

# At His Word

## *The Gospels in Harmony*

April 8, 2018

This isn't a sermon it's a training session.

I want to show you how the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) can be perfectly harmonized into one chronological story. Turns out, that's a *lot tougher* than you'd think.

My humble, frustrated, desperate, search began 4.5 years ago. I'd just started weaving Jesus' ministry for a sermon series; and I turned to a trusted "harmony" on my shelf ... but I noticed that it split up some story-ties that just can't be cut up. So, I tried another. But, it did the same thing.

Let me show you what I mean.

### Unbreakable Story Ties

**Certain story ties can't be cut apart without ruining the writer's account.**

**EXAMPLE 1:** Jesus **goes up** a mountain, **teaches, finishes,** and **comes down** the mountain.

5<sup>1b</sup> **He went up on a mountainside** and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup> **and he began to teach them**, saying: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor ... **[Jesus speaks uninterrupted through 7:27]** 7<sup>28</sup> **When Jesus had finished saying these things**, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, <sup>29</sup> because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. 8<sup>1</sup> **When he came down from the mountainside**, large crowds followed him. – Matthew 5:1-8:1 NIV

Matthew ties *that* teaching to *that* mountainside. You can't cut it up or rearrange it without ruining it. Jesus **goes up** a mountain, **teaches, finishes,** and **comes down** the mountain.

Now, *another Gospel* can add information, as long as all *story-ties* are preserved intact.

**Luke** matches **Matthew** while giving us additional details from Jesus' mountainside teaching:

Mt 7:9 "Which of you, if his son asks for **bread**, will give him a **stone**?"

Lk 11:11 "Which of you fathers, if your son

Mt 7:10 Or if he asks for a **fish**, will give him a **snake** ?

asks for a **fish**, will give him a **snake** instead?

Lk 11:12 Or if he asks for an **egg**, will give him a **scorpion**?

Only **Matthew** mentions the *bread and stone*. And only **Luke** mentions the *egg and scorpion*; but, Jesus said *both*. So, **information can be added as long as it supplements the same event.**

**EXAMPLE 2:** Jesus **calls Matthew** to follow, He **attends Matthew's Sinner Dinner**, and He's **interrupted while speaking** at Matthew's Sinner Dinner by a synagogue ruler named Jairus.

9<sup>9</sup> **As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.** 10 **While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house,** many tax collectors and "sinners" came ... 11 **When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why ...?"** 12 **On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ..."** 14 **Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How ...?"** 15 **Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn ... [Jesus speaks uninterrupted through 9:17]** 18 **While he was saying this, a ruler [Jairus] came and knelt before him** ... – Matthew 9:9-18 NIV

**Jairus has to interrupt Jesus while Jesus is speaking at Matthew's Sinner Dinner.**

Now, I didn't go to *seminary* ... I went to *film school*. So, to *me*, whether it's a script or Scripture, the *story is key*. And, **I wanted a harmony that kept every story tie intact**. But, every harmony I found was based on a belief that *someone's* story ties had to be chopped up in order to weave 'em into one. So, they make their best educated guess and then defend them. The arguments mostly revolve around which parts of which Gospels have more authority than the others. In other words: **which parts are right and which parts are wrong**.

That's a *big problem*; because, **without perfection, the Bible ceases to be the thing it says it is**.

**Its defining characteristic is its God-breathed infallibility.**

This is what we trust our eternal lives to! **It can't be based on someone's best guess**.

So, I studied the history of Gospel harmonies and made a list of the most influential and respected. Then I went on Ebay and bought the top fourteen.

**But, they were more confusing than clarifying.**

## **Published "Harmonies"**

A huge interest to harmonize the Gospels began in the mid-1800s and ended in the early 1900s.

Over 200 separate attempts were published; but, each one disconnects and re-arranges some of the Gospel's unbreakable story-ties; because, the authors thought they had no choice.

And, to my sad surprise, I found that **harmony doesn't mean what we think it means**.

Here are some *typical* preface quotes from some very well-respected authorities:

In accordance with current usage we have used the title "Harmony," although, as frequently happens with technical terms, it is likely to convey to the general reader a sense not intended. To some it may perhaps require explanation that the proper object of a harmony of the gospels is not to harmonize them, if by that is meant bringing them into agreement. ... Accordingly we have made no attempt to harmonize what is not harmonious. – *A Harmony of the Gospels by Stevens and Burton (1893)*

It will be evident, therefore, that not only has no theory of the relations of these records had any place in [this] work but also that [this] book cannot be regarded as a harmony of the records. – *Records of the Life of Jesus by Henry Burton Sharman (1917)*

... difficulties are numerous in the gospels, and they are fatal to any attempt to construct a biography of our Lord. – A Harmony of the Gospels by Johnston and Pickering (1962)

... “the sacred writers have not so treated their subject that the construction of a complete Harmony is possible for us.” ... from the earliest to the latest (numbering not less than 200) it would be difficult to find two who would entirely agree. It will, probably, now be found impossible ... to settle these questions conclusively. ... I certainly do not suggest that I have solved the problems. – A Harmony of the Four Gospels by S.D. Waddy (1895)

And, some of the unbreakable story-ties they break are *not minor*. Here are just two examples:

Stevens & Burton have Jesus **coming down the mountain** on page 49, **Matthew’s Sinner Dinner** on page 51, then Jesus **going up the mountain** on page 58, Jesus **coming down the mountain repeated** on page 70, and finally **Jairus interrupting Matthew’s Sinner Dinner** on page 91.

Sharman, Johnston & Pickering, Waddy, and Robertson have **Matthew’s Sinner Dinner** followed by Jesus going **up and down the mountain**, and then **Jairus interrupting the Sinner Dinner**.

