

Bible Study # 29
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The Gospels and Acts Series—Introduction to the Survey of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

This evening we will get into a brand new series. We have been in the Old Testament for quite a while. We have gone through a historical overview of the Old Testament and focused in on the historical flow going through the historical books of the Old Testament. We will, at later times, come back and pick up the books that we did not cover going through this survey of the Old Testament. Last Bible study we came up to the time between the Testaments.

This evening we are going to start in the New Testament, and we **are going to begin a new series—a survey of the Gospels and Acts**. This is a 14-part series that will take us through the four Gospels and Acts. As we go through the four Gospels, we **are going to go through them in a harmonized fashion**. In other words, we are not going to go through the Gospel accounts one at a time, but rather we are going to go through the account and get the story flow.

On the study questions, you will be directed as to what portions or verses in each book we will be going through and where the questions are derived from. As we go through the story, it will give you a kind of a historical flow to focus in on the Gospel accounts. We will follow it up with the book of Acts, which really follows the sequence.

The material that we have gone through prior to now really sets the stage for what we will get into this evening because ultimately the whole Bible focuses on, centers on, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the One who was promised, the Savior of the world, the One who is ultimately to return as Lord of lords and King of kings. The entire Bible focuses in on Him, whether looking forward or looking back in retrospect.

We went through a series of Bible studies on the canonization of the Bible, and one of the things that we noted was the way that the Jews count the books. They count the books as being 22 books in the Old Testament, and when you look at the New Testament, there are 27. It's interesting. If you take the four Gospels and Acts—five books—you have 22 on each side: 22 books of the Old Testament and 22 books of the New Testament that come after the Gospels and Acts. If you were looking at it like a seesaw or something balanced, you have the center, the

heart and core with everything balanced on either side. The center is Jesus Christ: the story of Jesus Christ and His personal ministry, and the extension of that, as He worked through the apostles as reported in the Acts of the apostles.

Let's look into the way in which the world was prepared for the introduction of Jesus Christ, for the coming of the Messiah. God knows where He is going and He knows what He is doing. God made sure that the world was prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ and for the message that He brought.

Let's look at five specific ways in which God ensured the world was prepared, to set the stage, for the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the New Testament Church.

(1) The first way in which God saw that the world was prepared for the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the New Testament Church was what is called the "Diaspora" or the dispersion, the scattering of the Jews over the known world. The scattering over the whole known world was vital to the preparation of the establishment of the New Testament Church. Wherever the Jews went, copies of the Scriptures and knowledge of God's law also went. In the areas they settled, synagogues were established, and after a period of time, even many of the Gentiles were exposed to the teaching of the Bible.

God knows where He is going before He ever gets started. God had a plan and a purpose.

Revelation 13:8, "...the Lamb of God [Jesus Christ] was slain from the foundation of the world." In other words, from the time that God began His plan for man, He had in mind a plan that certainly included the need for a Savior. God foresaw these things. God's whole plan outlined in the Holy Days was thought out. God didn't set about building things by starting out by just kind of stumbling through.

Galatians 4:4, God knew that Jesus Christ was going to come, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." He knew when, just as God knows now.

Acts 1:7, Jesus said, "...It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority." God knows the second coming and the first coming. God set the stage.

One of the things he allowed to happen was the dispersion of the Jews. When the Babylonians (Nebuchadnezzar) took the Jews captive, there began a scattering and a settling of the Jews in various areas. The bulk of the Jews were in Babylon, but afterward, particularly with

Alexander the Great and the time after that, the Jews scattered. Most of the Jews never came back to Judea. Some came back under Zerubbabel, and others came back under Ezra and Nehemiah. There were groups of Jews and colonies of Jews that returned, but most of the Jews never returned to Judea. Just as today, most of the Jews do not live in the land of Israel. The Jews dispersed and settled in groups in various cities.

Over a period of several hundred years, particularly from the time of Alexander the Great on to about a 300-year period, there came to be sizable Jewish communities in virtually all the major cities in the Roman world. Now where there was a Jewish community, there was a synagogue. Where there was a synagogue, there was a copy of the Scriptures—there was a scroll of the Scriptures.

We take for granted the availability of the Bible, but you have to realize in that day the only copies of the Book that existed were handwritten copies. Therefore, you didn't have a lot of copies. There now were, in major cities, copies of the Scriptures; there came to be certain knowledge of this people, of their religion, of their God and things that they did. This scattering served as the basis later on when the New Testament Church was going to be built.

