds to the opponent-often with a counter-question rather than an answer, (3) the opponent responds to Jesus' question in a manner that exposes the weakness of their own position, and (4) Jesus refutes their answer.

Mark 12:13-17 is an example of a controversy (12:15). Here, Jesus is asked about paying tributes to Caesar (12:14). Jesus responds by asking them whose image is on the coin (12:15-16). When they respond (12:16), Jesus tels them what to do (12:17).

Teaching Narratives
These narratives are similar to controvery narratives in that they focus our attention on Jesus's teaching. The difference between teaching and controversy narratives is the absense of opponents in the former. Mark 12:28-34 is an example of this sort of narrative.

In Mark 12:28-34, Jesus has an exchange with a scribe who does not appear to be testing Jesus, but simply seeking to understand his teachings.

Calling Followers
Jesus often calls followers, particularly early on in his ministry. These narratives involve Jesus calling a specific individual to follow him. That call is generally met with unqualified, radical obedience to that call.

At times, a call is embeded in a broader narrative to juxtapose those who immediately follow Jesus with those who question him. For instance, Mark 2:13-17 contains the call of Levi (2:14) followed by accusations by the Pharisees about eating with tax collectors. The narrative becomes a vehicle for Jesus to teach them why he. has come-"not to call the righteous, but ssinners" (2:17).

Biographical Sketches
At various points in the gospels, we aren't hearing directly from Jesus. Instead, various aspects of Jesus' life are described. These biographical narratives help us understand who Jesus actually is (see Mark 1:21-28; Lk 7:11-

16).

Sermons and Other Speeches
This categories focus on what Jesus is saying. They would include the various "I AM" statements in John's gospel (Jn 14:6), as well as the parables (Lk 15:1-10), teachings about the end of days (Matt 24), community life (Matt 18:15-17), and wisdom more generally (Matt 6:34; Mark 2:22; Lk 10:7).

This partial list of literary forms is intented to help you "place" the various gospel narratives. The stories and various forms of speech don't necessarily mirror those of our time. Understanding these literary forms can help us approach the gospels in a more informed manner.

Considering The Biblical and Historical Context
The gospel writers frequently draw on Old Testament themes and historical settings to communicate their message. Recognizing these connections enhances our understanding of various biblical texts in the gospels. Thankfully, study bibles and online resources allow us to identify direct quotes, allusions, and background information relatively easily.

In addition to specific prophecies (e.g., Isaiah 7:14 and the virgin birth in Matthew), there are also allusions to the Old Testament that can be easy to miss. For instnace, in Matthew 8:23-27, Jesus rebukes the wind and the waves. This phrasing likely echoes Old Testament language found in texts like:

- Psalm 104:7 – "At your rebuke the waters fled."
- Psalm 107:29 – "He stilled the storm to a whisper."
- Psalm 135:6-7 – "The Lord does whatever pleases him… He brings out the wind from his storehouses."

Since only God commands nature in the Jewish Scriptures, Matthew presents this miracle as evidence of Jesus' divine identity. Historical context also deepens our reading. The Sea of Galilee is prone to sudden storms due to its geography, making the disciples' fear understandable. Knowing this makes Jesus' command to trust Him even more striking.

Determining a Passage's Message
Having considered the parallels, literary form, and backgrounds for a given text, you can begin to think about what the passage is attempting to convey.

Returning to the stilling of the storm in Matthew, we might say the following:

At face value, Matthew 8:23-27 appears to demonstrate Jesus' control over nature. But considering the passage's context, a richer message emerges. The preceding verses focus on the cost of discipleship, and the storm scene reinforces the idea that following Jesus requires trust—even in dangerous or uncertain situations.

A refined interpretation might be: Despite the dangers and challenges of discipleship, there is no need to fear because Jesus is God.

By considering parallel accounts, literary structures, biblical allusions, and theological themes, we arrive at a more profound understanding.

Conclusion
Interpreting the gospels requires careful reading, curiosity, and an awareness of their literary and historical context. When we compare passages, recognize literary patterns, explore biblical backgrounds, and seek the theological message, we gain a richer appreciation of how each gospel presents Jesus.

Rather than reading these texts as mere historical records, we begin to see them as deeply intentional narratives—ones that continue to shape and challenge our understanding of what it means to follow Christ.

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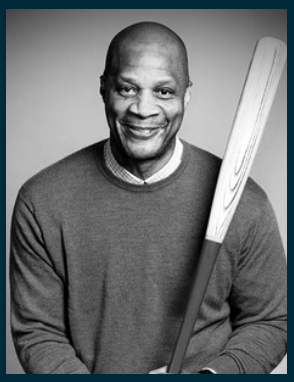

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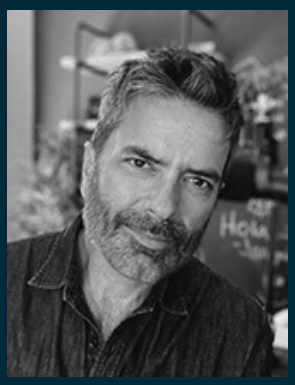

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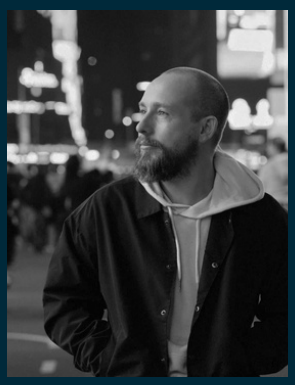

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- not just to master its content but to be mastered by it.

Ultimately, exhibiting Christian character in interpretation is not just about uncovering truth—though that is crucial—but about embodying the love of Christ in how we read and write. Interpretation should be an act of sanctification, shaping us as disciples and witnesses.

Developing Interpretive Habits
In my younger years, I was a personal trainer, working with clients ranging from weight-loss seekers to bodybuilders. Some improved simply by attending sessions, but those who excelled made fitness a lifestyle—eating well, sleeping properly, and reducing stress. One client even got rid of his television to escape the gravitational pull of his couch.

Interpretation is much the same. You can make some progress by merely reading Scripture, but you will be better equipped to hear God rightly when Bible study is part of a broader Christian life. Just as a strong body results from multiple disciplines—exercise, nutrition, and rest—so too a strong spiritual life results from a holistic approach to Christian living.

Bible study and Christian practices work together to open our hearts and minds to God:

- As we study, we recognize that God is our ultimate King, and His wisdom exceeds our understanding.

- As we practice Sabbath, we acknowledge our labor is fleeting and anticipate God's full restoration, learning to trust in His provision rather than our efforts.

- As we practice hospitality, we accept the risks of engaging others and prioritize the gospel over comfort, welcoming others as Christ has welcomed us.

- As we engage in community, we submit ourselves to transformation, sacrifice, and discipleship, understanding that faith is never a solo endeavor.

  As we pray, we embrace inefficiency, recognizing that seeking God's counsel is more effective than any task we might accomplish. Time spent in prayer is never wasted but rather an investment in divine wisdom.

- As we fast, we train ourselves to desire God above our physical needs, recognizing that true sustenance comes from Him.

- As we practice gratitude, we cultivate an awareness of God's goodness in all things, keeping our hearts oriented toward Him.

- As we confront sin, we engage in a continuous process of repentance and renewal, allowing Scripture to reveal our blind spots and shape our character.

-
God is revealed in the text, but also in daily trust and obedience. Christian interpreters must learn to see Him moving—not just in Scripture, but in life itself. To read Scripture well, we must live well. This means practicing classical Christian disciplines such as worship, Sabbath, fasting, and giving, alongside distinctive Christian virtues like hospitality, gratitude, forgiveness, and boldness.

