

Gospels: Introduction

Subject: Introduction to the four Biblical accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus known as Gospels

Main Idea: False expectations can impede our understanding and response to the Jesus of the Gospels.

Principles:

1. *You will be disappointed if you expect to know and experience Jesus without developing a consistent habit of personal Bible study.*
2. *You will be disappointed if you expect to meet a Jesus in the Gospels who is concerned about your troubles but disinterested in your sin.*
3. *You will be disappointed if you do not expect to continue living in active faith after coming to Jesus by faith.*

Introduction

Have you ever greatly anticipated something and then felt disappointed because the outcome was so different from what you expected? Maybe you have heard the expression “Have no expectations and you will never be disappointed.” Expectations are important and very helpful. At times, they motivate us to persevere through great trials and difficulties. But false expectations almost always get us into trouble.

The Jewish people had anticipated the birth of a Messiah for at least two millennia at the time when Jesus was born. When He came, He was largely unrecognized. Most of His own people found Him a disappointment because of their false expectations.

As we launch into a study of the Gospels, it is important that we consider whether we might hold any false expectations that will impede our understanding and response to Jesus. If we have wrong expectations, we could study the Gospels and yet never experience the Jesus they present. Maybe you believe you have met Jesus and yet you have never had the vibrant relationship others have. Maybe you have had a dynamic relationship with Jesus in the past, but if you are honest, your Christian experience currently isn't what it used to be and you are feeling disappointed. If so, false expectations about Jesus may be the trouble.

The Gospels tell the story of the life and work of Jesus, the Messiah. In order to fully appreciate them and in order to understand Jesus, it's important to have an understanding of the Old Testament. He came to earth in fulfillment of prophecy. So we will begin with a short review of the story of the Old Testament. After that, we will learn a bit about the world into which Jesus was born, before concluding with some basic information about the Gospels.

I. Old Testament Review

A. Four Primeval Events

i. Creation

- a. The Bible begins with the story of God creating everything from nothing. We learn early on that He is very concerned with what is good, and everything He created was good in the beginning, including Adam and Eve, the first man and woman.
- b. God gave Adam and Eve the freedom to enjoy the entire creation, with only one exception, the fruit of one tree. Adam and Eve's greatest blessing was the intimate, unhindered fellowship they enjoyed with God.

ii. Fall

- a. In the third chapter of the Bible, we are surprised to discover that one exists who opposes God. Even more surprising, this enemy appeared to Adam and Eve in the form of a Serpent and tempted them to doubt God's goodness in withholding the one fruit. Devastatingly, they listened to him and ate the forbidden fruit.
 - b. Immediately, Adam and Eve experienced guilt and shame, things God never intended them to suffer. The result of their disobedience was death: immediate spiritual death with regard to their intimate relationship with God, and bondage, for themselves, their descendants, and the rest of the creation, to physical decay (ultimately leading to physical death).
 - c. God cursed the Serpent. In other parts of the Bible, this Serpent is given other names, such as Satan (1 Chronicles 21:1), the Father of Lies (John 8:44), and the devil (Matthew 4:1). On that very occasion, the Lord God foretold that, among the woman's offspring, One would eventually come Who would crush the Serpent. This prophecy in Genesis 3:15 is known today as the "Protevangelion" (first announcement of the Gospel).
- iii. Flood and Babel: As the population expanded, so did the impact of the sin nature that had been birthed, on that fateful occasion, within the hearts of men and women. The Biblical events of the great Flood and the Tower of Babel serve to highlight mankind's rebellion against their Creator and the Lord's ongoing intervention to check evil. In every generation, a precious few continued to put their faith in God's promised Deliverer.