Where did the Apostle Paul go when he went into the cities of the Gentile world? Where did he start out? He always went into the synagogue and preached there first. That way the nucleus of the Church was people that knew the law; they were familiar with the Sabbath and were familiar with the Bible.

The first converts in any of the Gentile areas were Jews and Gentiles who attended synagogue services, so-called proselytes, Gentiles impressed with the Jewish religion. The nucleus was people who knew and understood the law and had access to the Scriptures. Then as others who came from a totally pagan background came to be converted, there were others in the Church who already had a certain understanding of the law. It was the logical way to build something. This scattering of the Jews was something important. This Diaspora was one of the ways in which the world was prepared for the introduction of the Messiah and His message.

(2) The Greek language was virtually a universal language at this time due to Alexander's conquests. Because of the Greek emphasis on education, literacy reached a high point for the ancient world. There were more people who could read and write in the Roman world at this

time than was the case for many centuries thereafter.

When you go through the Middle Ages, it got down to a point where very few people could read. The average person couldn't read or write. In fact, you don't have to go back very long ago in our time that there were many people who could not read or write at all. If they could, it was in a very limited fashion. That was very common. You don't have to go back very far where educational opportunities were not available even in this country. You go back in the 1800s and most people simply could not read or write.

The Greek period of time was really the high point of literacy in the period of ancient history. The Greeks placed a lot of emphasis on education. Obviously, there were a lot of wrong ideas that were a part of Greek education, but they did value education.

The Greek language had spread very widely because of Alexander's conquests. It was a second language in almost any of these countries. What did that mean? What was the value of that? What it meant was that most people at this time could read and write. The Scriptures were more accessible to them. They were able to read Paul's letters and the letters that the other apostles wrote, letters that make up much of our New Testament.

Much of our New Testament was letters that were sent out. What good is a letter if nobody can read it? So, it was necessary for people to be able to read. God ensured that there was this spread of the Greek language. In what language were they going to be written? They were written in the Greek language. They wrote letters to places that weren't in Greece. Paul could write to the Romans in Italy and he could write in Greek. James could write to the 12 tribes scattered abroad and he could write in Greek. You could have letters written to churches in widely scattered areas; they could be written in Greek, and people could understand it. It may not have been their first language, but Greek was a language that most people who had an education could read and write. It provided an almost universal language; you had a degree of literacy that enabled people to utilize the Bible.

(3) A third way in which the world was prepared was the relative peace and stability which the Roman Empire provided along with a system of Roman roads which facilitated travel. This opened a way for the proclamation of the Gospel over a wide area. In most periods of history, you had all these little nations, little kingdoms, and

they were all fighting one another. You couldn't go from one place to another, without somebody knocking you in the head, killing you and stealing what you had. How were you going to get there?

You don't have to go back very far in the history of this country when roads were few and far between. In 1928, when Huey Long came in as governor of Louisiana, there were less than 100 miles of paved roads in the state.

The Romans built thousands of miles of paved roads in the Roman Empire. Not graveled roads, we are talking about paving. The Romans built roads that were so substantial that there are Roman roads that are still in use today. You have places in Spain and in Italy where they are still using roads that the Romans built. The Romans were tremendous engineers. They put curbs and drains on these roads; they got the pitch as to the elevation of the road where the rain would shed. They came in and dug down, cleared it away, tamped the earth, and put in crushed rock. They built right on up to where on top was paving stone—and there were thousands of miles of that. In fact, you could travel in the whole Roman Empire.

The speed with which you could travel from one area to another was not duplicated again until after the middle of the 1800s. Julius Caesar could travel on Roman roads from a city in Switzerland to Rome in four days. They even had way stations along the way. Every 20 miles you could change horses for official Roman business; you could go at full horse speed on a good paved road for carriages and chariots. There were mileage posts all over the Empire. There are a few you can still find. There is an old saying, "all roads lead to Rome." They literally had the best system of roads that existed until you get into the 20th century.

What does that mean? The Romans thought they were doing that to move their armies. But how do you think the apostles were able to travel and go from one end of the Empire to the other—all the way from Britain, through France, Spain, Italy, across through Greece and Asia Minor, and on into the Middle East, down into Egypt and as far as Babylon—over a vast area. Because you had the Roman Empire, you didn't need passports or papers. The Romans ruled with an iron hand. It was safe to travel because the Romans policed it. Roman garrisons were all along the way so you could safely travel all over Europe and the Middle East and as far as India. There was Roman law. Paul was a

Roman citizen; wherever he went, that Roman citizenship was good and it was recognized.

