

by Michael L. Gowens

Matthew: The first of the four gospel narratives regarding the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew writes for a Jewish audience, quoting extensively from Old Testament prophecy to show that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah.

The concept of the “kingdom of God” and of Jesus as the King over His kingdom is the dominant theme.

Matthew was one of the original disciples of Jesus.

Mark: The second synoptic gospel and chronologically, the first of the four gospel accounts. According to reputable historians, Peter was Mark’s source of information. While Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus, Mark begins with the coming of John the Baptist and focuses primarily on the activities of Jesus’ personal ministry. He writes to provide a catalog of Jesus’ mighty deeds for the benefit of those who had not been eyewitnesses to His ministry.

Luke: Luke, Paul’s traveling companion, gathered his source material from eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life he met while traveling with Paul. It is the most comprehensive of the four gospel accounts and is tailored to a non-Jewish audience. The style is comparable to classical Greek and is so refined in its vocabulary that the infidel Renan said, “The gospel according to Luke is the most beautiful book in all the world.” Luke focuses on the humanity of Jesus, recording eleven of the fifteen references to the prayers of Jesus in the gospel record.

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John: Unlike the other three gospels, John's gospel is theological, not synoptic. The key verse is 20:31: "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God..." His principal concern is to demonstrate the deity of Jesus. He does this by recording seven miracles, five of which are not referenced in the other gospels. These miracles prove that Jesus was more than a man – indeed, that He was God manifest in the flesh. While Matthew & Luke begin with the birth of Jesus, and Mark with the personal ministry of Jesus, John begins with the preincarnate existence of Jesus as "the Word who was in the beginning with God." John's argument is that the works of Jesus identify Him as the eternal Son of God.

Acts: Acts was written by Luke as a sequel to his epic of Jesus' life. While his gospel records "all that Jesus began to do and teach" during His personal ministry, Acts records the *continued* ministry of Jesus to His disciples through the Spirit in His post-resurrection glory. It is an inspired account of church history covering the first thirty years of Christianity's expansion. The book neatly divides into two sections: (1) The evangelistic ministry of Peter (chs. 1-12); (2) The evangelistic ministry of Paul (chs. 13-28). Acts 1:8 also provides a grid for the development of Luke's plot. The book chronicles the triumphs of the gospel first at Jerusalem, then in Samaria, then to the uttermost parts of the earth. Acts teaches that the only explanation for the success and expansion of the Christian gospel is the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans: Paul's letter to the church at Rome is the most comprehensive statement of the gospel in the New Testament. The theme is "the gospel of God" (1:1). The key word is "righteousness." Chapters 1-3 describe man's lack of righteousness by nature; chapters 4-8, God's gracious gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ. Chapters 9-11 are a vindication of God's righteousness concerning His judgment on Israel. Chapters 12-16 call for a practical response of righteousness from believers.

1 Corinthians: The tone of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians is confrontational. This church faced a serious crisis. They were divided over preachers, distracted by human wisdom, disinterested in church discipline, disoriented about marriage, disturbed by the abuse of spiritual gifts, and deceived by false teachers concerning the doctrine of the resurrection.

Paul's letter is a call to repentance.

2 Corinthians: Written approximately one year after 1 Corinthians, this letter is one of the most personal of all Paul's epistles. The tone is pastoral. The theme is "encouragement" or "comfort." After he had sent the first letter, Paul waited anxiously for a report concerning their spiritual condition. When Titus finally brought tidings of their repentance and efforts toward reformation, Paul penned this letter of rejoicing. The major portion of the book is an autobiographical account of Paul's struggles in ministry. Second Corinthians is especially suited, therefore, to the encouragement of those who minister to others.

Galatians: After Paul had established churches in the region of Galatia (Acts 13-14), Judaizing teachers infiltrated the churches asserting that circumcision according Moses' law was necessary to salvation. Paul countered with this, his most polemical, letter. It corresponds with the circumstances narrated in Acts 15. Galatians teaches that salvation cannot be by both grace and works. If sinners are not saved by grace alone, he urges, then Christ died in vain.

Ephesians: Ephesians, one of Paul's prison epistles, is the most majestic of Paul's letters. In no other letter does his inspired mind soar to greater heights. It defines God's eternal purpose ("the mystery") in terms of His plan to restore harmony in Christ to a world torn apart by sin. The

key verse is 1:10. The logical development of his argument is similar to the Roman letter,. Chapters 1-3, the doctrinal section, emphasize God's grace and power in Christ. Chapters 4-6, the practical section, is a call to godliness in Christian living in response to God's saving grace.

□ **Philippians:** Like Ephesians, Philippians was written by Paul while he was under house arrest in Rome. It is a "thank you" letter, written in response to a care package sent by the church at the hands of Epaphroditus. Like 2 Corinthians, the tone of this letter is pastoral and intimate. The theme is "joy in the Lord." It teaches that the believer has resources in Christ that enable him to rejoice regardless of his circumstances.

Colossians: The Colossian letter is a Christological gem from the pen of Paul. The theme is "the preeminence of Christ." Written to counter the influx of gnostic teaching, Paul asserts that believers have a sufficient redemption, revelation, and resources for living in Christ.