B. Four Main Characters (Israel’s Patriarchs) - Genesis 12-50 (2250/2000 – 1805/1700 B.C.)

- i. Abraham – Genesis 12-15
 - a. Eventually, God chose one man and his family through whom He would communicate with the rest of the world. That man was Abraham and that family is his descendants, the Hebrews (also known as Israelites or Jews).
 - b. Abraham believed and obeyed God. His faith is held up throughout Scripture as a prototype of what God has always required of people in order to be saved from permanent, eternal separation from Him: faith worked out in a life of obedience.
- ii. The Patriarchs: Abraham, his son Isaac, his grandson Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons were Israel’s patriarchs. Jacob was renamed “Israel” and his sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. One of these sons, Joseph, was a “type” of the anticipated Deliverer. His life was characterized by suffering service.
- iii. God’s Unconditional Promises: God promised to bless and multiply the Israelites, to make them a blessing to the rest of the world, and to give them the land of Canaan.

C. The Exodus and Wanderings of Israel – Exodus – Deuteronomy (circa 1446 BC)

1. Moses and the Law: After four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, God delivered the Israelites, through his servant Moses, and led them to the Promised Land of Canaan. En route, the Lord gave them civic, ceremonial, and moral laws by which to be governed and organized. These included the institution of the priesthood and a system of sacrifices by which they could approach their holy God.
2. Israel’s Purpose: The Israelites were special, not because God loved them more than the rest of the world, but because He chose them for the special purpose of blessing the rest of the world. Through Israel, the Lord has given His written word (the Scriptures) and His Living Word (Jesus, the Messiah).
3. A Conditional Covenant: The Lord also entered into a covenant with Israel. Accordingly, the Israelites agreed to keep His Law. If they fully obeyed Him, the Lord promised to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6) and prosper them in the rich land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 28). However, God’s covenant promises also came with a warning: if they disobeyed Him, terrible curses would fall upon them, and ultimately, He would drive them from the land.

D. Settlement in Canaan (1400 - 1050 BC)

- i. A New and Rebellious Generation: Israel settled in Canaan under Joshua's leadership and that generation mostly obeyed God. However, after they died, successive generations strayed from the Lord and His laws, preferring to intermarry people of the pagan nations around them and adopt their idolatrous practices.
- ii. Cycle of Apostasy: Then the Lord gave Israel over into the hands of raiding nations. They cried out to Him and He mercifully raised up leaders among them, "judges" who delivered them from their enemies. This cycle of apostasy, judgment, repentance, and deliverance by judges ensued for the next two to three hundred years. The God-fearing Samuel was Israel's last Judge.

E. United Kingdom (1050 – 930 BC)

- i. Israel's Rebellion: In Samuel's day, Israel declared their determination to be governed by a king, like other nations, rather than by the Lord. Saul, David, and David's son Solomon were Israel's first kings.
- ii. Israel's Golden Age: During the reign of David and Solomon, Israel reached the height of her splendor. The Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are examples of the poetry and wisdom literature that, at least in large measure, came out of this era.
- iii. The Anointed One: The Lord told David that the long-awaited Deliverer would descend through his kingly line. Since Israel's kings were anointed, the long-awaited Deliverer became known through the centuries by the title "Messiah," derived from the Hebrew word *mashiach*, meaning "anointed one." The Messiah would be a king (like His forefather David), but somehow, He would also be a suffering servant (like His forefather Joseph). These facts left the Jews bewildered. Some even speculated that God had two separate individuals in mind.

F. Divided Kingdoms (930 – 722/586 BC)

- i. Northern and Southern Kingdoms: Only Saul, David, and Solomon ruled over all twelve tribes of Israel. Solomon's son Rehoboam made a foolish decision that resulted in his losing the confidence of the ten northern tribes of Israel. The kingdom divided, with "Israel" in the north and "Judah" (named for the dominant regional tribe) in the south.
- ii. Emergence of the Prophetic Office
 - a. The kings of the north were mostly all evil and they led the people into idolatry and other sin. Since Israel's kings no longer pointed their people to the Lord, the Lord began sending prophets to warn Israel of impending judgment and call them back to the Lord.

- b. The Books of Prophecy are at the end of our Old Testament, but historically speaking, most of the men for whom these books are named lived during the days of the divided kingdom.

