

Episode 5: What If God Was One of Us?

The Gospels + Acts:

The author and theologian Mark Allen Powell describes the four gospels as though they are series of paintings by four different people. Each image might show a specific quality, and some might capture the realism of the person Jesus.

Others might depict the compassionate image of Jesus cradling a lamb or the disgruntled image of Jesus yelling at the Pharisees. Each image lends itself to the interpretation and question, "Which Jesus do I want to present? What element of the person do I want to emphasize?"¹ As we work to discover these sacred texts, it might benefit all to remember that imagery for the painting of Jesus and the ways in which an artist paints a portrait.



At their fundamental core, the Gospels tell the story of Jesus, his disciples, and the ministry which Jesus began here on earth. They emphasize their points by utilizing genealogies, hymns, parables, miracles, and speeches as a means of communicating the evangelistic message of Christ to the world. The word "Gospel" comes from the Greek word "*euangelion*," which means "good news." It refers to the proclamation that Jesus has brought Good News to our world through his life, death, and resurrection as a fulfillment of the promise of God that a Messianic King would be born from the line of David. It is an invitation for us as readers to hear, receive, and proclaim the Good News in our own lives and stories.

There are various theories about the origin and source of each gospel. Some gospels hold similar content, stemming from a central source, while some of the content is unique to each author. For instance, Matthew's gospel holds similar content as Mark's, but John's Gospel has elements unique to John. What remains consistent is the teaching of Jesus as the central fulfillment of God's promise to the world.

¹ *Introducing the New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, by Mark Allan Powell, Christian Literature Crusade, 2014, pp. 81–82.

Matthew:

The first sequential gospel of the four, Matthew, approaches the life and ministry of Jesus through a distinctly Jewish lens. Matthew makes direct connections between the Old Testament Messianic promise (promise of a Messiah) and the life and ministry of Jesus as a fulfillment of that promise. The opening verses of

Matthew make the direct connection outlining the promise of Abraham, the line of David, culminating in the birth of Jesus. Its content and focus help bridge the gap between our Old Testament stories and the promised birth of a Savior.

Mark:

Box 7.4

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Material Unique to Mark's Gospel

- parable of seed growing secretly (4:26–29)
- healing of man who is deaf and mute (7:31–37)
- healing of blind man of Bethsaida (8:22–26)
- sayings on salt (9:49, 50b)
- flight of young man in the garden (14:51–52)

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Mark is the briefest of all four of the gospels, yet within its narrative are pieces that are found in all four of the gospels. Mark's writing continually paints Jesus in motion, always moving from one thing to the next toward the end, which is death and resurrection. One unique feature of Mark's message is the sense of urgency by which Jesus' ministry takes place. Utilizing the term "immediately" thirty-nine times, stressing the importance of the work and the shortness of Jesus' time on earth. While Matthew stresses Jesus as the King, Mark illustrates Jesus as the suffering servant. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:45. It is important to note that the original ending of Mark is left unresolved with the woman leaving the tomb and fleeing in fear.

Box 6.1

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Material Unique to Matthew's Gospel

This corresponds to what scholars sometimes refer to as the "M" material (see box 5.10).

Genealogy of Jesus (from Abraham)	1:2–17	Recovering the sinful member	18:15–20
Birth of Jesus (with focus on Joseph)	1:18–25	Peter asks about forgiveness	18:21–22
Visit of the magi	2:1–12	Parable of unforgiving servant	18:23–35
Flight to Egypt	2:13–21	Parable of laborers in vineyard	20:1–16
On fulfilling the law	5:17–20	Parable of two sons	21:28–32
The antitheses	5:21–24, 27–28, 33–38, 43	Prohibition of titles	23:7–12
On practicing piety	6:1–15, 16–18	Denunciations of Pharisees	23:15–22
Pearls before swine	7:6	Parable of bridesmaids	25:1–13
Mission limited to Israel	10:5–6	Description of last judgment	25:31–46
Invitation to rest	11:28–30	Death of Judas	27:3–10
Parables: weeds, treasure, pearl, net	13:24–30, 36–52	Pilate washes his hands	27:24–25
Peter tries to walk on water	14:28–31	Resuscitation of saints	27:52–53
Blessing of Peter	16:17–19	Guard at the tomb	27:62–66; 28:11–15
Peter pays the temple tax	17:24–27	The Great Commission	28:16–20

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Luke:

The longest book of the gospels, Luke paints a rather artistic portrait of the life and ministry of Jesus. The Gospel writer Luke was most likely a physician but also a historian. Much of the content within Luke stem from the source writing of Mark, but Luke pays careful attention to physical details of Jesus, those whom he had healed, and the outcomes of healings within the larger context of Jesus' ministry. Where Mark speaks of urgency, Luke focuses on the meals and companionship of Jesus, all things that would take time to be fully present with those whom he related. Luke uses the term Son of Man more than any other Gospel writer to emphasize the humanity of Jesus in connection to divinity. The emphasis on outreach to the disadvantaged, the outcast, and the outsiders are amplified by Luke's use of story to speak to the life transformation that happens to those who hear a message of salvation and respond. Luke invites readers to see the humanity of Jesus through beautiful imagery and the interconnectedness of Jesus to those whom he ministers. It is important to note that the author of Luke is also the same author who wrote the book of Acts, which we will discuss later.

Box 8.1

Material Unique to Luke's Gospel

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This corresponds to what scholars sometimes refer to as the "L" material (see box 5.10).