In the end, our habits shape our interpretation. As you learn biblical interpretation, remember that your life and disciplines shape your understanding of God's Word. Interpretation is not merely an academic endeavor—it is an act of discipleship. Discipline yourself, seek God's movement, and approach Scripture with both skill and sanctity. The Christian life is not about intellectual mastery alone, but about humble submission to God's wisdom and transformation in Christ's likeness.

CHARACTER IN INTERPRETATION

During my first year of college, I had an English Composition professor whose presence was as memorable as his pedagogy. Tall and thin with a mop of brown hair, his wardrobe seemed frozen in time: button-down shirts, high-water jeans, sneakers, and argyle socks. But beyond his idiosyncratic appearance and slow-motion orchestra conductor hand gestures, he was a man of unexpected eloquence when it came to reading and writing.

For him, reading and writing were more than academic exercises; they were metaphors for life. Reading was the art of understanding—a means of engaging the new and different. Writing was the vehicle of creation, shaping others by crafting stories, sharing information, and designing new worlds. Whether these acts occurred with pen and paper or other media was irrelevant. Reading and writing demanded character, requiring the kind of virtues that shape both comprehension and communication.

Years later, I saw this concept anew through Kevin Vanhoozer's Is There Meaning in This Text?, which introduces the idea of "interpretive virtues." These virtues shape how we engage with texts and communicate effectively as readers and writers. Among them are:

- Honesty – Readers must be honest about their motivations, preconceptions, and level of interest in a text. We bring our own assumptions to every text, and if we fail to acknowledge that reality, we risk distorting the message of the author.

Openness – Readers must be willing to be challenged by a text, fairly evaluating its perspective rather than using it to reinforce preexisting beliefs. Openness does not mean uncritical acceptance but a readiness to let truth challenge false assumptions.

- Attentiveness – Readers must respect the author enough to read thoughtfully and carefully. A distracted or hurried reading may cause us to misinterpret key ideas, leading us to misunderstand the very message we seek to grasp.

- Submissiveness – Readers must agree to engage a text on its own terms, recognizing context and the author's intent. It is easy to force our views onto a text rather than allowing the text to shape our views.

- Charity – Readers must allow for the imperfection of authors, critiquing with grace rather than cynicism. We must recognize that just as we are fallible, so are those we read, and yet wisdom can still be found in imperfect vessels.

Christian reading and writing become vehicles for engaging the world and proclaiming Christ within it. As Christian interpreters:

- We must practice our faith even as we defend it.

- We must interpret as members of a community rooted in God's faithfulness rather than our own adequacy.

- We must read in a way that acknowledges the transformative role of others in our lives.

- We must write as those participating with God in the restoration of mankind.

- We must approach interpretation as an act of worship, engaging with Scripture

JOHN'S GOSPEL: AN INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of John stands apart from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in its theological depth and unique presentation of Jesus Christ. Written by the apostle John, the "beloved disciple," this Gospel emphasizes Jesus as the eternal Son of God who came to reveal the Father and offer eternal life through belief in His name.

Authorship and Background
Though the Gospel does not name its author, early church tradition universally attributes it to John, one of Jesus' closest disciples. John is identified as an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection (John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24). External evidence from early Christian writers such as Irenaeus and Eusebius supports this claim, placing the Gospel's composition in Ephesus, likely between AD 85 and 90, making it the last of the four Gospels to be written.

John's background as a fisherman from Galilee, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, reveals a transformation from a zealous "Son of Thunder" (Mark 3:17) to the "apostle of love." His close relationship with Jesus is reflected in the title "the disciple whom Jesus loved," which underscores the intimate and personal nature of his Gospel.

Purpose and Audience
John's stated purpose is evangelistic: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). Writing for a predominantly Gentile audience, John explains Jewish customs, translates Aramaic terms, and highlights themes of universal significance, such as light and darkness, life and death, and belief and unbelief.

Unique Features
- Theological Emphasis: John opens with a Prologue (1:1-18), declaring Jesus as the eternal Word who became flesh. This Gospel consistently emphasizes Jesus' divinity and unity with the Father.

- Selective Content: Over 90% of John's material is unique, including Jesus' extended discourses and personal encounters. The Gospel omits events like Jesus' birth, baptism, and temptation, focusing instead on His deity and purpose.

- The Seven Signs: John highlights seven miracles (e.g., turning water into wine, raising Lazarus) that reveal Jesus' divine authority and point to His identity as the Christ.

- The "I Am" Statements: Jesus' self-revelations, such as "I am the Bread of Life" (6:35) and "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (11:25), anchor the narrative in His divine nature.

- Dualistic Themes: John contrasts light and darkness, belief and unbelief, truth and falsehood, presenting these as choices that confront every reader.

Structure and Message
John's Gospel unfolds in three main sections:

- Prologue (1:1-18): The eternal Word becomes flesh, revealing God's glory and offering grace and truth.

- The Book of Signs (1:19–12:50): Jesus' public ministry, marked by signs and teachings, calls people to faith and confronts unbelief.

- The Book of Glory (13:1–21:25): Jesus prepares His disciples, endures the cross, and rises victoriously, culminating in His

- commissioning of Peter and others to continue His mission.

Conclusion
The Gospel of John invites readers to encounter Jesus not only as a historical figure but as the eternal Son of God. Through belief in Him, John promises, we receive eternal life —a life of profound relationship with the Father and the Son. With its unmatched theological depth and universal message, John's Gospel remains a cornerstone for understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ.

HIS INCARNATION

There are five primary attributions ascribed to Jesus in the first chapter of John: (1) Jesus is the Word, (2) the Light, (3) the Christ, (4) the Son, and (5) the Lamb of God. Each attribution is rooted in the Old Testament and speaks to key aspects of Jesus's identity that the Gospel of John seeks to display.

The Word
The first line in the book of Genesis reads "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God shapes what is formless and void into a well-ordered world through a series of statements.

"Let there be light…"
"Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters…"
"Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear…"
"Let the earth sprout vegetation…"
"Let there be lights…"
"Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures…"
"Let the earth bring forth living creatures…"
"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness…'

For more on creation and the early chapters of Genesis, subscribe to **PREPPED**, a podcast that empowers Christians to live out a story with God at its center.

Alluding to the creation narrative in Genesis, the prologue to the Gospel of John reveals that God's speech in Genesis 1 is the Word. This Word was with God "in the beginning" and, indeed, was God. While Matthew and Luke utilize genealogies to discuss the origins of Jesus and tie him to the Davidic line and Adam respectively, John takes a further step back locating Jesus in eternity past. Before anything was created, the Word was with God and *the Word was God*.

All things were made through the Word and "without him was not any thing made that was made" (Jn 1:3). The Word brought all of creation into being. Something was brought from nothing by the Word. As such, this Word contains life. That life is not only what we often think of as "spiritual life" but life in the most robust sense—the formation, ordering and animation of all things.

The creative speech of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is the Word or logos that has now come to dwell, or "pitch his tent," among us. This dwelling likely looks back to those times when God's presence was made manifest in the tabernacle and the temple. In Jesus, God's glory has come in its fullness. The glory that Jesus exhibits is that of the unique Son of God who has made the Father known to us. Jesus offers a glimpse of coming glory. His life and teachings are designed to point us toward the new heavens and new earth.