G. Exile (586 – 538 BC): After much patience and mercy on God’s part, Israel eventually experienced the consequences about which He had forewarned them through Moses. In 722 BC, the Israelites of the northern kingdom were overrun by the Assyrians and sent into exile in lands to the east. Roughly 140 years later, the Babylonians overran Judah, destroying the Temple in Jerusalem. Like their northern relatives, the Judahites (or Jews) were also exiled. But God continued to work with them during their seventy years of exile, speaking to them through prophets such as Ezekiel and Daniel.

H. Post-Exilic Period (538 BC – Time of Christ)

- i. Eventually, Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed any Israelites who wanted to return to their homeland to do so. Those who did longed for the former days of glory. They built another Temple. However, it paled in comparison to Solomon’s temple and the golden days never returned. Following Persian domination, they continued to live under Greek, and then the Roman, control.
- ii. Differing Viewpoints: The Prophets had clearly foretold that glory *would* return to Israel in the person and reign of the Messiah, but the Jews had such divided ideas about their future and the Law of Moses that they could not agree on who He would be, what He would do, or if He was even coming at all. Different parties emerged, representing different viewpoints.

Summary Statement: The New Testament only has complete meaning when we understand the Old Testament because the Bible is one continuous story, from beginning to end.

Application: Few people realize that the Bible tells one unified story because so few actually read their Bibles. They concoct a “Jesus” of the imagination, based on things they have heard from others and personal preferences. But a “Jesus” of our imagination will disappoint. The only sufficient Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible.

Principle: *You will be disappointed if you expect to know and experience Jesus without developing a consistent habit of personal Bible study.*

It may seem easier to let a trustworthy person teach you what they know, but because God’s word is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12), secondhand learning is never an adequate substitute for self-study, prayer, and meditation. Jesus is the living Word (John 1:1) and He speaks to us through His written word. Ignorance will breed disappointment.

Transition: The Lord promised a Messiah and gave His people many pictures of His person and work in the Old Testament. After the last book of the Old Testament, 400 “Silent Years” passed. They were “silent” in the sense that no new revelation from God was given through the prophets. Nevertheless, God was at work through the political, educational, and philosophical changes, secretly preparing the world for the coming of His Messiah.

II. The World Into Which Jesus was Born

A. The World Outside Palestine during the 400 “Silent Years”:

- i. Philosophical Changes: In 370 BC, the philosopher Plato wrote *The Republic*, his most famous work, in which he espoused idealism. Plato taught that ideas, not physical matter, were the ultimate reality. Therefore, since thoughts are the ultimate reality, there must be a standard of truth, an Originator of thoughts, One from Whom we learn it. Since thoughts are communicated through language, this Ultimate Reality or First Cause came to be known by the Greek term “Logos,” meaning “The Word.” This “new concept” helped prepare the world for the coming of Jesus, whom John later declared to *be* “The Word.”
- ii. Universal Language: Then, in 334 BC, Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire. An important part of Alexander’s campaign was to make Greek the common language, and he succeeded. Sometime between the third and first century BC, a group of Jewish scholars living in Alexandria, Egypt translated the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) into a language that was widely known for the first time, Koine (common) Greek. The existence of a universal language also helps to explain how news of Jesus and His work spread so quickly in the first century. God was preparing the world for His Messiah.
- iii. Road Systems
 1. *Roman:* In 312 BC, the Romans built the first paved highway. As the Roman Empire later expanded outside the Middle East, so did the road system that enabled communication to a degree that far exceeded anything that had been available up to that time. These Roman roads were the means by which first century missionaries carried the Gospel from Jerusalem and Judea into Europe, Asia, and Africa.
 2. *Chinese:* Between 206 BC and 220 AD, a golden age occurred in China under the Han Dynasty. In terms of power and prestige, it rivaled the Roman Empire of the west. Under Han leadership, the Chinese developed trade routes, known today as the Silk Road system. Eventually, these roads permitted communication between China, India, Persia, Europe, the horn of Africa, and Arabia. In yet another way, the Lord was preparing the world to hear the news of the person and work of His Messiah.

