

# The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke

Volume II:  
*From the Desert  
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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• CHAPTER FOUR •

## *By the Sea of Galilee and at Capernaum*

**W**e have just witnessed the appearance of Jesus on the public stage. He is described in the first three gospels as proclaiming the kingdom of God, calling on the people to repent, and teaching them the ways of the Lord.

But who were these people? What kind of people did he reach? To whom did he proclaim his message of the kingdom? And on a more basic level—where did he find them? His group so ready to hear a new message?

In this chapter, we will meet Jesus' earliest followers. He did not encounter them in the glory of the Jerusalem Temple, but in the simple surroundings of where they lived and worked. Here, we will begin to see how their lives are affected by his words and mended by his touch. More fundamentally, we will see them embraced by God's powerful presence.

God's time has come to populate the kingdom of God.

2. Most of our major decisions—about education, career, marriage, raising a family—are more deliberative than this story presents. Once made, they have long-term implications. Is it possible to become *too* deliberative? Too committed to the *status quo*? Where do you find yourself struggling with this temptation?
3. We see the first followers almost spontaneously going with Jesus. In what ways do we measure whether a major decision, made in a small window of time, is a fool's errand or a wise man's surprisingly sudden pilgrimage?
4. We shall see that the call to follow Jesus is simple, compelling, and impossible. Who can follow him consistently? How?
5. In later segments of his gospel, Mark emphasizes how those who would become Jesus' disciples fail to follow him truly. As you continue to read Mark, consider the possibility that the author may have emphasized such failures to teach his own community that it was not alone when it fell short of the standards of the kingdom of God.



† *Matthew 4:18–22 Jesus calls his first followers*

<sup>18</sup>As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen.

<sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

<sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>21</sup>As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup>Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

1. What differences do you notice between Mark's version and Matthew's? What significance might these differences have?

Mark's and Matthew's versions of this text are quite similar. Yet there are variations. Matthew, who is often the more focused writer, makes some changes that appear to be stylistic. For example, Jesus is "passing" along the Sea of Galilee in Mark and "walking" along it in Matthew. Other changes may reflect the author's priorities. Unlike Mark, Matthew does not mention John and James having left their father with "hired men." There is some scholarly thought that Matthew intended this omission to focus more attention toward Jesus by limiting biographical information about his followers.

We will use our commentary on Matthew to elaborate on the individual players in this setting. Peter, John, and James are the most prominently featured disciples as the synoptic gospel stories unfold. The best example of their enhanced role is their presence as witnesses to the transfiguration. Otherworldly vistas are opened to them, but remain closed—for a time—to others.

Though Andrew is given less attention than the other three in the synoptic accounts, he is usually listed among the first few names of apostles. In the Gospel according to St. John, Andrew is depicted as one who shows good judgment and takes initiative.<sup>5</sup>

Tradition also assigns him an important role in the early church. Andrew is said to have performed mission work among the Scythians, a group of barbarians who, from time to time, rode out of their native land in the Caucasus to loot the civilized world. *Harper's Bible Dictionary* tells how they were a people known for their cruelty. While Andrew was eventually martyred, his life's work provides an example of courage.

The abiding image, though, is of Jesus. By calling Andrew and three other fishermen, he establishes his ability to influence others. This story also distinguishes the Jesus movement from other schools of thought. The contemporary practice was for prospective disciples to seek out rabbis, not the other way around. Philosophers of the Greco-Roman world also received, rather than sought, prospective disciples.

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<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., John 1:40–42 (introducing Simon to Jesus); John 6:1–14 (telling Jesus of a boy with loaves and fishes that are used to feed the 5,000); and John 12:20–26 (leading Greek inquirers to Jesus).

Jesus—never much of one to respect social mores—departs here as well. He actively seeks and chooses followers who respond favorably to his call. The exchange serves the twin purposes of showing Jesus’ compelling personal magnetism and showing how God uses it actively to seek out his people. The four join Jesus immediately, becoming “fishers of men.”

1. Is it easy or difficult to identify with the first followers of Jesus and the choices they make? What does it say about their character? Their lives?
2. Does the way Jesus departs from social norms affect your impression of him? Of his people? What does it say about him as a leader and a teacher? What guidance does it provide to us?



As we return to Mark, he takes us to a new place along our journey.

† *Mark 1:21–28 The Capernaum synagogue*

<sup>21</sup>They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

<sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

<sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

<sup>27</sup>They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

<sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.