John's Gospel identifies Jesus as the incarnate Word through whom God's glory has returned to the world. We have received "grace upon grace" because, while Moses revealed God through the law, Jesus makes the Father known in his very own person. Unlike Moses who can only see God's back, the world now sees God through "the only one, himself God, who is at the Father's side" has made him

known.

The Light
The Word that brought all things into being contains life and "the life was the light of humankind" (Jn 1:4). The Word's light "shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:5). The light imagery connects to creation, as well as pointing to the idea of divine disclosure—Jesus is the revelation of God.

John bore witness to the light, yet, despite John's testimony and the Word's role in

creation, the world did not know him and "his own people did not receive him" (1:11) Jesus had made the world and was now in the world, but the world did not know Jesus. It is not simply that Jesus's own did not know him, but that they did not accept him. Many did not want the light, but those who did receive him and "those who believe in his name" were "given the right to become God's children" (1:12)

The Lamb of God
When John the Baptist sees Jesus, he describes him as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). The lamb was an important Old Testament sacrifice, particularly in the Passover. The blood from a slaughtered lamb served as a means of protection for the Israelites. God passed over the houses of those who had blood on their doorposts. The Passover lamb served as a symbol of Israel's deliverance as Passover was celebrated throughout the generations of Israel.

In certain non-biblical Jewish literature describes a conquering lamb. For instance, the Testament of Joseph 19:8 reads, "And I saw in the midst of the horns a certain virgin wearing a multicolored garment, and from her came a lamb. Rushing from the left were all sorts of wild animals and reptiles, and the lamb conquered them." We see a similar image of the lamb in Revelation 17:14: "They will make war on the lamb, and the lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, *and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."*

By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, John highlights the sacrificial aspect of Jesus's ministry. As John's writings progress, the Lamb of God is shown to be more than a passive, helpless sacrifice. The lamb is the paradoxical conqueror whose sacrifice ultimately leads to victory. That victory comes because the lamb's innocence demonstrates the governing dynamics of reality—faithful and obedient dependence on and trust in God is the path to true humanity. We follow Christ becasue he shows us what it means to live in right relationship to the Father.

The Christ
The Jews were waiting for God's kingdom to come. They were expecting a messiah who would usher in that kingdom and reestablish Israel as an independent nation. By proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, John's Gospel seeks to consider what it means to be the Christ. The works and teachings of Jesus included in the Gospel do just that. They demonstrate who Jesus is and why everyone should recognize him as the Christ.

The messianic expectations of the Jewish world had produced messianic pretenders. As such, the Jews send the priests and the Levites to find out who John the Baptist is. As John makes clear, he is not the Christ, nor is he Elijah or the prophet. Instead, he tells the priests and the Levites that he is "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." Referring to Isaiah 40:3, John identifies himself as the one who points to the Messiah, or Christ. He is the one who will identify the messiah.

Yet, if John is not the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet, why is he baptizing people? Baptism was, at times, used as a rite to initiate new converts into Judaism. John, however, is not forming a new community. Instead, John baptizes as part of his role of preparing the way for Jesus. He baptizes with water in preparation for "he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to

untie" (Jn 1:27). John baptizes as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." He points to the Christ. As John himself notes in 1:30-31, "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."

John was not the only one to recognize Jesus as the Christ. After John identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, two of John's disciple, one of whom was Andrew, followed Jesus and spent the day with him. Leaving Jesus, Andrew finds Peter and tells him, "We have found the Messiah" (1:41).

Nathanael does not use "Christ" to describe Jesus but calls him the "Son of God" (1:49). While "Son of God" and "Messiah" may be seen as overlapping terms, they are not fully interchangeable. Still, given the combination of "Son of God" and "King of Israel" in 1:49, it seems likely that Nathanael is acknowledging Jesus as the Christ. The use of "Son of God," however, also points to Jesus's unique relationship with the Father. While we might not go so far as to suggest that Nathanael understands the full import of the title, the title of "Son of God" is an important one in the Gospel of John.

The Son- John 1:43-51
The language of Sonship is infrequent in the first chapter of John's Gospel; however, the importance of attributions like "Son," "Son of God," and "Son of Man" in the Gospel of John are difficult to overstate. As noted previously, "Son of God" has some overlap with Messiah. These terms likely have a fair degree of overlap with one another as well. Still, it is important to differentiate the terms to some degree so that the nuance each brings in a given context becomes clear.

On its own, "Son" is most often found in contexts that specify Jesus's relationship with the "Father." In John 1:14, for instance, we see that Jesus displays "glory as of the only Son from the Father." We see a similar use in John 3:35 where we find that "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand."

The Son is the one sent by the Father to "make known" the Father. As such, in John 5:19, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." It also seems clear that the "Son" and the Father are one.

Son of God
While it is certainly transformed in the Gospel narratives, the title of the "son of God" is associated with royalty. The language of sonship is used frequently in the Old Testament with reference to the Israelite king. For instance, in 2 Samuel 7, God promises to be a "father" to Solomon who will be his "son." In Psalm 2:7, we read, "I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'"

That the filial relationship between God and king is likely in mind in the Gospel of John is suggested by Nathanael's combination of titles in John 1:49: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Nathanael may not know that he is looking God in the face, but he recognizes, as Andrew did, that he is looking at the Messiah, the anointed king who would usher in God's kingdom.

It seems clear that John is not using "Son of God" as a solely royal title. In John 10:30, Jesus claims, "I and the Father are one." The Jews seek to stone him for blasphemy "because you, being a man, make yourself God." Jesus responds, "'Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" Here the use of "Son of God" is more than a royal title. It is an assertion of Christ's divinity.

<u>Son of Man</u>
The first use of the "Son of Man" title in John 1:51 includes an allusion to Genesis 28:12 and the "ladder" that Jacob sees in his dream on which "the angels of God were ascending and descending." In John, the picture seems to be that Jesus is the connection between earth and

heaven. It is through Jesus that the blessings of heaven will flow. As such, when Jesus tells Nathanael that Nathanael "will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man," Jesus is not referring to some later eschatological state, but to the whole of his ministry. If Nathanael chooses to follow Jesus, he will see the blessings of heaven.

It may be wise to see the "Son of Man" reference in John 1:51 in relation to two other titles used in the near context: son of Joseph in 1:44 and Son of God in John 1:49. Calling Jesus the "son of Joseph" points toward Jesus's humanity. He is a human member of a human family. Son of God points toward Jesus's relationship to the divine Father. The "son of man" title harkens back to the "one like a son of man" in Daniel 7 who is an otherworldly figure that is obviously more than human and, yet, has the appearance of being human. While the one like a son of man forms part of the conceptual background for the use of the title in John, the Gospel of John extends the concept in its application of the title to Jesus. Jesus is not just human in appearance…he is the son of Joseph. He is not just otherworldly… he is God. The Son of Man likely draws these two aspects of who Jesus is together. The "Son of Man" title bridges the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. This understanding fits with the allusion to Genesis 28:12: Jesus is the connection between earth and heaven.

In this first chapter, the Gospel of John describes Jesus and, in doing so, develops a framework and lens through which the rest of the Gospel may be understood. Jesus is God. He displays the Father and, by walking among us, showcases God's glory. He is the manifestation of God's glory in the midst of the world. What Jesus does throughout the rest of his life and what he teaches, displays God's glory.

For more on the incarnation through the interpretation of Philippians 2, check out this episode of the Thinking Christian Podcast on Salem's Life Audio network.

HIS SIGNS AND WONDERS

After cleansing the temple, the Jews come to Jesus to ask, "What sign do you show us for doing these things" (Jn 2:18)? Jesus responds by saying that when "this" temple is destroyed, Jesus will raise it up in three days, which John tells us is a reference to Jesus's own body.