1 Thessalonians: The church at Thessalonica was an exemplary church. Paul had established the church during a very brief visit, but was soon forced to leave (Acts 17). When Satan hindered his return, Paul sent Timothy to complete the work and return with a report of their faith. So elated was Paul at the good news of their steadfastness that he penned this letter to encourage further growth. In chapter one, he validates the authenticity of their conversion. In chapters two and three, he vindicates the authenticity of his ministry among them. In chapters four and five, he verifies the authenticity of His teaching concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

2 Thessalonians: This letter was written by Paul soon after his first epistle to further instruct the church regarding the Redeemer's return and to correct misconceptions they had drawn from the first letter. The key verse is 2:15 – a verse in which Paul exhorts them to faithfulness and industry in Christ's service.

1 Timothy: A "Pastoral Epistle" to Paul's "son in the faith." Paul wants Timothy to guard the integrity of the gospel. The key word is "godliness". Much practical instruction concerning the nature of pastoral ministry and the function of the local church is here.

2 Timothy: Paul's final letter written shortly before his death. Persecution under Nero's reign was taking a toll on Timothy, tending to his discouragement. Paul writes to charge him to faithfulness in ministry and to encourage him to persevere in the faith.

Titus: When Paul sailed from the island of Crete, he left Titus to shepherd the new converts. Titus subsequently met with considerable opposition to his teaching.

Paul writes to encourage him to teach sound doctrine, to exercise his pastoral authority, and to exhort the people to good works and holiness of behavior. This letter illustrates the dynamic of cultural influence on the church and offers very practical counsel on living Christianly in a pagan environment.

Philemon: Paul's "postcard" to Philemon is a piece of personal correspondence regarding a runaway slave named Onesimus. The servant Onesimus had once defected from his master. In the meantime, he encountered Paul and was converted. Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter of explanation and loving counsel. Paul urges Philemon to receive him as a beloved brother in Christ "for love's sake."

Hebrews: This letter is written in sermon style. It is an epistle of both warning and encouragement. The recipients were Jewish people who had embraced the gospel of Christ but still lived in a culture that was dominated by Judaism; consequently, they were suffering tremendous persecution and recrimination from their families and peers as traitors and turncoats. The pressure was so intense that some of them had concluded that the best course of action was to renounce their new-found faith in Christ. The writer urges them to be faithful and to persevere in two ways: (1) By warning them of the dangers of walking away from the superior light of the gospel for the inferior shadows of the law; (2) By encouraging them to endure like the patriarchs (Heb. 11) and like Christ (Heb. 12:1-3). The book draws heavily on imagery from the Old Testament in order to show that Christ is the fulfillment of the ceremonies and shadows of the law.

James: In the chronological sequence of New Testament books, James was penned first. It was probably written shortly after the events recorded in Acts 8:1ff when the early church was "scattered abroad" from its base in Jerusalem. Interestingly, the nature of this epistle is primarily ethical, not theological.

James is concerned to counsel these early believers to live godly Christian lives. The practical value of this general epistle for saints in all subsequent ages cannot be overstated.

1 Peter: The theme of the general epistle known as 1st Peter is “suffering”. Peter is concerned to encourage his readers to endure intense persecution.

He does so by reminding them of the supreme example of suffering affliction – the Lord Jesus Christ. He urges them to learn to define their sufferings in terms of “trials of faith” and opportunities to glorify the Savior.

2 Peter: The tone of Peter’s second epistle is polemic. He writes to warn the saints about false teachers who promote “cunningly devised fables.” Bible students agree that the primary emphasis of these false teachers took the form of a heresy known as “antinomianism”. They argued that grace was a license to sin; hence, Peter’s exhortation to “give diligence to make your calling and election sure” and to pursue godliness was diametrically contrary to these imposters who “walked after their own lusts” (3:3).

An understanding of the Savior’s promised return should motivate believers to “be diligent to be found of Him in peace, without spot and blameless” (3:14).

1 John: Like Hebrews, 1st John is written in sermon form. If John had practiced the habit of giving titles to his sermons, he might have called this one “Theology Applied to Life.” The two principle texts are 1:5 – “God is Light” – and 4:7 – “God is Love.”

John’s argument is simple:

If God is light and love, and we profess to belong to Him, then we should walk in the light and love one another. This epistle proposes several tests of true discipleship and offers various evidences of sonship.

It is intended to prompt the reader to self-examination to prove whether Christ is in him or not.

Like Colossians, 1 John is also a direct apologetic thrust at the gnostic heresy concerning the Person and Work of Christ.

2 John & 3 John: Like 1st John, these two epistles are warnings against false teachers who peddled a mystical view of Christ. John wants his readers to “walk in the truth” and to avoid the religious phonies who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ.

Jude: Very similar to 2 Peter, Jude writes to expose the ungodliness that results from false teachers. He writes to urge his readers to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” Note the contrast between his description of the false prophets (vs. 4-16), and his exhortation to the believers to persevere in the faith (vs. 17-23). This one chapter epistle concludes with an encouraging benediction (vs. 24-25).

Revelation: Exiled on Patmos Island for preaching the gospel of Christ, John writes to the Christians in Asia Minor who were enduring severe persecution. His aim is to encourage them to faithfulness. How does he do it? By relating the heavenly vision that Christ had given him.

In the book of Revelation, the curtains of heaven are pulled back and the persecuted church of Jesus is permitted to see their risen Lord seated upon His throne, worshipped by the angelic host and disembodied souls of departed saints, and reigning in sovereign majesty.

They are reminded of the fact of His glorious return when every foe will be vanquished and the redeemed multitude will be gathered into the New Jerusalem.

This heavenly perspective is intended to strengthen their faith in the midst of the present conflict.

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