B. Palestine During the “Silent Years”

i. Hunger for Deliverance

1. In the years between the Testaments, the Jews began to hunger more and more for freedom from the yoke of the nations that controlled them. From approximately 165 to 63 BC, under the leadership of the Maccabees, the Jews finally succeeded in regaining control of parts of the land, and most importantly, the Temple. During these years, Maccabean (or Hasmonian) rulers served not only as regional kings but also as the Jewish high priests, setting a precedent that linked the politics with the priesthood and continued through the time of Christ.
2. The Jews desperation for political freedom invited the appearance of false Christs (the Greek word for “Messiah”) to deliver them from Rome. The historian Josephus gives details about two such individuals: Theudas and Judas the Galilean. These two men are also mentioned in Acts 5:36-37 as having claimed to be (or believed to have been) Messiahs, for a short period of time. In the context of their own perceived need, the Jews found it difficult to remember that Messiah would be a suffering servant. They yearned for a political deliverer who would bring back the golden era they had experienced under David and Solomon.

- ii. Development of Jewish Sects:ⁱ Two distinct currents of religious interest developed among the Jews in the Inter-testamental period. One was attached to the priesthood and perpetuated ritual, performed through the ceremonies of temple worship. In this realm, the high priest dominated, and he gathered about himself the political interests of the nation. The other line of interest arose from the scribes’ work of teaching of the Law that centered in the synagogues (outside Jerusalem). At the beginning of Jewish history, the two lines of interest were indistinguishable, but a cleavage soon appeared, and the further their history proceeded, the wider the breach became. Eventually the priestly group became absorbed in political affairs; the scribal group, impatient of politics, devoted themselves with utter abandon to the individual application of the Law. The scribes were chiefly on the conservative side while priests were mainly liberal. Out of these two divergent currents of Jewish life came the sects of the New Testament known as the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

1. *The Pharisees*

- a. The Pharisees formed the largest and most prominent sect of the Jews. To be a member of this fraternal order, one had to withdraw from all evil associations and give complete obedience to every precept of the oral and written law. In order to remain pure, the Pharisees separated themselves (“Pharisee” means “to separate”) from anything “unclean,” going to the extreme of applying the Old Testament’s special laws of ritual cleanliness for priests to everyone in their daily activities. They also separated themselves from commoners and from politics (except when their religious rights were threatened).
- b. Although the Pharisees were the unrivaled teachers and exemplars of the day, they were also very unpopular because they expected others to live up to their rigid requirements and interpretations of the Law. Fortunately, not all Pharisees were ostentatious extremists. Many diligently and sincerely sought to promote piety and to remain in favor and fellowship with Yahweh.
- c. Among the better-known Pharisees in the New Testament are Nicodemus, who asked Jesus how to be born again and later assisted Joseph of Arimathea in burying the body of Jesus (John 19:38-42), and Saul of Tarsus (Acts 23:6, Philippians 3:6).
- d. Of all the sects of Judaism, only Pharisaism has survived. It became the foundation of the modern orthodox or *Hasidic* (“the righteous”) movement within Judaism. There, too, one finds a pattern of morality, ceremonialism, and legalism.
- e. Two extreme groups developed from Pharisaism: The Essenes and the Zealots.
 - i. *Essenes*: The development on the extreme right of Pharisaism led to the organization of a sect known as the Essenes. The Essenes were so intent upon exact compliance with every requirement of the Law that they separated themselves into isolated communities and devoted themselves to a rigidly ascetic form of life. They established several colonies in the region about the Dead Sea and are best known for the Qumran Community associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. This movement is not mentioned in the New Testament, although there is more information about them through archaeology than about either the Pharisees or the Sadducees.

- ii. *Zealots*: This sect represented the development on the extreme left of the Pharisees. The Zealots emphasis on the importance of ushering in a Messianic political kingdom as the way to allow for freedom to worship Yahweh and observe the Law often led them to resort to extremes of fanaticism. Simon the Zealot was one of Jesus' disciples (Matthew 10:4).