In this brief account, Jesus symbolically condemns the current temple which has become a "house of trade" (1:16). He also takes its place as the locus of God's presence amongst the people. Here, Jesus does not perform any particular miracle but points forward toward the crucifixion and resurrection. The request for a sign to justify his actions with regard to the temple marks out an important theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus offers or is asked to offer a sign so that one group or another may believe. In this case, Jesus's response to the Jews inspires the belief of the disciples, particularly when they recall Jesus's words post-resurrection (2:22). Yet, many others did not believe Jesus.

The signs in John's Gospel demonstrate a spectrum of belief. There are those who see the signs of Jesus, follow him, and deepen their faith (e.g., the disciples). Through the signs and Jesus's other works and teachings, they come to know Jesus as the Son of God who reflects that Father in the world. There is a group who seem to believe the signs, but never develop beyond a faith that no longer requires those signs. We likely see this in John 6. Jesus has fed the crowds who continue to follow him. He recognizes, however, that they are following him because they have been fed and not out of a deep commitment as his disciples have. As such, when he gives the hard teaching that they will have to eat his flesh and drink his blood, many stopped following him (Jn 6:66).

Still others, despite the signs, refuse to believe in Jesus. For instance, consider interchange between Jesus and the Jews after Jesus tells them that he and the father are one: "The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me'" (Jn 10:31-32).

He goes on to challenge the Jews saying, "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:37-38).

This episode highlights the function of the signs and works of Jesus. They are to point to who Jesus is. Jesus's challenge to the Jews is to believe because of the works or, at the very least, to believe in the works so that they do not close themselves off to all he is doing.

The signs are an important aspect of John's Gospel because they reflect Jesus's identity. The signs legitimize Jesus's claims and teachings. They point beyond themselves to the Savior who brings life to the world.

The Wedding at Cana- John 2:1-12
In Jesus's first sign, he turns water into wine. The crux of the story revolves around Jesus's instruction to the servants. He tells them to fill "six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty to thirty gallons" with water (2:7). Having filled the jars "to the brim" (2:7) the servants then, at Jesus's command, draw out some of the water and take it to the master of the feast. The wine, as the text attests, is better than any of the wine served up to that point.

There are certain details that hint at the meaning of this initial sign. First, the filling of the jars normally preserved for ceremonial washing highlights the movement from the current Jewish order to a new age ushered in by Jesus. The laws and customs put in place by the Jewish religious establishment will be disrupted by Jesus's presence and replaced by Jesus's teaching.

Second, the report that the servants filled the pots "to the brim" prior to Jesus telling them to "Now draw some out" may suggest that the pots are no longer necessary (2:8). While it is possible that Jesus is telling the servants to draw water from the pots, it is also possible—and seemingly more likely—that, having filled the pots to the brim, Jesus is telling the servants to draw additional water from the well and to take the water from the well to the master of the feast.

This interpretation is supported by John's use of the verb translated "draw" which is used again in John 4:7 and 15 in reference to drawing water from a well. If the water turned to wine comes from the well rather than the jars, the filled jars may represent the end of the age in which ceremonial purification is necessary. Drawing the water that would become wine from the well rather than the ceremonial pots would point to the separation of the new age being ushed in by Jesus and the old age represented by the Jewish religious system.

Finally, the quality of the wine produced by Jesus is superior to that served previously. The convention of serving the best wine first and leaving the lower quality wine for later in the night underscores the fact that the wine Jesus produces is far better than anything else served at the feast. Even the best wine cannot compare with the wine Jesus provides. This points to the superiority of the new age Jesus represents.

The narrative of this initial sign ends with the simple statement, "And his disciples believed in him." In the case of the disciples, the sign has done its job. They believe that Jesus is who he says he is.

Signs and Unbelief- John 12:36-43
While his disciples saw the signs and believed in Jesus, there were many who saw the signs and "still did not believe in him" (12:37). The signs were not ambiguous, but many were still not convinced. John links the people's unbelief to the fulfilment of Isaiah 53:1.

In context Isaiah 53:1 should probably be read in continuity with the previous chapter. Isaiah 52:13-15 describe God's servant as unattractive. He is lacking in the sort of power and position that would have been anticipated. The servant comes in weakness and, as Isaiah 53:12 notes, will achieve victory through death. Many who hear this portrayal of the servant find it unbelievable.

John identifies Jesus as the servant. Despite the signs he has performed, he is not meeting the expectations of the people. As such, "they could not believe." They become like those to whom Isaiah prophesied. They do not have eyes capable of seeing Jesus, nor do that have soft hearts prepared to accept him.

The signs were compelling, yet not sufficient in many cases to convince those who saw them that Jesus was who he claimed to be. They do not see beyond the signs to recognize the glory of God reflected in the person of Jesus. The association of glory with the signs and with Jesus has been fairly common throughout the Gospel of John. John's comment about Isaiah seeing the glory of the Lord in v. 41 sets up the final comment regarding those among the religious leaders who believed Jesus.

Again, we see that the signs produce a spectrum of belief. Here, the leaders who believe do not confess. Presumably, they do not confess because they don't recognize God's glory as Isaiah did. Isaiah speaks because he saw God's glory, whereas those who saw Jesus's signs and don't confess choose the "glory that comes from man" over the "glory that comes from God" (12:43). They see the signs and believe in some sense, but they do not recognize the glory of God displayed in the life and work of Jesus. As such, they content themselves with the honors

bestowed by men in the synagogues and miss out on the riches that would have inevitably been theirs had they devoted themselves to pursuing the glory of God.

For more on the glory of God and the beatific vision, check out this episode of **PREPPED**.

MARK'S GOSPEL: AN INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark emphases Jesus's identity as the Son of God and the Servant who came to save humanity. While shorter and more concise than the other Gospels, Mark's narrative is rich in detail, portraying Jesus as ceaselessly active, moving immediately from one moment of ministry to the next.

Authorship and Background
Although the Gospel itself does not name its author, early church tradition unanimously attributes it to John Mark, a companion of the apostles Peter and Paul. Mark's account is widely believed to reflect Peter's firsthand testimony, making it both authoritative and personal. Early church fathers such as Papias and Clement of Alexandria affirm Mark's role as Peter's interpreter, preserving his teachings in written form for a Roman audience.

Mark's background—his connection to the early church, his travels with Paul and Barnabas, and later reconciliation with Paul—positions him as a well-informed and dedicated recorder of the Gospel. His work is thought to have been written in Rome, likely between AD 64–69, during a period of persecution under Nero.

Purpose and Audience
Mark wrote to encourage Roman Christians, many of whom were Gentiles, to remain steadfast in their faith amidst persecution. His Gospel emphasizes Jesus' power, compassion, and sacrificial obedience, presenting Him as the perfect Servant of God. To resonate with his audience, Mark minimizes references to Jewish laws and customs, explaining them when necessary, and uses Latinisms and Roman timekeeping, making his account accessible and relatable.

Unique Features
- Focus on action: Mark's Gospel is fast-paced and dynamic, frequently using the term "immediately" to convey urgency. Jesus is depicted as constantly serving, teaching, healing, and confronting opposition.

- High Christology: From the opening declaration, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), Mark emphasizes Jesus' divine identity, confirmed by His miracles, teachings, and the confessions of others, including Roman centurion at the crucifixion.

