Why You Absolutely Must Study The Gospels

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I spent most of my Christian life almost completely ignoring the Gospels. I couldn't have told you what was in them, or why they were in the Bible. I couldn't have explained why they were in the same book, or why they were different (apart from reporting some silliness about how "Matthew paints Jesus as Messiah, Mark as Servant, Luke as Son of Man, and John as Son of God" that I had been conditioned to repeat without understand their emptiness, or their message.

And frankly, I didn't really like the mere character of the Jesus that I met, he seemed a little bland and boring compared to the Jesus I knew to be the God I worshipped. I read the Gospels through occasionally of course. But never read them with a lower student thirst for knowledge.

Then, four things happened to me almost all at once.

Four Providential Movements That Compelled Me To The Gospels

First and I think providentially, I had opportunity to set under some teachers who were capable of studying the Gospels and who had known Jesus and Christ. I read the current Jesus Seminar, and John Crossan's, A.N. Sherwin-White's, and Bart Ehrman's, and I learned that my own belief, that this remained the same Jesus I knew, was a fundamentalist error. I learned that I was ignorant of the Gospels and Jesus. I realized I had to set down and start over. I realized I had to learn how I had been conditioned to see the Gospels in a distorted way. I realized I had to study and learn how to read the Gospels for what they were, and what they were trying to say. I realized I had to learn how to read the Gospels as an evangelical student of God and Jesus. I realized I had to set down and start over,

There Differences In The Gospels?" (He builds on Richard Burridge's landmark work, the eagerly awaited third edition of which will be available here). And if one is specifically interested in whether they can be treated as historically accurate documents, Craig Blomberg's "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels" is still the best thing around, available as a video course here. And if your interest is specifically in why *these four* Gospels became a part of the Christian canon, when skeptics tell us regularly that there were dozens of others that Christian's "suppressed" so they could perpetrate lies about Jesus, then Charles Hill's utterly enjoyable and extremely convincing defense of the four canonical Gospels against such skeptical claims in "Who Choose The Gospels?" will bless your heart.

4) Get Darrell Bock's *Jesus According to Scripture*.

One work stands in a class by itself. "Jesus According To Scripture" by Darrell Bock is essentially a commentary on the Gospels Synopsis (not the kind of simplistic attempt at a harmony in older works like Walvoord). As you work through a Gospels Synopsis, you come to each pericope one at a time. You could consult a separate commentary for each of the Gospels at each point. But this work gives you the same material in one volume. And at every step it pays special attention not only to how the Evangelists differ, but to the editorial and theological motives that cause them to do so. That is, it gives special focus in every Gospels pericope to *the intent of the biblical writer* in writing and editing his gospel as he did. It's one of the most helpful tools for Gospels study I have ever seen. I can't imagine studying the Gospels without it. It's part of a 3-Volume set of works by Bock on Studying the Gospels, (not counting his individual commentaries on each Gospel). But it has total usefulness by itself without any of the other volumes. Get it. You will not regret it.

5) Finally, Get A Good Critical Commentary On Each Gospel.

Any commentary in any of the standard critical sets will be helpful. But I have found the volumes in the NIGTC, NICNT, BECNT, and ZECNT series' to be especially helpful for the Gospels, giving attention at each point to parallels, differences, editorial activity, and theological intent (the NIGTC most of all).

I wouldn't list it as it's own step, but in addition, there are a handful of great audio lectures or videos that take the listener by the hand and walk them expertly through the Gospels and the story of Jesus, produced by some of the best Gospels scholars around. Especially if one doesn't like heavy reading, or learns better by listening than reading, they could perhaps skip the intro in step 2, and listen through one of these instead.

- Robert Stein's marvelous survey is free here.
- Craig Blomberg's excellent survey is free here.
- Darrell Bock's Life of Christ lectures are free here.
- The Bible Project will eventually have treatments of each Gospel here.
- But pride of place, if one can spend a little bit of money, goes to Gordon Fee's lectures available as DVD or downloads here.

I met Jesus while listening to these lectures in a way I never had before. They quite literally changed my life. Deeply. I cannot too highly recommend them. They are worth every penny you will spend, a thousand times over.

For The Average Bible Student;

Most of this post and its recommended resources are aimed at those who preach and teach. And I get asked often by by preachers and teachers for advice on handling the Gospels. But perhaps you say, "But Tim, I'm not a preacher. I'm not planning a series of lessons through the Gospels. I just want to read and study them for myself." What advice would I give?

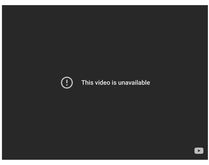
> 1) Buy "How To Read The Bible for All It's Worth", and read its section on the Gospels.
> 2) Either buy Mark Strauss' "Four Portraits, One Jesus," or listen to one of the audio lecture series linked to above.
> 3) Buy and learn how to use a good Gospels Synopsis (preferably one of the two mentioned above).
> 4) Buy a good commentary on one Gospel (if you like details, from the NICNT set, if not, from the TNTC, BST, or NTE set) and work through it while you study that particular Gospel.

Then, repeat steps 1-4 for each Gospel. And meet with Jesus in powerful new ways!

Just Read Them!

If one simply can't purchase any of those tools, then just get ahold of a good reader like the ESV one here (which takes out chapter and verse divisions, and presents just the bare text). Even if you can purchase each of these resources, never forget that the value of studying the Biblical text can never replace the importance of just simply *reading the text* out loud. Take your reader. Block out an appropriate chunk of time. Get alone somewhere. And take the time to gloriously read through each Gospel, by itself, *out loud*, as a whole. The experience will change you. You just might walk away having encountered a Jesus you never knew. For the serious student or preacher though, I would recommend the additional resources noted above, or perhaps *at least one resource* from each of the 5 suggestions above.

The Gospels As The Keystone in the Archway of the Canon



I quite agree with Pennington's bold claim that the Gospels are the very center and most important part of the Bible. We end with his brief summary;

> "I like to think of the fourfold Gospel book, or Tetraevangelium, as the keystone in a Roman archway. The keystone is essential for holding together both sides of the archway, and it alone enables the arch to stand and serve as an entryway. So too, the fourfold Gospel book functions as the portion of Holy Scripture that is so fitted and placed that it holds together the archway with its two sides—the Old Testament Scriptures on the one side and the rest of the New Testament writings on the other. The Gospel accounts complete and make ultimate sense of the story of God's work in the world as found in the Jewish Scriptures, while at the same time they serve as the fountainhead for the rest of the apostolic witness and teaching. The fourfold witness of the Gospels provides the guiding principle (even regula fidei) and lodestar for understanding and standing under all of Holy Scripture. The Gospels providentially and uniquely stand at the interpretive fulcrum for reading all of the Bible, for they focus on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the final Word spoken by God."
> (Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, pg. 231.)

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