Roman roads made it possible not only to travel, but you had mail service. This facilitated communication as much as what could have been done prior to the invention of modern electronic technology, steam engines and things of that sort. You would have to come all the way to the middle of the 1800s before you could even begin to duplicate it. In terms of the roads, you really didn't have the equivalent until this century.

The Romans were builders. They were engineers. The Roman Empire set the stage. It provided a period of relative peace and stability. It centered at the time of the first century, the time when things were at their height. The first two-thirds of the first century was a time when the Church was growing, when there was a need—and here it was—a situation that wasn't duplicated until our time.

(4) A fourth way in which the world was prepared for the coming of the Messiah and His message was the fact that the bankrupt pagan mythology of the Gentile world had ceased to be strongly believed, particularly by those with any degree of education. The mystery religions of the East were gaining prominence in the areas of Greece and Rome, as well as more traditional areas of Babylon. The point is that many people had ceased to be satisfied with what traditional religions had to offer.

We have all heard of the old pagan mythology. Maybe in school you had to study about Greek or Roman mythology. You've heard about Zeus, Athena, Mars, all the Greek gods or the Roman gods and all the various things. What you come up to is, by this point in history, most educated people had ceased to believe mythology as being real. They still told the old stories and went through a lot of the ceremonies, but it was obvious that this really did not answer the questions that people wondered about. It was bankrupt. Pagan mythology had simply ceased to provide the answers people were looking for.

It was a time of great religious turmoil. Many of the so-called mystery religions of the East had begun to spread. People were searching. They had ceased to be satisfied with what traditional religion offered. So, it set the stage. At a time when people were questioning, there was certain curiosity.

(5) Because of at least a limited understanding of Daniel's 70-week prophecy given in Daniel 9:24, many of the Jewish religious leaders were expecting the Messiah in that generation. Many Jews were restive because of their subservient

status to the Romans and eagerly anticipated the coming of the Messiah who would free them from the yoke of foreign domination. This was what the Jews were looking at. They looked at all of the prophecies in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Zechariah, and they said, 'When the Messiah comes, He is going to run out the Romans.' They liked that idea.

The Romans may have built roads and policed the areas, but they were foreigners, and in many ways, harsh taskmasters. They allowed a certain level of freedom on the local scene, but they didn't allow independence. That was very important to the Jews. They were expecting the Messiah, but they were expecting Him to come and take action when He came—as far as overthrowing the Romans. The Jews were expecting something in that generation.

Daniel had made a prophecy of 70 weeks to be determined. He talked about 62 weeks plus seven weeks from the time that the decree to rebuild Jerusalem went forth. From this decree issued by Artaxerxes in 457 B.C., there would be 69 weeks until the Messiah, the Prince, would come. Sixty-nine weeks equal 483 days or 483 years (a day for a year). If you move forward from 457 B.C. 483 years, you come to 27 A.D.

The Jews did not fully understand what all that portended, but it was obvious that something was going to happen right around that time. Jesus began His public ministry in 27 A.D. That's when He made His public appearance as the Messiah. We would date the prophecy to begin at the time that Jesus made His appearance and was baptized by John the Baptist. Then the final 70th week was His ministry. He was cut off in the midst of the week, three and one-half days or three and one-half years. He was literally cut off in the midst of the week because He was crucified on a Wednesday. He was cut off in the middle of a prophetic week in that His ministry, instead of lasting seven years, it only lasted three and one-half years. This means that there are three and one-half years left which will undoubtedly be the first three and one-half years of the Millennium when He will conclude His ministry to Israel and will set the stage to expand out into the world.

The Jews had a certain limited understanding of that. That's why Herod quizzed the wise men (Matthew 2). The Magi came, and Herod wanted to know where the Messiah was going to be born, the One who was going to be King of the Jews. Herod, of course, thought that *he* was king. It kind of disconcerted him when he found out someone else was going to be king. Here are

these guys that had come all the way from the East, probably from the Parthian Empire. They had made this journey, coming here looking for somebody, and they weren't looking for Herod. That made him a little nervous. He called the Jewish religious leaders and wanted to know some answers; they were able to tell him that there was a certain expectation that they had around that time. God had set the stage for the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the New Testament Church.

We look at the Gospels and there are four of them. Have you ever asked yourself why? Why four? You have Matthew. Why do you need Mark, Luke and John? Why are there four Gospels? Are they identical? Do they all say the same thing? If they don't, why don't they? Why do some have certain information and others have other information?