- Emotion and Humanity: Mark portrays Jesus' full humanity, vividly capturing His emotions—anger, compassion, sorrow, and distress—alongside His divinity.

- Preparation of Disciples: A significant portion of the Gospel focuses on Jesus' efforts to prepare His disciples for ministry and for the reality of His suffering and death.

- Movement Toward the Cross: Mark's narrative pivots at 8:31, where Jesus predicts His suffering, signaling the transition toward His ultimate mission: the cross and resurrection.

Structure and Themes
The Gospel can be divided into four sections:

- Introduction of Jesus (1:1–13): Jesus is introduced as the Son of God, affirmed through His baptism and victory over temptation.

- Ministry in Galilee (1:14–9:50): Mark details Jesus' teaching, healing, and confrontations with religious leaders, emphasizing His authority over both spiritual and physical realms.

- Journey to Jerusalem (10:1–13:37): Jesus intensively instructs His disciples, culminating in His arrival in Jerusalem and confrontation with the religious establishment.

- Passion and Resurrection (14:1–16:20): The narrative focuses on Jesus' sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection, providing hope and commissioning His followers to share the Gospel.

Conclusion
Mark's Gospel offers a compelling portrayal of Jesus as the Servant-King, whose life, death, and resurrection fulfill God's redemptive plan. Through its vivid storytelling and emphasis on action, the Gospel of Mark calls readers to faith, discipleship, and the hope of the risen Christ.

HIS KINGDOM

The kingdom of God is part of Jesus's proclamation of the Gospel. Because the kingdom is at hand, it is time to "repent and believe the Gospel." While Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, he does not necessarily reveal the nature of the kingdom to everyone. Instead, Jesus teaches about the kingdom in parables. As Jesus tells "those around him with the twelve", "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables" (Mk 4:11).

Jesus is not being enigmatic for no reason. He is continuing an Old Testament pattern represented in Isaiah 6:9-10. In Isaiah 6, God is giving Isaiah instruction regarding his prophetic activity and message. God telegraphs the response of the people who are spiritually deaf and blind and, thus, cannot understand or perceive. Isaiah's message will call them to repentance and reform, but they will not grasp just what that entails. As such, they will experience God's judgment until God comes to deliver the people from themselves.

By citing Isaiah 6:9-10, Jesus points to the spiritual deafness and blindness of many of those who hear his teachings, particularly his parables. While they may hear the parables, they do not comprehend how to live as members of the Kingdom. The kingdom and the way of life it requires is unintelligible to many of those to whom Jesus speaks. However, his inner circle has been "given the secret of the kingdom of God" (Mk 4:11). Even so, it is clear from Mark 4:13-20 that even Jesus's disciples have difficulty understanding the parables.

Not all of Jesus's teaching about the kingdom of God are contained in parables. For instance, in Mark 9:1, Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." Jesus also offers teachings about entering the kingdom in Mark 10:13-31.

For Mark, the kingdom of God is associated with Jesus's authority. The presence of the kingdom demands a reconsideration of the current world order. When faced with the power of the kingdom Jesus's followers and opponents alike must reckon with the presence of the kingdom in their midst. While the scribes attempt to demonize Jesus by claiming that his power came from "Beelzebub" and that "by the prince of demons he casts out demons," Jesus reminds them that "a kingdom divided against itself… cannot stand" (Mk 3:22-24).

The kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus can only be attributed to God's power. The kingdom requires decision. Either the kingdom of God is embraced and allowed to transform one's way of life or it is rejected. Rejecting the kingdom results in one's opposition to the kingdom. Embracing the kingdom demands discipleship.

The Parable of the Seed Growing- Mark 4:26-29
After telling the parable of the sower, Jesus tells the parable of the seed growing. This parable is one of only a handful of passages unique to Mark. The parable emphasizes that the kingdom will grow without human effort. Having planted the seed, the farmer watches the ground, but he does not understand how the seed actually grows. The farmer plants the seed but has no role in making the seed flourish beyond that. Like the gospel, the seed will grow on its own.

That the parable underscores the growth of the kingdom without human effort may be an implicit critique of movements in Jesus's day that sought to establish a Jewish kingdom by

force. The kingdom of God, according to Mark, cannot be the result of human effort. The parable stands as a reminder that the kingdom is, like the seed planted by the farmer, inevitable. It is growing even though we may not see it growing. As such, our role is similar to that of the farmer. We wait, knowing that God's kingdom will come.

The reference to the harvest is likely similar to the idea of Jesus's disciples being "fishers of men." In that context, the disciples are participating in the deliverance of those who embrace the kingdom and the Gospel prior to the judgment of the Lord. The harvesting in this parable refers to deliverance and judgment. The kingdom is divisive in so much as those who enter the kingdom will be saved while those who reject the kingdom will suffer the consequences of their rebellion and opposition.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed- Mark 4:30-34
The parable of the Mustard Seed juxtaposes small beginnings with massive growth. Despite its small size, the mustard seed "grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches" (Mk 4:32). The kingdom of God is compared to what happens to the mustard seed. Its small beginnings require a leap of faith trusting that the seed will grow. Jesus' ministry requires a similar leap of faith as one recognizes that its humble beginnings will lead to the kingdom of God in its fullness.

The reference to the birds making nests in the plant's shade (Mk 4:32) may allude to Ezekiel 17:23: "On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest." Ezekiel's sprig will flourish. As it does, those who see it will admire it. The substitution of the cedar in Ezekiel with the mustard plant in the gospels likely gestures toward the humility of Christ and the crucifixion through which Jesus will establish the kingdom.

The Kingdom, Little Children, and the Rich

After the disciples rebuke those bringing children to Jesus, Jesus is indignant or "greatly displeased" (Mk 10:13-14). Mark is the only Gospel that uses this term in relation to Jesus and he only uses it in this passage. Instead of sending the children away, Jesus tells his disciples to let the children come "for of such is the kingdom of God" (10:14). The little children provide a picture of what is required to receive the kingdom of God. But why?

It is fairly common to assume that Jesus is referring to the innocence of the little children; however, it is more likely that it is the vulnerability of the children that is in view. They are powerless and easily marginalized. They are dependent on the mercy and good will of others.

The point, then, is that the kingdom of God does not belong to those with the strength to take it but to those with the humility to receive it. It is available to those who understand their weakness—their dependence on the Lord. Unlike the rich young ruler who "went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Mk 10:17-22), the little children have nothing to lose by coming to Jesus. Receiving the kingdom of God as a little child means that we receive it not from a place of strength, but from a place of deep vulnerability, weakness, and surrender.

This interpretation of the episode regarding the little children is supported by the contrast between the children and the rich young ruler. After Jesus tells the rich young ruler to "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me" (10:21), he tells his disciples "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God" (10:23).

In contrast to those who are powerless those who have earthly riches will find it challenging to enter the Kingdom because the kingdom requires that we surrender other forms of security. Those who are living comfortably and have the resources to survive, if not thrive, in the world on their own will find it difficult, as

did the rich young ruler, to set aside their wealth to embrace Christ. The illusion of safety and prosperity create barriers for the acceptance of Christ.

Jesus's temptation in Matthew offers insights into how the kingdom of God will come about. Learn more on this episode of the Thinking Christian Podcast.

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL: AN INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew serves as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments, presenting Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the long-awaited Messianic King. Rooted in Jewish tradition, this Gospel provides a compelling narrative that ties Israel's history to the coming of Christ while also extending the message of salvation to the Gentiles.