2. *The Sadducees*

- a. Of the Jewish sects, second in prominence to the Pharisees were the Sadducees. No one is certain whether Sadducee-ism had any structure or whether it was merely a term used to identify a certain anti-Pharisaic point of view. The Sadducees were Jerusalem's aristocrats. Social position and politics were of great concern to them. Since the high priesthood had become a political position, the Sadducees were very interested in Temple affairs and the priesthood.
- b. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees accepted only the written word of God as authoritative, not oral traditions or interpretation. Yet sadly, they held a very low view of God and religion, even denying that God was concerned with human events and activities. The group itself disappeared when the Temple was destroyed and the priesthood ceased in AD 70.
- c. Just as two extremes grew out of Pharisaism, two extreme groups also arose from the Sadducees: The Zadokites and the Herodians.
 - i. *Zadokites*: To the far right of the Sadducees were the Zadokites, a group of Jewish priests who sought reform and revival in Temple worship. They were ardent Messianists, looking for the early arrival of a "Teacher of Righteousness" who would call Israel back to his national ideals and usher in the advent of Messiah. When their reform efforts failed, they abandoned the temple and the Holy Land and retired to Damascus and established a community under a set of regulations they termed "A New Covenant." Later, they returned to their homeland as missionaries, where they met with bitter opposition from both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Not surprisingly, adherents of this party were susceptible to the appeal of Christianity, and many were won to the Christian movement.

- ii. *Herodians*: On the extreme left of the Sadducees, a party developed that was almost purely political. Religion to them was a secondary interest. When the ministry of Jesus was accumulating popularity among the masses, the Herodians feared that He might precipitate a nationalistic movement that would thwart their designs for their favorites, and hence, they joined the Pharisees in opposition to him (Matthew 26:16, Mark 3:6, 12:13).
3. *The Sanhedrin*: An important Jewish religious body that Rome also permitted a degree of political power was the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem. It was “generally composed of seventy of the leading priests (who were mostly Sadducees) and the revered rabbinic scribes (who were mostly Pharisees), with the ruling high priest serving as the seventy-first member who would vote to break ties in the court.”ⁱⁱ

Summary Statement: This is the world into which Jesus, the Messiah, was born. For the most part, His fellow Jews had interpreted the Scriptures about Him in accordance with their personal preferences and who they wanted Him to be, rather than perceiving Him and their need through the lens of the Scriptures. They had self-serving biases. Most wanted a Messiah who served their political interests, rather than one who came to suffer and die for their sins.

Principle: *You will be disappointed if you expect to meet a Jesus in the Gospels who is concerned about your troubles but disinterested in your sin.*

Application: After Jesus healed the invalid by the pool of Bethesda, He told the man to “stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). He rescued the woman caught in adultery from her accusers, but then He told her, “Go and sin no more” (John 8:11). You will be disappointed if you hope to find a Jesus in the Gospels who will fix the problems you want fixed and ignore the sin in your life. He came *first* to redeem us from our sins. He will come again as a reigning King. Does this mean the Christian life isn’t victorious? Just the opposite! But the victory He wants for us is first and foremost freedom from bondage to sin. Don’t expect to find a Jesus in the Gospels who will allow you to go on living as you please. If we want to really know the Jesus of the Gospels, we will have to let go of our preconceived ideas and our personal agendas.

Transition: A question that often arises concerns the reliability of the Gospels. Can we trust that they present Jesus as He truly was and is? Before we explore that question, we should consider a little basic information about the Gospels.

III. The Four Gospels

A. Why Matthew? Our *Gospels* study uses Matthew as the primary text. Based upon the number of quotations from the Gospels by the church fathers, they seem to have considered Matthew the most important of the four Gospels, and they placed it first in the canon of the 27 New Testament books. Mark was probably the first gospel written. However, most of its text is contained within Matthew, so we will read from it the least. Luke is famous for his attention to detail as a historian. John is filled with unique insights and unlike any of the other three Gospels. Therefore, we will read from Luke and John to supplement the accounts in Matthew, covering almost all of John. Matthew is partly chronological and partly thematic, and so is our *Gospels* study.