The four Gospels are the account of Jesus Christ's life and His ministry. We have four distinct accounts. There is a purpose and logic as to why it was handled the way in which it was. The Gospel accounts take their name from their authors. Matthew wrote Matthew, etc.—that's pretty obvious. Now who were these four individuals? Mark and Luke weren't apostles. Matthew and John were of the twelve. Where did they come in? Why were they the ones?

Matthew was one of the original 12 apostles. He was also called Levi; he was probably of the tribe of Levi. He was an educated Jew from Palestine, a Roman tax collector, obviously an educated man. This was a position that demanded a certain amount of education. Because of his occupation, he would have been very unpopular with people. Tax collectors aren't really popular today; they were less popular then. Back then they didn't get a salary; it was a commission job. You got a percentage of the take, which gave you a lot of incentive to be kind of strong on tax collecting. The Romans didn't care as long as they got theirs. Matthew left this job and accepted the opportunity to be one of the 12 apostles.

His Gospel was the earliest written, about 45-50 A.D. It was evidently the only one of the Gospels to have been written originally in a language other than Greek. *Matthew was probably originally written in Hebrew with a Greek translation. It was written primarily for use in Palestine among the Jews there in Judea.* The copies that have come down to today were written in Greek—undoubtedly, translated into Greek by Matthew himself. It was written in Hebrew for a Hebrew audience. It was written

for the Jewish audience there in Judea, with a translation made so it could be utilized outside the area of Judea.

Matthew, in many ways, is the Jewish Gospel. It deals with the King and the Kingdom. The term “Kingdom of heaven” is used in the book of Matthew 33 times. Have you ever wondered why Matthew talks about the Kingdom of heaven, and Mark, Luke and John talk about the Kingdom of God? There is a reason.

The Jews had developed such a consciousness of keeping God’s law during this time between the Testaments, particularly after the Maccabees revolt and the time the Pharisees came to the fore. The idea was to put a hedge about the law to make sure nobody even got close to breaking the law. They developed an almost superstitious type of awe and respect for God’s name; they wanted to make sure they didn’t use the name of God in vain. So, the way to not use God’s name in vain was to not use God’s name. They got to where they would not pronounce the name of God.

Anywhere you see in the King James Version of the Bible the name “LORD” in all capitals or “GOD” in all capitals, it is translated from the original Hebrew “YHVH.” Hebrew is basically written with just the consonants and not the vowels. We are not entirely sure of how to pronounce it. The reason we are not sure how to pronounce it is that the Jews quit pronouncing it. Whenever they would read the Scriptures orally, every time they would come to that name, they would substitute the word “Adoni,” which is the Hebrew word for Lord. They used it as a euphemism for God’s name, just as a title of respect.

Even today, a Jew, instead of saying, “Praise be to God” or something of that nature, he would use the Hebrew phrase “Barach Hasheem,” which simply means “Blessed be the Name.” They wouldn’t pronounce the name; they would say, “Blessed be the Name.” The Jews did not use the term “Kingdom of God”; they used the term “Kingdom of heaven” as a euphemism. It was the Kingdom of God ruled from heaven, so came the common term among the Jews. When the Jews discussed the Kingdom, they always used the term “Kingdom of heaven.” That is why they always used it. When Matthew wrote a Gospel to the Jews, he used the terminology that was common. That was what the Jews in Judea used. That was the term they used and that was why they used it.

So, you find throughout the book of Matthew, written for the Jews in Judea, the use of the term

“Kingdom of heaven” where other Gospels were written to a wider audience. They were written to areas outside of Judea, and they used the term that was the most commonly used term. There is nothing wrong with the term “Kingdom of God.” In fact, Mark, Luke and John all use it. Matthew simply used the term that the Jews were accustomed to using. “Kingdom of heaven” is used 33 times in Matthew out of regard for Jewish sensibilities. The Jews normally referred to the term “Kingdom of heaven” rather than “Kingdom of God.”

Matthew introduces Jesus Christ as the son of David. He quotes His legal genealogy through Joseph. When Matthew gives the genealogy, he gives the legal genealogy and traces it back to David and to Abraham. Matthew traces the genealogy back no further than Abraham because to Abraham were the promises made, and the promise of the scepter confirmed through David. Matthew has no need to trace it back further than that, but he does trace it back that way to accentuate the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David.

Matthew quotes the Old Testament 65 times. There are 65 Old Testament quotations in Matthew—just chock-full—because it was written to people who were very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures.

The terms “righteous” and “righteousness” are used more often in Matthew than in the other three Gospels put together.