Authorship and Background
Although the author is not explicitly named, early church tradition unanimously attributes this Gospel to Matthew, also called Levi, a tax collector turned disciple of Jesus. Matthew's background as a tax collector is reflected in his precise use of financial terms and his emphasis on Jewish customs. Early church fathers such as Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, and Origen strongly support Matthean authorship.

Matthew's Gospel is thought to have been written around AD 50, likely before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, as there is no mention of this event despite Jesus' prophecy in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24). Scholars suggest the Gospel may have originated in either Jerusalem or Antioch, written for a predominantly Jewish audience familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures.
Purpose and Audience

Matthew wrote his Gospel to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel, the King from the line of David, and the Savior of the world. By highlighting Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and His authoritative teachings, Matthew seeks to establish Jesus' credentials as Israel's true King. At the same time, the Gospel includes a broader call, emphasizing the inclusion of Gentiles in God's redemptive plan (Matthew 28:19-20).

Unique Features

- The "Jewish Gospel": Matthew frequently references the Old Testament, quoting or alluding to it nearly 130 times, and emphasizes Jesus as the "Son of David" and "Son of Abraham."

- Focus on the Kingdom: The Gospel highlights the "kingdom of heaven," a phrase unique to Matthew, occurring 33 times. It presents Jesus as the Davidic King who fulfills Israel's covenantal hopes.

- Structured Teaching: Matthew organizes Jesus' teachings into five major discourses, including the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7) and the Olivet Discourse (chapters 24–25), mirroring the five books of Moses.

- Bridge Between Testaments: By beginning with a genealogy that traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and David, Matthew connects the Old Testament promises to their fulfillment in Christ.

- Inclusion of the Church: Matthew is the only Gospel to explicitly mention the "church" (Matthew 16:18; 18:17), emphasizing its role in the new covenant era.

Structure and Meaning
Matthew's Gospel unfolds in seven main sections:

- The Incarnation and Preparation of the King (1:1–4:11): Jesus' genealogy, birth, baptism, and victory over temptation establish His royal and divine identity.

- The Proclamation of the Kingdom (4:12–

7:29): The Sermon on the Mount outlines the ethics and righteousness of the kingdom.

- The Power of the King (8:1–11:1): Through miracles and healings, Jesus demonstrates His authority over nature, sickness, and spiritual forces.

- The Rejection of the King (11:2–16:12): Increasing opposition from Israel's religious leaders culminates in Jesus' use of parables to reveal truths to His followers while concealing them from His opponents.

- The Preparation of the King's Disciples (16:13–20:34): Jesus begins preparing His disciples for His coming death, resurrection, and the establishment of the church.

- The Presentation and Rejection of the King (21:1–27:66): Jesus enters Jerusalem as King, faces rejection by Israel's leaders, and endures crucifixion.

- The Resurrection and Commissioning of the King (28:1–20): Jesus' resurrection proves His identity as Messiah, and He commissions His disciples to make disciples of all nations.

Conclusion
The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and the Savior of all humanity. By intertwining Jewish tradition with the universal scope of the Great Commission, Matthew's Gospel invites readers to recognize Jesus as King and to live as faithful subjects of His kingdom. It is a Gospel of fulfillment, authority, and hope, calling people to embrace the reign of the risen Christ.

HIS BIRTH

While all of the Gospels portray Jesus as fulfilling various prophecies, Matthew places an emphasis on fulfilment through a repeated formula that (1) references an Old Testament passage or prophet, (2) utilizes the verb translated "fulfill," and (3) identifies Jesus or some event in Jesus's life as the fulfillment of the prophecy sited.

This formula occurs at least ten times in the book of Matthew in 1:22-23, 2:15, 2:17-18, 2:23, 4:14-16, 8:17, 12:17-21; 13:35, 21:4-5 and 27:9-10. "Fulfill" occurs in other passages in Matthew though without all three of the formulaic elements. For instance, after Peter cut the ear off one of the servants of the high priest, Jesus says the following in Matthew 26:52-54:

"Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

The use of "fulfilled" in verse 54 points to Jesus and, in particular, his crucifixion as a fulfillment of the Scriptures. However, in 26:54, the reference is more general than specific and, as such, does not fit the formula Matthew uses elsewhere.

Still, Matthew 26:54 and other verses such as Matthew 5:17 in which Jesus says that he has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, work in conjunction with the more formulaic expressions to reinforce Matthew's notion that Jesus is the fulfilment of the scriptures. The Israelites have waited for God to deliver them and to re-establish an independent Israel free from the Gentiles. Now, according to Matthew, they should recognize that, in Jesus, the prophecies of old are being fulfilled.

Isaiah 7:14 in Its Old Testament Context
The initial use of the formula has to do with the virgin birth citing Isaiah 7:14. The backdrop of Isaiah 7 includes (1) the divided kingdoms of Israel in the North and Judah in the South and (2) the expansion of the Assyrian empire. Coming from the Northeast, the Assyrians had their eyes on Lebanon, which would require them to go through Aram (Syria). Fearing the Assyrians, Aram joins forces with Israel or Ephraim, the northern part of the divided kingdom.

This alliance, then seeks the aid of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, against the Assyrians. They were attempting to add Judah's military strength to their own, as well as eliminating the possibility that Judah would attack from the South as the Assyrians attacked from the North. After Ahaz, the king of Judah, refuses to join the alliance, Aram and Ephraim unite to displace Ahaz.

After Ahaz has been told that the Syro-Ephraimite alliance is coming against Judah, Isaiah brings a word from the Lord to Ahaz. Isaiah encourages Ahaz not to fear because the Syri-Ephraimite alliance will come to nothing. The "smoldering coals" will do little to Judah as long as Ahaz continues to trust in the Lord. Aram and Israel may seem like mighty nations, but they are driven by two men, Rezin in Syria (or Damascus) and Pekah in Israel/Ephraim (or Samaria). God will not allow the plans of Rezin and Pekah to stand. Ahaz will not be replaced by a puppet king.

After giving Ahaz assurance that the seeming threat will amount to nothing, Isaiah gives Ahaz the opportunity to request a sign from God. Ahaz can ask for anything "as deep as Sheol" or "as high as heaven" (Isa 7:11). This phrase is called a merism and would be comparable to saying "from New York to Los

Angeles" as a way of referring to the whole of the United States. Ahaz may choose virtually anything for a sign. Ahaz, however, refuses to request a sign noting that he does not wish to test God.

Because of his unwillingness to ask for a sign, God provides the sign of the "young woman" with child who will bear Immanuel ("God with us."). This sign is a mixture of judgment and hope. A pregnant woman and a baby have no military utility. Yet, the survival and growth of the child offers future hope that goes beyond near-term defeat.

Before discussing the nature of the sign any further, it is necessary to consider the translation of Isaiah 7:14. Translating "young woman" rather than "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 may seem controversial given the New Testament rendering, as well as the doctrine of the virgin birth. However, the Hebrew word almah used in 7:14 does not necessarily demand virginity though it does not rule it out either. For instance, in Isaiah 54:5, the word almah is used to refer to a barren woman. Since there were no scientific tests for barrenness in ancient Israel, the only way a woman would become known as barren is by having sex (presumably multiple times) without becoming pregnant.

Considering Isaiah 7:14 on its own—apart from later developments in the New Testament— it seems best to render almahas "young woman." Again, this translation does not preclude virginity. It certainly allows for the New Testament's use of the passage with reference to Mary who was, indeed, a virgin.