Dedication to Theophilus	1:1–4	Parable of severe and light beatings	12:47–48
Promised birth of John	1:5–25	Parable of barren tree	13:1–9
Announcement of Jesus's birth to Mary	1:26–38	Healing of crippled woman	13:10–17
Mary's visit to Elizabeth	1:39–56	Healing of man with dropsy	14:1–6
Birth of John the Baptist	1:57–80	Two parables for guests and hosts	14:7–14
Birth of Jesus (with shepherds, manger)	2:1–20	Counting the cost (two parables)	14:28–33
Presentation of infant Jesus in temple	2:21–38	Parable of lost coin	15:8–10
Childhood visit to Jerusalem	2:41–52	Parable of prodigal son	15:11–32
John's reply to questions	3:10–14	Parable of shrewd manager	16:1–12
Genealogy of Jesus (to Adam)	3:23–38	Parable of rich man and Lazarus	16:19–31
Good news to the poor	4:14–23, 25–30	Cleansing of ten lepers	17:11–19
Miraculous catch of fish	5:1–11	Parable of widow and judge	18:1–8
Raising of widow's son at Nain	7:11–17	Parable of Pharisee and tax collector	18:9–14
Encounter with homeless woman	7:36–50	Story of Zacchaeus	19:1–10
Parable of two debtors	7:40–43	Jesus weeps over Jerusalem	19:41–44
Ministering women	8:1–3	Reason for Peter's denial	22:31–32
Rejection by Samaritan village	9:51–56	Two swords	22:35–38
Return of the seventy missionaries	10:17–20	Jesus before Herod	23:6–12
Parable of good Samaritan	10:29–37	Pilate declares Jesus innocent	23:13–16
Mary and Martha	10:38–42	Sayings associated with Jesus's death	23:28–31, 34, 43, 46
Parable of friend at midnight	11:5–8	Jesus appears on road to Emmaus	24:13–35
Parable of rich fool	12:13–21	Jesus appears to disciples	24:36–49
		Jesus's ascension	24:50–53

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John:

Box 9.5

Some Stories about Jesus Unique to John's Gospel

- calling of Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael (1:35–51)
- changing of water into wine at Cana (2:1–12)
- conversation with Nicodemus (3:1–21)
- encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well (4:1–42)
- healing of a crippled man at Pool of Bethzatha (5:1–18)
- rescue of an adulterous woman from stoning (7:53–8:11)
- healing of a man born blind (9:1–41)
- raising of Lazarus (11:1–44)
- washing of disciples' feet (13:1–20)
- prayer for believers to be united (17:1–26)
- resurrection appearance to Thomas (20:24–29)

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wondered about the faith which was being professed. "But these (words) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have eternal life." John 20:31. John invites hearers to a message of salvation and belief that we may be people of light rather than of darkness.

The Gospel of John differs from the other gospels in that the emphasis is on the identity of Jesus. Beginning with an immediate connection to God who spoke creation into existence, John connects Jesus to those spoken words and to the God of the Old Testament. John's focus isn't to present a chronological narrative but rather to connect and correct a narrative that disconnected Jesus from God. The emphasis on Jesus as the "Son of God,"

fully God and fully man, would have been a word of promise to those who doubted or

Acts:

Why include Acts in the section on the gospels? The book of Acts was written to provide a history of the early church and how it lived out its life and ministry together. The book of Acts witnesses to the work of the Holy Spirit, who empowers, guides, and teaches the disciples along the journey and as they live out their mission to bear witness to Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, and the ends of the world. (Acts 1:8) As a result of receiving the Holy Spirit, think Pentecost, the disciples can speak in other languages and thus the spread of the early church. Instead of a unified language (Tower of Babel), the Holy Spirit creates a standard message spoken in various languages.

People will spend the rest of Acts working to maintain what it means to have a common belief and finding methods of maintaining that belief instead of losing it to interpretation and cultural structures. Chapter 2 of Acts, we see an ideal image of community where everyone has enough care and concern for neighbor remains central to community formation, and then the rest of the book lays out the unsustainable nature of this ideal community and the conflict which arises.

The book continues through the miracles and preaching of the disciples, the spread of the faith to outsiders, and the continued wrestling of communities of faith as they live out the faith to which they have been called.

Binge the Bible Weekly Reading Plan:

Monday: Read the opening passages of each gospel. What stands out to you about the introduction of each book? What wonderings do you have?

Tuesday: Feeding of the Five Thousand: Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6: 30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14. Who is Jesus in each of these texts? What is his temperament? What is the purpose of feeding the people?

Wednesday: Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem: Matthew 21:9-11, Mark 11:8-11, Luke 19:36-38, John 12:12-13. What do you find in common between these stories? What is different? What might the author want us to think about in this passage?

Thursday:

Jesus is Buried in the Tomb: Matthew 27:59-61, Mark 15:46-47, Luke 23:53, John 19:29-42

They went to the Tomb: Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:1, John 20:1

What do you see in common between these stories? What is different? What message do you hear about Jesus or Jesus' ministry in these texts?

Friday: Acts 2.

What do you hear about the life of the early church? What challenges are already a part of the story? What do you think the call is for the disciples and early believers?

Saturday: Acts 9:1-19.

Saul's conversion invites us to wonder aloud how God works in the lives of God's people. What word of hope do you hear in these verses? How is Saul identified throughout the text? What significance would Saul's title have for the inclusion in the community?