



GOSPELS

THE BIG IDEA - THE KINGDOM

If one could summarize Jesus' teaching ministry into one idea, it's the kingdom of Heaven. But what does that mean? Simply put, the kingdom refers to God's people living under God's rule. This is not a new idea, rather one that goes back to God's intent for humanity and creation in Genesis 1, which was later promised through Abraham in Genesis 12. Not only does Jesus teach this concept, but He embodies it. Through His Spirit and teachings, Jesus calls his followers to live out this Kingdom ethic on Earth as it is in Heaven and thus fulfill God's intent for the world.

*For more on this, read *God's Big Picture* by Vaughn Roberts

WHY FOUR GOSPELS?

The Gospel accounts introduce the life and teachings of Jesus through a multi-perspective lens. Each author speaks of Jesus in their style and perspective, with authors highlighting, at times, stories and details unique to them. In other words, these differences between the Gospels do not mean contradictions in the historical accounts. Instead, each emphasizes certain aspects of Jesus' life and teachings to communicate points particular to their viewpoint. That said, all four gospels include Jesus' ministry beginnings in Galilee, his betrayal, his death, and his resurrection.

BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

With the completion of the Old Testament (also called the Hebrew Bible or the Tanakh) around 400 BC, Persia overthrew Babylon. Then, the Romans overthrew Persia. Throughout this time, many Jews scatter from their homeland. Eventually, some would settle back in the land of Israel (once the former northern kingdom, now Samaria/Galilee in the New Testament) or Judah (the former southern kingdom), while other Jews stayed put in other parts of the Empire.

During the 400 years between the Testaments, the Jewish people still wrote stories to document significant events and make sense of what God was doing. In this way, "apocryphal" stories like Tobit, 1-2 Maccabees, Judith, Enoch, etc, are helpful books to understand what happened in these 400 years. Still, they're not authoritative like the Old Testament books, hence why the Jews do not include these books in the same canon/collection as the Hebrew Bible.

WHO ARE THE MAJOR PLAYERS?

In the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, different Jews had different perspectives on understanding the Old Testament and how God's kingdom would eventually come about. During Jesus' ministry, he encounters these groups and challenges their ideologies. The main four are:

PHARISEES



God's kingdom will come through Torah-keeping

Since the exile occurred because Israel disobeyed the Torah, the Pharisees emerged to ensure God's people adhered as closely to the Torah as possible (Deut. 27-30). The irony is that they added extra instructions to the Torah to stay obedient and, in the process, missed the more significant heart of God's instructions (Matt. 23:23).

SADDUCEES



God's kingdom will come through nation-state affiliation

Jewish priests and leaders worked with pagan rulers to ensure peace for God's people (Jer. 29:7). The irony is the Sadducees became so comfortable with living at peace with the nation-state that they rejected the promised Messiah, Israel's king, who would eventually rule the nations.

ESSENES



God's kingdom will come through separation

Like the Pharisees, the Essenes saw exile as a consequence of failing to live into God's covenant. Rather than obeying the Torah while living in the Roman Empire, the Essenes secluded themselves in the wilderness so they would not be tempted by pagan idolatry. It's believed John the Baptist originated from this group (Luke 1:80).

ZEALOTS



God's kingdom will come through rebellion or violence

Specific figures were elevated and commended in the Old Testament for their "zealousness" for God in keeping Israel holy (e.g. Phineas in Numbers 25, Ps. 106:30-31). Because of this, some Jews saw themselves in keeping to this tradition. The success of the Macabbean revolt in 167 BC was one such example.

OBSERVATION - WHAT DOES THIS SAY?

Read the pericope (the shorter story in the narrative) rather than pull a verse or two out of its context. Typically, the subtitle breaks in your Bible indicate the beginning and end of a pericope.

Take note of any key themes or ideas - if you spot any repetition, this can be a good clue as to the overall message.



INTERPRETATION - WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Who wrote this?

The Gospel account you're in (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) will likely indicate the overall message the author is trying to communicate to the original audience.



Who are the characters within the story?

Do the characters represent a certain people group (e.g., Romans, Gentiles, Pharisees, etc.)? If so, do they reinforce or subvert our expectations?

What is the "genre" of the passage?

While the Gospel accounts are historical, Jesus' teachings vary in categories. Some of these include:

- **Proclamation**

These are the most straightforward of Jesus' teachings as they generally command the audience how to live in God's kingdom.

- **Parable**

If reading a parable, rather than parse out what every detail could mean, what's the big idea? Generally, Jesus will explain the parable or include a "twist ending" to reveal the meaning to the audience.

- **Prophetic/Apocalyptic**

At times, Jesus speaks of future-telling events. In these cases, some general questions to ask include if such prophetic/apocalyptic teachings are...

- fulfilled by the end of the Gospel narrative?
- fulfilled by the time the Gospel is written?
- yet to be fulfilled?

What is the context?

When reading a passage, think about how the passage connects to everything that came before and after.

The more you zoom out, the more connections you'll see.

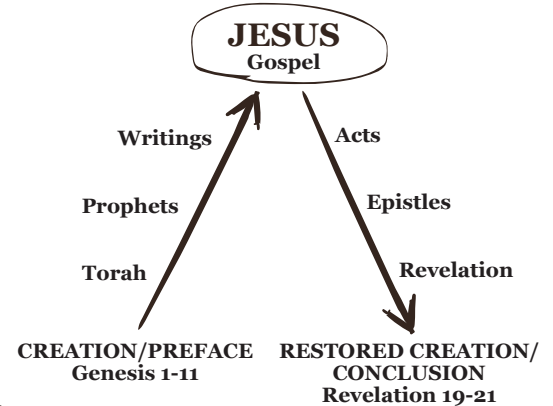
APPLICATION - WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

If reading a teaching of Jesus, what is He calling me to do? How is He calling me to change the way I think, feel, live, etc? Is there any hope I can cling to in the passage?

If reading a narrative of Jesus, how should I respond? Or, how can I model what He's doing?



NARRATIVE OF GOD'S STORY



FEATURES OF EACH GOSPEL

MATTHEW

When: ≈ 85-90 AD

Audience: Jews

Portrait of Jesus: Jesus is the promised Messiah and fulfillment of the Old Testament

Keyword: fulfilled

Structure: Broken into 5-parts to emulate the 5-book Torah (Genesis - Deuteronomy)

MARK

When: ≈ 66-70 AD

Audience: Romans

Portrait of Jesus: Jesus is the suffering Servant of God

Keyword: immediately

Structure: Told in "3 acts": 1) Galilee, 2) throughout the Roman Empire, 3) Jerusalem

LUKE

When: ≈ 85-90 AD

Audience: Hellenists (Greeks)

Portrait of Jesus: Jesus is the Son of Man who came in the power of the Spirit to reach the nations

Keyword: Son of Man

Structure: Treated as part 1 of Jesus' ministry, with Acts serving as part 2

JOHN

When: ≈ 90-110 AD

Audience: Jews and Greeks

Portrait of Jesus: Jesus is the Son of God, fully human and fully divine

Keywords: signs, eternal life, believe

Structure: The first half covers Jesus' three years of ministry, with the second half covering his final week.