Isaiah 7:14 in Its Near Context

The analysis of Isaiah 7:14 above may seem to close off the sort of use found in Matthew 1:23. Yet those same passages, especially when read within the context of their immediately surrounding paragraphs or chapters, disclose a further dimension of meaning never approximated by an OT-age event. It seems plausible, therefore, to affirm that the prophetic author consciously looked both for a relatively immediate referent and for a more longer-term eschatological fulfillment.

In Isaiah, we likely find this "longer-term eschatological fulfillment" in chapters 8 and 9. First, in Isaiah 8:3, we see the account of the birth of Maher Shalal Hash Baz (or "quickly, the plunder; it hurries, the loot), who may be identified as the Immanuel promised in 7:14. In addition ot the shared context of the Assyrian invasion referenced in both 7:17-25 and 8:7-8, the repetition of language ("the boy knows..") taken from 7:15 in 8:4 would also seem to suggest a connection.

While the appearance of two different names may seem problematic, the multiple names could serve a clarifying function with Immanuel pointing to God's presence and Maher Shalal Hash Baz highlighting the coming judgment God's presence brings in this context. We also see the repetition of the name "Immanuel" in 8:8 suggesting a connection between chapters 7 and 8.

If we view the child from 7:14 as Isaiah's son Maher Salal Hash Baz in 8:3, we remain within the Old Testament's time horizon. However, reading Isaiah 8:9 and following, we see the context broaden. For instance, "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts, which dwelleth in mount Zion" (Isa 8:18). The children in mind are Shearjashub and Maher Shalal Hash Baz. Shearjashub, whose name means "a remnant will return," was born prior to the Immanuel prophecy.

Isaiah's point is that his sons hold out hope while pointing toward the consequences of disobedience. They function as signs for Israel and point beyond Isaiah's present context toward a time when light will break through darkness and the birth of another child will fulfill the hopes of Israel. This child will have the government on his shoulders (Isa 9:6). The child will also be called by names expressing the superiority of God and the actions God takes on behalf of his people: "Wonderful Counselor, Might God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6).

Isaiah sees a child who will be born to rule and fulfill the ideas expressed in the names given

to him. The child, who is referenced again in Isaiah 11, will receive the Spirit of the Lord which is described in 11:2 with terms such as wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, and knowledge and the fear of the Lord. This child will usher in a time of redemption and prosperity. As Isaiah 11:3-5 reads:

> "And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins."

Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23

As we return to Matthew 1:23, we should recognize that (1) the context in which Isaiah 7:14 occurs in the Old Testament has a clear historical setting and (2) Isaiah looks beyond the historic context to an eschatological time in which a child ruler will be the conduit through which God will restore and redeem his people. Matthew's citation of Isaiah 7:14 needs to be understood in the broader context of Isaiah.

Matthew sharpens the Hebrew almah ("young woman") by utilizing the Greek word parthenos, which more specifically refers to a virgin. That was an appropriate description of Mary as the rest of Matthew's narrative makes clear. As God acts through Mary to bring his Son into the world, Matthew rightly recognizes that Jesus fulfills the broader hope for Isaiah that a child ruler would usher in God's deliverance and judgment.

As we consider Jesus's birth in Matthew, we should view it as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel contained in the Old Testament. The virgin birth demonstrates that Jesus is the child who was to come. Not only does he point to God as Immanuel—he is God. He has been incarnated among us to fulfill all God's promises and to bring the salvation that was to come through the nation of Israel.

Listen to more on Jesus's birth and Isaiah 7:14 on this episode of Thinking Christian.

LUKE'S GOSPEL: AN INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Luke offers a compelling portrait of Jesus Christ as the perfect Son of Man, emphasizing His humanity and universal mission to bring salvation to all people. With its meticulous historical detail and theological depth, Luke's Gospel is a masterful narrative that highlights Jesus' compassion, teachings, and sacrificial work.

Authorship and Background
The Gospel of Luke is anonymous within its text, but early church tradition unanimously attributes it to Luke, the "beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14) and a close companion of the Apostle Paul. Luke also authored the Book of Acts, and together, these two volumes comprise 28% of the New Testament, making Luke the most prolific writer in terms of content.

Luke's Gentile background and his education as a physician are reflected in his polished Greek style and his attention to detail. His deep theological insight and historical precision make his Gospel unique. Luke likely wrote his Gospel during Paul's two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (around AD 58–59), addressing it to a Greek audience, including Theophilus, likely a Gentile of high rank.

Purpose and Audience
Luke explicitly states his purpose in the Gospel's prologue (1:1–4): to provide Theophilus and other readers with an orderly and reliable account of Jesus' life and ministry, ensuring they could be confident in the truth they had been taught. Luke highlights Jesus' role as the Savior for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, portraying Him as the perfect God-Man who offers salvation to the lost.

Unique Features
- Historical Precision: Luke ties the life of Jesus to historical events, offering specific details about rulers, regions, and customs that ground his narrative in history.

- Emphasis on Jesus' Humanity: Luke portrays Jesus as the ideal man, tracing His genealogy back to Adam, the father of all humanity.

- Prayer and the Holy Spirit: Luke frequently highlights Jesus' prayers and the work of the Holy Spirit, more so than the other Gospels.

- Attention to the Marginalized: Luke gives special attention to women, Gentiles, the poor, and social outcasts, emphasizing Jesus' inclusive mission.

- Rich Parables and Unique Content: Eighteen parables, including the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, are unique to Luke, showcasing his literary skill and theological depth.

Structure and Message
Luke's Gospel unfolds in six main sections:

- Prologue and Purpose (1:1–4): Luke explains his methodical approach to writing and his aim to confirm the truth about Jesus.

- The Narrative of John and Jesus' Births (1:5–2:52): Luke details the miraculous births of John the Baptist and Jesus, emphasizing their divine purpose and including unique nativity accounts like the shepherds' visit.

- Preparation for Jesus' Ministry (3:1–4:13): This section includes John's ministry, Jesus' baptism, genealogy, and temptation, all pointing to His divine and

human qualifications.

- Public Ministry in Galilee (4:14–9:50): Jesus' ministry begins with teaching, miracles, and calling disciples, demonstrating His authority and compassion.

- Journey Toward Jerusalem (9:51–19:27): Known as the "travel narrative," this section focuses on Jesus' teachings, including parables about the kingdom of God, as He sets His face toward Jerusalem.

- Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension (19:28–24:53): Luke details Jesus' triumphal entry, rejection, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, emphasizing His victory over sin and death.

Conclusion
Luke's Gospel presents Jesus as the Savior of the world, whose life, death, and resurrection offer redemption to all people. Its universal focus, historical reliability, and profound theological insights make it a cornerstone for understanding the life and ministry of Christ. Luke calls readers to respond to Jesus' invitation to "seek and save the lost" (19:10) and to live as witnesses of His redemptive work.

HIS MESSAGE AND MISSION

Jesus accomplished a great deal in a relatively brief period of public ministry. While Luke tends to emphasize Jesus's work among those who are marginalized in society, Jesus came to proclaim the Good News to all people. He came to make a way for all who are willing to follow Him to find salvation.

Proclaiming Good News- Luke 4:16-21
Luke's citation of Isaiah 61:1-2 is unique to his Gospel. In context, Isaiah 61 speaks of the who will bring deliverance to his people in the midst of the nations. As Isaiah 60 makes clear, there is a day coming in which the Lord will rise upon his people so that God's glory will be reflected upon his peoples and, as Isaiah 60:3 makes clear, "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

The glory that will come to the nation of Israel will come through the servant described in Isaiah 61. The "spirit of the Lord" will be upon the servant as he was upon the Messiah in Isaiah 11:2, which reads, "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." The servant is called upon to bring "good news;" however, as the parallel verses suggest, there is more to the Servant's role than simple, verbal proclamation. It also involves binding up the brokenhearted, to issue a decree that the captives have been released, to free the prisoners, and to announce the year of the Lord's favor.

