

New Testament Survey #1

(Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts)

COURSE OVERVIEW

This four lesson course surveys the New Testament, tracing how God's presence is revealed in Jesus Christ, poured out through the Holy Spirit, and extended through the church.

1. Beginning with the Gospels and Acts, we see the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the arrival of the Kingdom of God, and the Spirit's empowerment for witness.
2. The Epistles and Revelation then unpack the meaning of the gospel for the church's life, mission, and future hope, calling believers to live as God's Spirit-filled people until Christ returns.

THE INTERSTIMONAL PERIOD

The 400 years between Malachi and the birth of Jesus are known as the "silent period." Though no prophets spoke, Israel experienced major political, social, and religious shifts that set the stage for the New Testament.

The Political World

At the close of the Old Testament, Judea was under Persian rule. Over the next four centuries, power shifted repeatedly:

- **Persians (539–333 BC):** Allowed exiles to return home. This set the stage for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its Temple.
- **Greeks (333–323 BC):** Alexander the Great conquered Persia and Egypt. His victories spread Greek culture and language across the region.
- **Ptolemies (323–198 BC):** Ruled Judea with relative peace and tolerance. Jewish life continued with some freedom under Egyptian control.
- **Seleucids (198–142 BC):** Harsher rule; Antiochus IV desecrated the Temple.

Bethel School of Discipleship

His actions led to the Maccabean revolt for independence.

- **Maccabees (142–63 BC):** Independence under the Hasmonean dynasty. Internal conflict between rulers eventually weakened them.
- **Romans (63 BC–AD 638):** Rome took control of Judea. The civil war opened the door for Pompey and later Herod the Great's reign.

The Religious World

During this time, several key groups emerged:

- **Pharisees:** “Separatists” who stressed strict observance of the Law. They believed in angels, resurrection, and traditions passed down by elders.
- **Sadducees:** Wealthy aristocrats tied to the Temple. They denied resurrection and often sided with political rulers.
- **Essenes:** A Monastic sect living apart from society. They practiced strict purity laws and communal living.
- **Zealots:** Nationalists calling for violent resistance to Rome. They sought liberation through rebellion rather than compromise.

Summary

- By the time of Jesus, the world was politically under Rome, culturally shaped by the Greek language and thought, and religiously grounded in Judaism. These forces together set the stage for the long-awaited Messiah. Into this moment, God's presence would be revealed in a greater way—preparing for the rapid spread of the gospel and the outpouring of His Spirit through the church.

THE GOSPELS

The word *gospel* (Greek *euangelion*) means “good news.” So, when the Bible talks about the gospel of Jesus, it's referring to the good news about Jesus.

Each Gospel presents a different view of Jesus, particularly his work and teachings, with an emphasis on his passion, death, and resurrection. The reason or explanation for most of the differences between the four Gospels lies in the missiological purpose of each evangelist. Each writer answers the question of “who is Jesus” to a different group of people.

The Synoptic Gospels

The first three Gospels are called *synoptic* (“seen together”) because of their similarities in content, arrangement, and wording. Together, they set forth a unified picture of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. While the Gospel of John emphasizes Jesus’ divinity and unique signs, the Synoptics focus on His teachings, miracles, and ministry as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes. It will be covered in lesson 4.

MATTHEW – JESUS THE MESSIAH

OVERVIEW

Matthew is the first book in the New Testament, not for chronological reasons, but because it bridges the gap between the Old and New Testaments. Matthew recalls the promises of God in the Old Testament and announces their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He has more than fifty quotations and seventy-five allusions from twenty-five Old Testament books.

- Very little is known about Matthew aside from the fact that he was a tax collector from Galilee who gave a banquet to introduce his tax-collecting friends to Jesus.

- Matthew wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience.
 - He begins Jesus’s genealogy from Abraham and David. He carries it forward to the last genealogical list in the OT found in Ruth 4:18, which ends with David linking God’s ancient promises with Jesus.
 - Christ is presented as first coming to the Jews and then to all of humanity.