Matthew alone tells of the Jews’ request that Christ’s blood be upon their heads. Remember that? Pilate was getting ready to wash his hands and he said, ‘Look, He is innocent; I don’t want this righteous man’s blood be upon me.’ And the mob said, ‘His blood be upon us.’ Matthew records that. He’s the only one that did, but he was writing to them and wanted to make sure that they understood the enormity of what they had said. He mentions that specifically.

Matthew was the only account that tells of the sealing of the stone when Christ was crucified—the sealing of the stone, the setting of the guard and the fabrication of the story that the disciples came and stole the body while the guard slept. Matthew mentioned that because he was writing to an audience that was familiar with the story. That was a story that had been widely circulated.

The Pharisees wanted a sign that He was the Messiah. Jesus told them the only sign He would give them was that He would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. That was a sign; in a unique way, it was a sign to the

Pharisees, the Jewish religious leadership. You know why it was such a special sign to them? Because when Jesus was buried, they went to Pilate and said, 'Look, this deceiver (KJV, "schemer") has said He is going to rise from the dead. You know what's going to happen, Governor? His disciples are going to come and steal the body and carry it away. They are going to tell the story that He rose from the dead, and we are going to have more trouble than we have now. What we want you to do is to set a guard on the tomb and we are going to seal it.'

What is meant that they sealed it? It is like an official document that is sealed. The Post Office puts a seal on registered mail; if you open the letter, it will be apparent because you have broken the seal and it will show. That's what they did at the tomb. They rolled this big flat stone there in the front and placed the Governor's seal there; if anybody came in and moved it, it would be apparent that they moved it. They placed a guard there to make sure nobody did. And you know what happened? He rose anyway. He was gone.

Who knew for a fact that the disciples didn't come and steal Him away? Well, the guard and the Pharisees knew it. The Jewish religious leaders knew it because they told the guard to tell the story that he went to sleep, and the disciples came and stole the body while he was asleep. If the Governor heard the story, the leaders would make sure he didn't get in trouble with him.

They bribed the guard. Now if you bribe somebody to tell a story, who knows if they are telling a story? The guy that paid the bribe and the guy who took the bribe, those are the two that know. The people that hear it may not know, but if I bribe you to do something, there are two of us that know that you aren't telling the truth—you and me.

Christ being in the tomb three days and three nights was, specifically, very uniquely a sign to the Jewish religious leadership because they knew the truth. They had the evidence and they had fabricated this story. Matthew told that. His is the only one of the Gospel accounts that mentions it because he is writing to the audience of people who had firsthand knowledge and memory. Matthew was writing within 15 years after Christ's crucifixion and ascension.

Remember 1974? You remember events that happened then? Sure you do. That's not that long ago. It would be very difficult to falsify something like that because you have too many people who are alive who have firsthand knowledge and memory. He gives some of these

specific details that have specific relevance to his audience.

He is the only one who mentioned the fact that when Christ rose from the dead, many of the saints who had died and were buried also rose. There were a number of people who had died prior to Christ's death who were resurrected. Some had been dead for hundreds of years and some who recently had died. If you attended a guy's funeral last month, you saw him dead in the coffin. All of a sudden, the guy comes walking up. When they pick you up off the floor and kind of revive you, you realize something unusual has happened. This was not the normal course of events. These were the saints. It was a witness to the resurrection.

It had happened 15 years earlier; the story on that was still circulating around. People had heard about some of these things. Matthew gives the details. These were incidents that would have had particular interest and benefit to Jewish readers there in Judea. Matthew gives those things.

Matthew chapters 1—4 are basically chronological chapters.

Matthew chapters 5—13 are topical. In other words, Matthew deals with what Christ said on a subject. He may introduce what Christ said. He is going alone telling the story. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, he gives what Christ said, not only at that moment, but the other things Christ said on that subject are put in at that time. These are topical. They may have a general chronological flow, but they are topical. When he dealt with a subject, he told you what Christ said on that subject, even though He may have said part of it in the story flow and part of it six months later, etc. Matthew kind of gives you what He said on a subject.

Matthew 5, 6 and 7 give greater details. This had particular significance for a Jewish audience because this was Jesus Christ in the role of Lawgiver. Remember the scripture we focused on back in the early part of the Bible study?

Deuteronomy 18:15, the canonization was when Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, ..." —One who will give law.

Deuteronomy 34:10, then at the end of Deuteronomy we are told, "But since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, ..." We are told that no prophet like Moses has arisen. The Old Testament concluded as Ezra and the scribes working with him provided and gave the final copies of the Old Testament and

put it in final form. They could state that “the Prophet like Moses had not yet arisen.”