B. Definition, Purpose, and Comparison of Gospels

- i. Definition: The English word “gospel” comes from the old English term *godspell* (good spell), something good spelled out. The Greek word is “Evangelion.” It means “good news.”
- ii. Purpose: In the years immediately following Jesus’ ascension into heaven, enough eyewitnesses to His life and ministry existed that it probably did not seem important to have a written record of what He had said and done. If anything untrue began to circulate, the apostles or other eyewitnesses could have easily refuted it. Over time, however, the church grew well outside Jerusalem, the eyewitnesses aged, and heretical ideas developed. These are surely among the reasons why the gospel writers eventually decided to create reliable records. The four books can be dated within the range of AD 60-85 (with some arguing for a date for John’s gospel as late as AD 100). Thus, they were most likely written within 30-55 years after Jesus returned to heaven. Each was composed by an apostle of Christ (an eyewitness) or a close companion to an apostle (who recorded the witness of that apostle).
- iii. Comparison of Gospel Accounts: Like four eyewitnesses interviewed in a police report, each gospel writer includes different details. In the case of the Gospels, some of the differences can be explained by the fact that each writer was addressing a different audience.
 1. *Writers of the Synoptic Gospels*
 - a. Matthew, the tax collector and apostle of Jesus, was originally called by his Jewish name, Levi (later, he was given his Christian name, Matthew). He was a well-educated man and he recorded his account for a Jewish audience.
 - b. Mark, also known as John Mark, was a disciple and interpreter of the apostle Peter. Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the apostle John) wrote that Mark put down the substance of Peter’s preaching.

- c. Luke was a physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul and is seemingly the only Gentile writer of the New Testament. According to Irenaeus, Luke recorded the gospel that Paul preached. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles and therefore, Luke’s audience was a Gentile, Greek-speaking one.
 - d. J.J. Griesbach first used the term “synoptic” in 1774 when referencing Matthew, Mark, and Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ It simply means that the works are similar and can be compared to one another (literally, “*able to be seen together*”^{iv}). The synoptic Gospels all have the same general order of events.
2. *John*, the beloved apostle of Jesus, lived a long life and published his account much later than the others. The style of his gospel is quite different, containing much more commentary. This can be explained by the fact that he had many years to reflect on the meaning of Christ’s life and teachings.

C. Reliability of the Gospels: When Christians say they believe in the inerrancy of Scripture (that it is without error), what is meant is that the *original documents* were without error. They were divinely inspired. However, the original documents are no longer in existence, and occasionally, scribes who copied from these originals made mistakes. How then do we know whether the manuscripts we have today are reliable?

i. Manuscript Evidence

- 1. The oldest copy known to be in existence today is a tiny fragment of John’s Gospel known as the “Ryland’s Fragment” that dates between AD 125–150. However, it is one of nearly 25,000 manuscripts in existence that contain portions of the New Testament! By comparison, the second most attested document from antiquity is Homer’s *Iliad*, which is found on only 643 manuscripts.
- 2. Because of the abundance of Biblical manuscripts, most of the time, it is easy for those who have written our versions of the Bible to tell when a scribal error was made (a word dropped, inserted, or changed). Comparing such an abundance of manuscripts makes it possible to reconstruct the original documents with virtually complete accuracy. With regard to the few cases where uncertainty remains, it should be noted that *not one* changes the actual teachings (doctrine) of Scripture. Rather they are simply differences in choice of language.