- Matthew's Gospel is thematic. He is not as concerned with an exact chronology. He groups events and teachings based on a thematic connection.
- Matthew's Gospel is didactic. He registers five major discourses from Jesus.
 - Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5-7
 - Instructions to the Twelve on their first mission – Ch. 10
 - Parables of the kingdom – Ch. 13
 - Instructions to the Disciples – Ch. 18
 - Olivet Discourse – Matthew 24-25

THEMES

- Messiah Fulfilled: Matthew's objective was to persuade Jewish people that Jesus was the promised Messiah and the fulfillment of the law and the prophecies. (Matt. 1:1-17; 5:17)
- Christ the King: Matthew presents Jesus as King, the Son of David, who inaugurates God's reign (Matt. 2:2; 21:5).
- The Kingdom of God/Heaven: Matthew's Gospel emphasizes the Kingdom as both a present reality in Christ and a future hope, shaping life, mission, and hope for God's people.
 - Present reality – "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 4:17).
 - Power over darkness – Healing, deliverance, and authority reveal God's reign (Matt. 9:35; 12:28).
 - Revealed through teaching – The Sermon on the Mount shows Kingdom life (Matt. 5-7).
 - Explained through parables – The hidden yet growing nature of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:31-33).
 - Future hope – Jesus promises the full arrival of the Kingdom at His return (Matt. 25:31-34).

MARK – THE SUFFERING SERVANT & SON OF GOD

OVERVIEW

The author of the second Gospel is Mark (also known as John Mark). Mark, cousin of Barnabas and companion of Paul and Peter, is

traditionally understood to have written his Gospel from Peter's eyewitness accounts.

- Mark wrote sometime between 50-65 AD. There is considerable textual evidence that this was the first Gospel written.
- Mark wrote his Gospel especially for the Romans. This is exhibited in:
 - His explanation of Jewish customs. Mark 7:1-4
 - His translation of Aramaic words. Mark 5:41
 - His removal of topics especially relevant to Jewish audiences. Examples include genealogies and Jesus' extended confrontations with Jewish religious leaders.
- Mark is the Gospel of action. It is primarily narrative with a direct, simple, and concise style.
- Mark constantly affirms *that* Jesus taught, but doesn't inform us *what* He taught. Mark 6:6
- Mark uses the historical present tense of an eyewitness. 'immediately' 40 times—10 in the first chapter.
- Mark is the Gospel of detail.
 - Even though it is the briefest of the four, Mark adds vivid and striking details about people, places, and numbers.
 - He brings out the feelings of his characters. He uses different words to express fear, wonder, trouble, amazement, and extreme astonishment.
- Mark is the Gospel of candor.
 - Failings of the disciples are vividly portrayed. *But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask Him. Mark 9:32*
 - The most detailed account of Peter's denial of Jesus.
 - Severe rebuke of Peter in Caesarea.

THEMES

- Jesus the Messiah and Son of God – Mark begins by declaring Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 1:1) and builds his narrative around the question, “*Who is this?*” (Mark 4:41). His identity is confirmed by the Father (Mark 1:11), revealed through His authority over evil and nature, and ultimately confessed at the cross by the centurion (Mark 15:39).
- The Kingdom of God – For Mark, the Kingdom is God’s dynamic presence breaking into history through Jesus:
 - Proclaimed: “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe” (Mark 1:15).
 - Demonstrated: Healings and exorcisms show the clash of God’s reign with evil (Mark 1:34; 3:11).
 - Hidden yet powerful: Parables describe the Kingdom’s mysterious growth (Mark 4:26–29).
 - Revealed at the cross: The fullness of God’s reign is shown through Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection (Mark 15:37–39; 16:6).
- Mission with Authority – God’s presence empowers believers to proclaim the Gospel with confidence. (Mark 16:15)
- Endure Persecution and Suffering – Written during a time of Roman hostility, Mark encourages believers to follow Jesus faithfully, even through hardship: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Mark 8:34).

LUKE – THE SAVIOR OF ALL PEOPLE

OVERVIEW

- Luke, a Gentile physician (Col. 4:14) and companion of Paul, was highly educated and skilled in Greek. He carefully investigated eyewitness accounts to provide an orderly and historical record of Jesus’ life and ministry (Luke 1:1–4).
 - As the only Gentile author in the New Testament, Luke bridges cultures, setting his story in the context of both Roman history and Jewish leadership.

- Luke wrote both his Gospel and Acts to *Theophilus* (“lover of God”), showing that the story of Jesus and the church is meant for all people. His work emphasizes God’s presence revealed in Christ and continued through the Spirit in the life of the church.
- Luke’s style and structure
 - Historical and Detailed – Names Roman emperors and officials more than any other NT writer.
 - Orderly: Begins with Jesus’ birth and moves toward His death, resurrection, and ascension.
 - Two-Volume Work – Luke’s Gospel shows what Jesus *began* to do; Acts continues what He *still does* through the Spirit and His people (Acts 1:1 –2).