Matthew points out who that prophet like Moses was. Jesus Christ came as a lawgiver, and in the Sermon on the Mount, He is giving law. Over and over again He said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not do this, etc...but I say to you.” He modified. He changed. He gave law. Matthew gives greater details and focuses on the Olivette Prophecy which had specific relevance.

Matthew chapters 14—28 are again chronological. Matthew gives the most detailed account of Christ’s teaching on the Mount and of the Olivette Prophecy in Matthew 24.

Mark’s Gospel, primarily, represents Peter’s account. Mark was Peter’s companion, disciple and his assistant. All ancient tradition treats the Gospel of Mark as Peter’s account. John Mark, who was the author of Mark, was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). He was from Jerusalem. His mother Mary lived in Jerusalem, and her house was used as a meeting place for the Church (Acts 12:12). Tradition states that the upper guest room, at which Christ and the 12 apostles held the Passover, was located in that house, in John Mark’s mother’s house.

He was a teenage boy at the time. This certainly fits with the evidence that Mark, himself, was the young teenager who fled naked from the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:51-52). It mentions the account of the young boy who was there in the house. He heard Christ and the disciples leave after the Passover service, and he wanted to go out and see what was going on. He just wrapped a sheet around himself and sneaked out of the house to follow them. He got out there trying to see where the action was and he saw the action, all right! Here came the Romans, and he saw all that happen. All of a sudden, one of the soldiers looked over there in the bushes and saw this person crouching down. They grabbed for him. When they grabbed the sheet, he turned loose of it and took off running, which was a smart thing to do, but rather embarrassing. When he told the story in the book of Mark, he told the story, but he left out his name. That’s a firsthand account that basically only the author would know.

He had certain firsthand impressions, but they were the impressions of a young boy, of a teenager. It’s interesting that in *Mark’s account*, the stress is continually on what Christ did, more than on what He said. The miracles are stressed quite a bit in the book of Mark. These were things that certainly would have impressed a young person the most.

Mark was Peter’s traveling companion. Peter, in the latter period of his ministry, had his headquarters in Babylon, which was the capital of the Parthian Empire. It had a large Jewish community; a considerable portion of the remnants of the 12 tribes was in the area of the Parthian Empire—those that had not already migrated to Britain. Peter was in Jerusalem for perhaps the first 10 or 12 years of the New Testament period. But even prior to that time, he had begun to leave.

By the time you pick up the ministerial conference (Acts 15) in Jerusalem in 49 A.D., James was the chief apostle in Jerusalem. Peter came in and out, but he was not based in Jerusalem. By the early to mid-40s A.D., Peter had left Jerusalem and only returned periodically. He was primarily based in Babylon. This is where his epistles were written from.

1 Peter 5:13, he says, “She [the Church] who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son.” Babylon was the capital of the Parthian Empire. It had a very large Jewish community, and it was an area where there were many of the ten tribes that had not yet migrated from the Parthian Empire into Europe. Mark was there with Peter.

Mark’s Gospel was written at Peter’s direction. It was primarily written and circulated in the areas of Peter’s ministry. It was probably written about 60 A.D. The scope of Mark’s Gospel corresponds to that of Peter’s address at Caesarea, as recorded in Acts 10:34-43. The narrative abounds with details of time, place, circumstances and the feeling and manner of Jesus and the others mentioned. Greek scholars state that the language of Mark is “clean, vigorous, direct speech of the sturdy middle-class.” The style is very simple. The stately periods of the classics are wholly absent. The narrative is commonly terse and concise. The descriptions are wonderfully vivid.

Mark throughout portrays Jesus as the servant of the Lord. Much is said about the Servant (Isaiah 53). Go back and look at those prophecies. Mark is a Gospel of deeds. The word “*euthus*,” which is rendered “straightway” or “immediate,” is used 41 times in Mark—five times as many as are used by the other three writers put together. Mark’s entire Gospel is in chronological order and stresses action and deeds. It is the account that records the vivid impressions on a teenage boy with the details and general outline supplied by Peter. It was written primarily to circulate in the areas where Peter was preaching—the Israelite areas, the areas where there was a

Jewish community outside of Judea and the area where the 12 tribes were.

Luke, on the other hand, was Paul's traveling companion. Just as Mark was written at Peter's direction and utilized in the Churches where Peter was primarily ministering, Luke was Paul's traveling companion and represents Paul's account. It was written for circulation in the Greek speaking Gentile world to which Paul was commissioned to preach.

