

The Gospel of Jesus Christ – Lesson 3

The Gospel as News

Lesson Objectives:

1. First, compare and contrast how the term “gospel” was used in the secular Roman world and in the Gospels, and try to understand the NT from the 1st-century perspective.
2. Then, contemplate how to replicate today what the NT authors did.

Biblical Texts: Mark 1:1; 10:45; 15:39; Luke 4:18-19 and 19:9-10

The Gospel in Its Historical Roman Context

1. The Priene Inscription (9 BC)
 - a. The Priene Calendar Inscription is text inscribed on two stones found in the market-place in the old town of Priene, Asia Minor. It is dated around 9 BC.
 - b. It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: ‘Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings/news for the world that came by reason of him which Asia resolved in Smyrna.
 - c. Was the birth of Caesar Augustus really good news for the world?
 - d. Was he really benefactor for humankind?
 - e. Was he truly divine/savior? What kind of savior was he?
 - f. ***The Pax Romana*** (Roman Peace): The Roman Empire brought an unprecedented prosperity and unity to the world in the 1st century AD.¹ Trade was more active than ever, and travel and communication were relatively easy. However, not everyone enjoyed this Roman Peace because somebody had to pay the high price.
 - i. Roman citizens comprised of about 1/3 of the Roman population, and 25-33% of people in the Roman Empire were slaves. Many of them were captured from conquered countries.
 - ii. Economic disparity – most people were extremely poor (90%), a small group of people were extremely rich (3%), and there was no concept of ‘middle class’ back then.
 - iii. They had the concept of “limited good,” i.e., acquisition of wealth or resources by some necessitated depletion of wealth or resources for others.

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). See the section on Roman rule during the Christian Era in Chapter 1. See also Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), chapter 3 where he discusses the socio-economic background of the New Testament era.

- iv. Tax rate in Judea was about 35-40%; Farmers had to save about 1/3 of their grain for the following year for sowing; That means they were able to consume only about 20% of what they produced.
- v. “Direct taxes were usually levied only upon those inhabitants of the cities who were not full citizens. Citizens could be asked to make special contributions in exceptional circumstances, and wealthy individuals were expected to make voluntary payments on special occasions. All other taxes were indirect: custom duties, sales taxes, market taxes, and fees for the use of public facilities, such as port taxes...all conquered lands were legally owned by the king...”²
- vi. Romans thought of emperor worship as a patriotic thing to do.
- vii. How was *Pax Romana* reached? What kind of peace was it?

- 2. For comparison see the prologue and epilogue of the Code of Hammurabi <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Hammurabi-Prologue.html>

The Gospel according to the Bible

- 1. The Gospel according to Mark
 - a. Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 BC – AD 14)
 - b. Mark is the first of the 4 Gospel writings (Ca., AD 65-73).
 - c. Mark applies the term gospel to Jesus – “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God” (1:1) – but does not talk about the birth/incarnation of Jesus.
 - d. What types of people did Jesus choose to be his apostles?
 - e. Mark highlights the Way of the Cross – “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).
 - f. Mark quotes the words of the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus and saw how Jesus died - “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39) – when compared to the Priene Inscription, what implication does the statement have?
- 2. The Gospel according to Luke
 - a. Jesus read from Isaiah 61:1ff
 - i. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).
 - ii. What does it say about the ministry of Jesus? If you were a person living under Pax Romana, what would you feel when you listen to Jesus’s proclamation? Would you just spiritualize it?
 - iii. How does Luke use the term salvation? How often does Luke talk about money/economy?
 - b. Salvation in Luke
 - i. Already here, but not yet fully (Cf. Luke 19:9-10)
 - ii. Present and future salvation – holistic – not just eternal life after death
 - iii. To remove religion/salvation from everyday life is unscriptural.

² Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 53.

- iv. Salvation is holistic.
- 3. The Gospel according to Paul
 - a. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in AD 56/57 (54/55 for an alternative date).
 - b. 1 Cor. 15:3-8
 - i. ³“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”
 - ii. Jesus is crucified and resurrected, and we have the hope of resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12ff).

Reflection/Comparison

1. When compared to the birth of Caesar Augustus, why the ministry of Jesus was/is good news to all humankind?
2. What was different about what Jesus did and what Caesar Augustus did?
3. When compared to the Code of Hammurabi and the Priene Inscription, what is “good” about the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to the Bible

1. Universal
2. Sacrificial
3. Eternal & holistic – more than spiritual, already here on earth, but not yet fully

What Does It All Mean for Us Today?

1. How can we live out the Gospel? What do we need to do to highlight the universality of the Gospel?
2. In what ways do we limit the universality of the Gospel?
3. In what ways can we focus on the Gospel in its holistic characteristics?