THEMES

- Gospel for All People – Luke highlights the universality of the gospel—salvation is for Jew and Gentile alike (Luke 2:30–32; 24:47). He gives special focus to the poor, women, children, and the marginalized (e.g., Luke 7:36–50; 10:29–37; 15:11–32; 19:1–10). In Luke, the Great Commission is forgiveness preached to all nations (24:47).
- Jesus as Savior – Luke describes Jesus as one who saves. Luke uses the words save, saving, salvation, and savior at least 25 times - more often than any of the other gospel writers. (e.g., Luke 2:11; 19:9–10).
- Son of Man – Luke’s preferred title for Jesus emphasizes both His humanity and His authority to bring God’s Kingdom (Luke 5:24)
 - Luke 19:10 summarizes the identity and mission of Jesus that Luke wants to underline: *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*
- God’s Presence through the Spirit – From beginning to end, Luke shows the Spirit’s activity—filling John the Baptist, overshadowing Mary, empowering Jesus (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:18–19). This presence continues in Acts as the Spirit empowers the church to carry out Jesus’ mission (Acts 1:8).
- The Kingdom of God – Luke emphasizes the Kingdom as God’s reign breaking into history, bringing salvation, reversal, and restoration. Jesus proclaims it (Luke 4:43), demonstrates it

through miracles, and promises its full arrival in the future (Luke 22:18).

ACTS – THE SPIRIT-EMPOWERED WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

OVERVIEW

- Acts is Luke's second volume, continuing the story of what Jesus began (Luke 1:1–4) and now continues through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1–2). Covering about thirty years of early church history, it shows how God's presence—once embodied in Christ—is now poured out on His people through the Spirit.
- Luke occasionally shifts from third person to first person, signaling his own participation in the events (Acts 16:10; 20:5; 27:2).
- Luke organizes Acts around summaries of the church's growth also known as "progress reports." (e.g., Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Each marks the Spirit's guidance in moving the gospel outward—from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and finally to Rome which is the start to it being a worldwide movement.
- Luke registers 12 apostolic proclamations revealing the core content of the Apostolic Gospel: Jesus's identity as Lord and Savior, his first and second comings, his fulfillment of ancient prophecies, his ramifications for humanity, and his call to repentance. (Acts 2:14–40; 3:12–26; 13:16–41)

THEMES

- Empowered by the Spirit – The Spirit is the central actor in Acts, filling, guiding, and empowering the church for mission (Acts 2:1–4; 4:31; 13:2–4). God's presence is no longer confined to one place but is with His people wherever they go.
- Growth of the Church – The gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Rome, overcoming persecution and opposition (Acts 1:8; 28:31). What began with a small group in Jerusalem becomes a worldwide, Spirit-driven movement.

- Continuity of Jesus' Mission – Acts links directly to Luke's Gospel, showing that what Jesus began in His ministry is continued by His Spirit through the church (Acts 1:1–2).
- The Kingdom of God: The book begins with Jesus teaching about the Kingdom (Acts 1:3) and ends with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness" (Acts 28:31). The Kingdom advances through preaching, miracles, and Spirit-empowered witness.
- Witness in Persecution – Acts reassures believers facing hostility that the gospel is unstoppable; opposition only fuels its spread (Acts 8:1–4; 12:24)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does understanding the Intertestamental period help us see why the world was ready for the coming of the Messiah and the greater revelation of God's presence in Jesus?
2. Each Synoptic Gospel emphasizes a different aspect of Jesus. Matthew shows Him as the promised King, Mark highlights His power and sacrifice, and Luke presents Him as Savior for all. How do these perspectives together deepen your understanding of the Kingdom of God?
3. In Acts, the presence of God moves from being embodied in Jesus to being poured out through the Holy Spirit in the church. How does this shape the way we think about our role in God's Kingdom today?

HOMEWORK - Choose one of the following assignments below.

1. Matthew organizes his Gospel around five major teaching sections (Matt. 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 24–25). Review these passages. How does each discourse reveal what life looks like under the reign and presence of God's Kingdom? Write a short reflection or list (2–3 insights per discourse) on how these teachings apply to believers today.
2. Read the "progress reports" in Acts (2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). For each one, note (a) where the gospel had spread, (b) what role the Holy Spirit's presence played in that growth, and (c) what opposition the church faced. Conclude with a short reflection on how these patterns encourage the church's mission today.