Luke was a highly educated Greek, probably from Antioch. He was a physician. *His account is written in the classical, historical style of the day. He refers to many historical illusions.* Luke is the one that tells you that Christ was born when Tiberius Caesar Augustus was emperor, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He records those historical details written from the standpoint of a Greek historian. He is the one who gives the chronological details. Theophilus (Luke 1:3), who was a wealthy nobleman, must have played the part of patron and paid the cost of production of the Gospel because it is dedicated to him, as was standard practice in the classical Greek world. It was intended for the public, especially the Greek public. From the beginning it was written in that vein.

Luke stresses the humanity of Christ. He traces the genealogy all the way back from Mary to Adam. Matthew traces it back to Abraham and stops because as far as the Jews were concerned, that was as far as you needed to go. Luke traces it back to Adam, stressing that Jesus was the Son of man and the Promised Seed—the Seed that was promised to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15). Luke traces it back that way, going back to the common ancestry that everyone has. Luke emphasized that Christ was the Son of man as well as the Son of David.

Luke 2:10, he's the one who speaks of "...good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." Luke is the only one who mentions that. It is only in later retrospect of Paul's ministry that the full implications of that statement came to be understood. The good tidings, good news, were for all people, everybody regardless of ethnic origin.

Isaiah 52:10, Luke is the only one that quotes "...all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6). Luke emphasizes some of those things. In Luke, Christ is pictured as the Redeemer.

Luke was probably written during the time that Paul was in prison in Caesarea, which would put it about 58 A.D. It was written to circulate in those areas.

All of these three accounts, Matthew, Mark and Luke, were written within the first 30 years of the New Testament period. There was nothing written immediately because the 12 apostles were expecting the end at any moment. That was kind of the thinking—"any day now, any day."

Acts 1:6, when Christ got ready to ascend from the Mount of Olives, the disciples questioned, "...Lord will You at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?" "Right now?" Undoubtedly, Peter was the one that asked the questions; he was never afraid to speak up.

They were expecting it at any moment, so there obviously wasn't any need to write a bunch of things down because they expected it was going to happen in just a few days or a few months. Some of the earliest converts liquidated property and pooled all their money together. Nobody wanted to leave Jerusalem and go back home because they just knew it was all going to come together quickly. But 12 to 15 years later, it was apparent that things were going to go on a little longer than what was anticipated. By this time you begin to have adults coming on the scene who really didn't have firsthand memory of those events, even in Judea. It began to be necessary, so Matthew wrote the first account.

At the time he wrote, the whole Church was primarily centered there in Judea. It had not really begun to spread outside Judea. The Church's decision on circumcision was not made until several years later, so the real mushrooming growth of the Church outside of Judea had not really occurred to speak of. Matthew's account was needed in Judea because the account was written from a Jewish viewpoint by a Jew living in Judea.

But as the Church grew and growth mushroomed, Peter was in Babylon ministering over a wide area with the 12 apostles under his direction. Paul was traveling throughout the Gentile areas. As things progressed, perhaps 12 to 15 years after Matthew had written his Gospel, there became greater need. Paul and Peter each had one produced under their direction that stressed details that were important to be understood by the people to whom they were ministering. They wrote Gospels that stressed things that they felt needed to be stressed in their areas. Then by the time we come to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., three of the Gospels existed—Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The Gospel of **John** was the last written. It was written almost 30 years after all of the apostles were dead. John wrote in the late 90s

A.D. John's perspective was quite different. At the time Peter, Paul, Matthew and the others were doing what they were doing, Jerusalem hadn't been destroyed. The Church was centered in Judea and the Jewish element clearly predominated. The questions involved questions of the law.

By the time John wrote in the late 90s, the Jerusalem Church had fled Jerusalem. It was destroyed, and the Jews were scattered. All of the original apostles were dead. There were heresies coming into the Gentile world. John had totally different things to address. Questions had arisen that simply never had even been an issue 40 to 55 years before when the others were writing. John was written much later.

John closed the canonization of the New Testament by adding his own five books to the 22 that had previously been canonized by Peter. We noticed that when we went through how the New Testament came together in the Proof of the Bible series. John wrote one more Gospel account in order to meet certain needs of the time. There were certain problems that were engendered by Simon Magus and the Gnostic heresies that were sweeping the Church at that time. John's epistles and his Gospel were written to meet this necessity. *John emphasizes the divine nature of Jesus Christ. He emphasizes the teaching of Christ, particularly in regard to the Holy Days.*

It's interesting. John doesn't start out by giving you the genealogy from Abraham or from Adam.