3. Another evidence of the accuracy of what we have today lies in the very short period of time that transpired between the writing of the original documents and the time copies began to be made. After the books of the New Testament were written, they were carried all over the Roman Empire. Christians immediately recognized them as the authoritative word of God and wanted them to be known. Therefore, the work of careful copying began almost immediately after the original documents were penned.
- ii. Early Church Fathers' Testimony and Other External Evidence
1. In addition to the thousands of manuscripts in existence that contain portions of the New Testament, we also have documents containing over 19,000 quotes from the Gospels written by church fathers, individuals such as Polycarp and Irenaeus. Irenaeus wrote, "So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them endeavors to establish his own particular doctrine" (Against Heresies III).^v
 2. Secular historians also have confirmed the information in the Gospels. Josephus lived from AD 37-100. He was a Pharisee of the priestly line and a Jewish historian. Among others, his writings verify many general, as well as specific, details of both the Old and New Testaments.^{vi}
 3. Archaeology confirms the Gospel accounts. Nelson Glueck, the renowned Jewish archaeologist, wrote, "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference."^{vii}
- iii. A Final Objection: Some have proposed a conspiracy among Jesus' disciples to write and spread the idea that Jesus rose from the dead, and to propagate his teachings just in order to start a new religion. At this point, we must ask ourselves, since nearly all of Jesus' apostles and many other eyewitnesses were actually martyred for their testimonies, *would this many people really be willing to die for a lie?* And since they wrote while many eyewitnesses were still alive, if any of them wrote in error, would not their writings would have immediately been discounted or corrected by other eyewitnesses? The Gospel writers claim in their writings to be putting down accurate accounts and there is really no good reason to believe they would make up their stories.

Summary Statement: There is an abundance of evidence regarding the historical accuracy of the Gospels. Once our confidence in the text is established, what may continue to be uncomfortable is the *implication* of its claims. The Gospel writers claim Jesus was the Son of God and had divine authority (Matthew 7:29, 9:6, 28:18; John 8:28). What will you do with Jesus' claim of authority over your life? Are you willing to respond by yielding control of your life to Him? Many overcome ignorance and bias only to stumble at this point. Although they usually will not confess it, their disappointment with Jesus is really a matter of rebellion against His authority and call on their life.

Let us take this case in point: Jesus calls us to a life of faith (Matthew 17:20-21, 25:21; Luke 8:25, 17:5-6; John 2:11, 14:12). We are saved by faith, yes. But the Christian life is also lived by faith. If you are a believer, you cannot remain satisfied with Jesus very long if you are not expressing faith *actively*. Living by faith stretches us. It is uncomfortable. If you are not currently experiencing Jesus in your life, it may be because you may be rebelling against His call to live by faith.

Principle: *You will be disappointed if you do not expect to continue living in active faith after coming to Jesus by faith.*

Application: If you are not living in active faith, your Christian experience will be bland and dissatisfying. But do not say that *Jesus* has disappointed you! Be honest and admit that you have been unwilling to follow Him down uncomfortable roads.

Illustration: At the moment, the Lord has asked me to remain, by faith, in a position where I have no idea what He will give me to say from week to week while I write and teach. At times, I must confess that I am a bit fearful that I will not hear from Him, but in reality, He has never let me down. As uncomfortable as it can be, this active step of faith has caused me to experience Jesus' activity in and through me in a thrilling way.

Perhaps you have difficulty living by faith with regard to your witness. You fear the outcome. My Chinese brother-in-Christ and ministry partner never knows when he will be arrested for telling others about Jesus. If he stopped, his life would be more comfortable. But I know for a fact that he will not stop sharing his faith, because once a person experiences Jesus at work in and through them, any other life is a disappointment.

Conclusion

False expectations can impede our understanding and response to the Jesus of the Gospels. We will never be disappointed by Jesus if we are willing to invest the time studying His word to know Him as He really is, if we grant Him unhindered access to the ugly sin in our lives, and if we are open to following Him wherever He leads.

ⁱ Notes on the sects of Judaism are largely taken from the personal teaching notes of Dr. David Denyer, Professor Emeritus, Alliance Theological Seminary, used with permission and reformatted for use in this lesson.

ⁱⁱ Borchert, G. L. (1996). *John 1–11* (Vol. 25A, p. 364). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

^{iv} Schroeder, David E. *Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*. Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1995.

^v McDowell, Josh. *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p 53. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

^{vi} McDowell, p. 55.

^{vii} McDowell, p 61.