As Isaiah 61 goes on to note, what is "good news" for the poor, brokenhearted, captives, and prisoners, is also a day of vengeance. The Servant will not simply restore the fortunes of his people but will bring justice. Those who have been faithful to the Lord will enjoy restoration, but there are others who will not receive blessing.

Jesus identifies himself with the servant in Luke 4. In doing so, he claims to be the one who will restore the fortunes of those who recognize their sin and recommit to being loyal to the Lord. While Jesus certainly proclaims the good news in each of the Gospels, Luke's Gospel emphasizes Jesus's work among those who exist at the fringes of society to whom Jesus will bring liberty. While Jesus is ultimately rejected in Nazareth, he continues his mission of preaching the good news. As Luke notes in 4;43-44, "…but he [Jesus] said to them, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.' And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea."

The Rich Man and Lazarus- Luke 16:19-31
As Jesus warns his disciples in Luke 20:46-47, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive their condemnation." Unlike the scribes, the disciples are not to use their position to honor themselves and to "devour widows' houses" but to serve the purpose for which Jesus came: to proclaim the good news which, as we saw in Luke 4:16-21, involves ushering in the Jubilee so that those who are oppressed and vulnerable within society.

The narrative of the rich man and Lazarus, which is unique to Luke's Gospel and reinforces what might be described as Luke's reversal motif. In the story, the rich man uses his wealth for his own comfort and interests. The rich man wears purple clothes which would have be considered a luxury item in ancient Rome. The dyes used to produce purple clothing would have been inaccessible

to anyone without great wealth. This reference in combination with the comment that the man "feasted sumptuously every day" highlight the lavish lifestyle of the rich man and creates a stark contrast between the rich man and Lazarus.

While the rich man is dressing well, Lazarus is covered with sores. The rich man feasts while Lazarus stays alive by obtaining scraps from the rich man's table, possibly in competition with the dogs who also licked Lazarus's sores. The presence of the dogs and Lazarus's sores suggest that Lazarus would have been viewed as unclean. Unlike our "best friends" today, dogs were not viewed positively in the ancient world. For instance, note the parallel between dogs and pigs in Matthew 7:6: "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."

Also note the proverb cited in 2 Peter 2:22, which also compares dogs and pigs: "What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire." Other negative, metaphoric references to dogs are found in Philippians 3:2 and possibly Revelation 22:15. Clearly, the dogs in the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus, are intended to highlight the dire situation of Lazarus.

Despite the drastic difference in their earthly lives, neither Lazarus nor the rich man can escape death. Still, though they both die, their fates are not the same. Lazarus finally finds comfort at Abraham's side, whereas the rich man ends up in Hades where he experiences discomfort that likely transcends anything Lazarus felt while lying at the rich man's gate. Now, like Lazarus who witnessed the feasts of the rich man, the rich man sees Lazarus with Abraham and asks for assistance.

The rich man seems to retain some sense of his prior assumptions about the way the world works as he asks to be served by Lazarus; however, he quickly realizes that the fortunes of he and Lazarus have been reversed. As we read in Luke 16:25: "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish." The rich man has had his moment in the sun and there is now nothing that can be done to remedy his situation. Resigned to his fate, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his five brothers so that they can avoid the torment he is experiencing. Abraham again refuses telling the rich man that "if they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

The narrative is not a condemnation of the rich per se. Instead, it is likely offers a critique similar to that found in the parable of the wicked tenants in Luke 20 in which the Jewish leaders are viewed as wicked tenants who reject the vineyard owner's servant and son, thus, according to Luke 20:16, prompting the owner to "come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man represents those who use what they have been given in this life to their own advantage. They serve themselves and enjoy the fleeting pleasures of temporal life. Abraham's denial of the rich man's request for Lazarus to go to his five brothers to warn them of the consequences they will inevitably face is framed in terms an unwillingness to hear.

In Luke, "hearing" is not simply a matter of auditory ability but is associated with an obedient response to what is heard.It is not so much that people are unfamiliar with Moses and the Prophets. The Jewish leaders such as the scribes and pharisees would be familiar with the Old Testament. Instead, they refuse to be transformed by what they hear. They do not respond with obedience and, as such, demonstrate a general unwillingness to change the course of their lives.

As Jesus notes in Luke 8:9-15, each of the "seeds," regardless of their location, have heard the word of God, yet not all hearing results in a lasting faith. Only the seeds in good soil hear the word and, as Luke 8:15 puts it, "hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." According to

Luke 8:19, there are different ways of hearing, but those who would become part of Jesus's family are, as Luke 8:21 notes, "those who hear the word of God and do it."

The story of the rich man and Lazarus illustrates the peril of living a life to serve oneself. Those who have heard the word of God without allowing it to inform and transform their actions have not heard in the right way. As such, they end up opposing God by living for themselves. The rich man offers an illustration of the fate of those who opt to ignore the word of God and to serve their own interests rather than participating with God as he brings liberty and salvation.

To Seek and Save- Luke 19:1-10
The brief encounter with Zacchaeus offers a similar lesson to that of the rich man and Lazarus with the difference being the response of Zacchaeus. As a rich, Jewish tax collector, Zacchaeus would likely have been disliked by the people. In this case, the reason Zacchaeus can't see Jesus may have had less to do with being a "wee little man" than with being shoved aside and kept away by the crowd. Zacchaeus, despite his wealth, exists on the margins of society.

So, while the people grumble about Jesus's decision to be a guest in Zacchaeus's home, Zacchaeus fits the broader paradigm for an individual with whom Jesus has come to share the good news. Still, Zacchaeus's wealth is not inconsequential. Zacchaeus responds to the situation by committing to give half of all he has to the poor and to restore "fourfold" what he has gained by defrauding others. Zacchaeus is ready and willing to repent.

As such, Jesus proclaims that salvation has come to Zacchaeus's house. Jesus is not suggesting that because Zacchaeus has repented all those within his household have been saved, but that Zacchaeus's response recognizes Jesus as the locus of salvation. It is important to recognize that this conversation does not appear to occur in private. The conversation happens in the midst of the crowd. Jesus's announcement, then, is intended not as a message to Zacchaeus only, but also as a message to the crowd.

Zacchaeus's response to Jesus identifies him as a "son of Abraham." While Zacchaeus is Jewish, Jesus is not referring to his ethnicity. Luke has been consistent in his insistence that being Jewish is of little consequence if one does not respond to God in a faithful manner. Similarly, his pronouncement that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19:10) offers an implicit critique of crowd's grumbling.

Zacchaeus is not like the Jewish leaders who have used the Law and Prophets to advance their own ends. Instead, he is someone who lost his way and needs salvation. While it may be simple to see those with little to no material wealth as needing salvation, the story of Zacchaeus reminds us that even the wealthy require redemption.

Jesus's mission and message is now our message. Learn more on this episode of Thinking Christian.

CONCLUSION

As you continue to read and study the Gospels, I would encourage you to consider the resources available from Useful to God. We have a full course on the gospels including more than 20 lessons and video lectures on interpreting the gospels more generally, as well as addressing specific passages. You can also check out the Thinking Christian podcast on Life Audio. I've included QR codes to episodes looking at the gospels below.

Thanks for downloading and using this guide. I trust it has been a blessing.

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