John 1:1-3, John starts out, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." John starts out by going back to the very beginning showing that the One that we know as Jesus Christ was from the beginning—He was God. Because there were problems around that time and that was not something clearly understood, many of the heretics were teaching all kinds of crazy ideas. John dealt with some of those things.

If you go through the book of John, nearly the whole book of John centers around what Jesus said and did in seven Festival seasons. We could go through a sermon sometime just showing you how we can find several Passovers, Feast of Trumpets, Feast of Tabernacles, the Last Great Day, Pentecost, as well as some Unleavened Bread seasons.

John does not give the same information the others gave. There was no need to go back through and retell it. He skips the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivette Prophecy; there was no need to give that information. Matthew had given it in detail. Mark and Luke had added the details of any clarification that was needed in addition to Matthew. John didn't need to give that. He focused in on what Christ said, did and taught in the context of the Holy Days and the Festivals.

John uses the expression over and over again, the "Feast of the Jews." He emphasizes the fact that Jesus observed the same days the Jews observed because by this time, the Holy Days were coming to be questioned. In some of the Gentile areas, they were trying to downplay the necessity of keeping the Festivals. John emphasized over and over that Jesus kept them. John is the only one who gives a detailed account of the teaching of Christ to the apostles on the night of the final Passover. The others describe in detail the physical actions that took place. John describes what Jesus said. He doesn't go into detail about the bread and the wine—Matthew, Mark and Luke had already given that—but John gives you in detail what Jesus said.

John wrote from Ephesus in the 90s A.D. He was writing to the whole Church. He emphasized deep spiritual things. John was an elderly man, probably around 90 years of age when he wrote this—comparable age to Mr. Herbert Armstrong in the last years of his life. Mr. Armstrong also wrote with an emphasis on very deep spiritual things.

I mentioned the Holy Days. Just to give you an idea: John 2—3 relate to the Passover; John 4 to Pentecost; John 5 to the Fall Festivals, particularly Trumpets; John 6 to Passover and Unleavened Bread; John 7:1-36 relates to the Feast of Tabernacles; John 7:37 through chapter 10 relates to Christ's teaching on the Last Great Day; and John 11—19 focus on Christ's final Passover. As you go through, you have this outline.

John emphasizes the things that Christ taught. He gives us the message that Christ gave on the various Festival seasons so that we might have a deeper understanding of the New Testament implications of these days. John recorded Christ's teaching on these occasions. It was something skipped over by the others, but it was an issue by the time that John wrote.

We have what each one adds in. God used different men writing from different backgrounds, different perspectives, writing to

different audiences at different times over the period of about a generation to record the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Each one adds in details. Because of circumstances, they emphasized certain details in different ways so we are able to have an overview and a balanced picture. No one Gospel, while it contains a tremendous amount of useful and necessary information, gives as balanced a picture as all four taken together. I hope that we can gain a little bit of insight as to why there are these four.

We are going to begin going through the Gospel accounts. Matthew will be the one that we will perhaps refer to quite a bit for the story flow and some of the details he adds in. But we are going to go through everything in all of them. We are going to go through *in survey fashion*. You will notice on the study questions that I give you the verses from each book, so you won't need a harmony of the Gospels, per se. If you have one, fine. This will take you through step by step and will point out the scriptures that overlap. We will start going through that next time.

To give you an idea of what we will cover, we will cover the beginning portion, the equivalent of the first four chapters of Matthew. In other words, we will cover from His birth up to prior to the Sermon on the Mount. Then following that, we will cover the time period from the time of the Sermon on the Mount through Passover 29 A.D., covering about a year of Christ's ministry. Christ's ministry stretched from the fall of 27 A.D. to the spring—Passover 31 A.D.

Next Bible study will basically cover from Christ's birth up through the first six months of His ministry, which would bring us to Passover of 28 A.D. Then in the second series we will cover the next year, from Passover 28 A.D. to Passover 29 A.D., which will be basically the equivalent of Matthew 4—9. As you begin to get into the latter part of Christ's life, we begin to get more and more details, so we will begin to go a little more slowly. I think it will be helpful to go through and get a little bit of an overview, step by step, of the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ stretching on into the ministry of the New Testament Church.

[Editorial Comment: Both the *New King James Bible* (NKJV) and *A Harmony of the Gospels in Modern English* (MEV, 2nd Edition) are used in the Gospels Series unless otherwise indicated.]