Burton & Goodspeed, and Huck & Finney have Jesus coming **down the mountain**, **Matthew’s Sinner Dinner**, Jesus going **up the mountain**, and then **Jairus interrupting the Sinner Dinner**.

Let’s just state the obvious: **Jesus can’t come down a mountain before He goes up**. And, **Jairus can’t interrupt a dinner that ended months earlier**.

## Contacting Bible Colleges

I’ve contacted 45 of the top rated Bible Colleges and Seminaries in the U.S. and asked if they hold the position that the four Gospels can or cannot be *perfectly* harmonized into one account.

Turns out nobody really wants to answer that question directly. I’ve received nineteen replies. And, although each of these schools believes the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, nine didn’t take a position one way or the other. Four were so confusing I couldn’t understand their position. Three said that the Gospels *can’t* be *perfectly* harmonized. Three were willing to say that it’s possible.

One of these three wrote:

All the facts of the gospels can be harmonized ultimately by God. We may not be able to because of our finite knowledge, but *He* can.

But, the one I give an A+ to wrote:

Multnomah’s “position” ... holds to the traditional view of the **full inerrancy** of the Bible in all it teaches and contains. ... **Therefore**, in principle, the four could be perfectly harmonized into one account. **Nevertheless**, I must state that I have not seen a Gospel harmony done by anyone **as of yet** that I am completely satisfied with that **“perfectly harmonizes”** what we have in the Gospels, **though many have tried** (Robertson, Cheney & Ellison, etc.). ... Putting them in one continuous narrative **has value**, but offers too many opportunities for **guess work** where I may be **liable to serious error**.

In other words: Multnomah’s position is *full inerrancy*; therefore, *yes*; nevertheless, *not yet*.

# Mark's Story Ties

## *John the Baptist Prepares the Way*

**1 THE BEGINNING** of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>2</sup> It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”—<sup>3</sup> “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”<sup>4</sup> And **SO JOHN CAME, BAPTIZING** in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.<sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.<sup>7</sup> And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.<sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

## *The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus*

<sup>9</sup> **AT THAT TIME JESUS CAME FROM NAZARETH** in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.<sup>10</sup> **AS JESUS WAS COMING UP OUT OF THE WATER,** he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.<sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”<sup>12</sup> **AT ONCE THE SPIRIT SENT HIM OUT INTO THE DESERT,**<sup>13</sup> and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

## *The Calling of the First Disciples*

<sup>14</sup> **AFTER JOHN WAS PUT IN PRISON, JESUS WENT INTO GALILEE,** proclaiming the good news of God.<sup>15</sup> “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”<sup>16</sup> **AS JESUS WALKED BESIDE THE SEA OF GALILEE,** he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.<sup>17</sup> “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”<sup>18</sup> **AT ONCE THEY LEFT THEIR NETS AND FOLLOWED HIM.**<sup>19</sup> **WHEN HE HAD GONE A LITTLE FARTHER,** he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets.<sup>20</sup> **WITHOUT DELAY HE CALLED THEM, AND THEY LEFT** their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

## *Jesus Drives Out an Evil Spirit*

<sup>21</sup> **THEY WENT TO CAPERNAUM,** and **WHEN THE SABBATH CAME,** Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.<sup>22</sup> The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.<sup>23</sup> Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,<sup>24</sup> “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”<sup>25</sup> “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!”<sup>26</sup> The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.<sup>27</sup> The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.”<sup>28</sup> News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

## *Jesus Heals Many*

<sup>29</sup> **AS SOON AS THEY LEFT THE SYNAGOGUE,** they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew.<sup>30</sup> Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her.<sup>31</sup> So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.<sup>32</sup> **THAT EVENING AFTER SUNSET** the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed.<sup>33</sup> The whole town gathered at the door,<sup>34</sup> and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

# Mark's Story Blocks

## Unbreakable Story Block 1

### *John the Baptist Prepares the Way*

**1 THE BEGINNING** of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— <sup>3</sup> "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" <sup>4</sup> And **SO JOHN CAME, BAPTIZING** in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

### *The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus*

<sup>9</sup> **AT THAT TIME JESUS CAME FROM NAZARETH** in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> **AS JESUS WAS COMING UP OUT OF THE WATER,** he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." <sup>12</sup> **AT ONCE THE SPIRIT SENT HIM OUT INTO THE DESERT,** <sup>13</sup> and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

## Unbreakable Story Block 2

### *The Calling of the First Disciples*

<sup>14</sup> **AFTER JOHN WAS PUT IN PRISON, JESUS WENT INTO GALILEE,** proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

## Unbreakable Story Block 3

<sup>16</sup> **AS JESUS WALKED BESIDE THE SEA OF GALILEE,** he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>17</sup> "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." <sup>18</sup> **AT ONCE THEY LEFT THEIR NETS AND FOLLOWED HIM.** <sup>19</sup> **WHEN HE HAD GONE A LITTLE FARTHER,** he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. <sup>20</sup> **WITHOUT DELAY HE CALLED THEM, AND THEY LEFT** their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

### *Jesus Drives Out an Evil Spirit*

<sup>21</sup> **THEY WENT TO CAPERNAUM,** and **WHEN THE SABBATH CAME,** Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. <sup>22</sup> The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. <sup>23</sup> Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, <sup>24</sup> "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" <sup>25</sup> "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!"

I approach it like a script and blocked out all the unbreakable story ties.

**I marked anything that ties anything to anything in *any* way.**

I did this for all four Gospels.

**I put a black bar wherever a writer *doesn't tie* events together.**

**These black bars simply mark each writer's story breaks.**

**And, this creates blocks of unbreakable story ties.**

They keep everything that's tied together, *obvious*.

I call 'em "**Unbreakable Story Blocks**" (or **USB Connections**).

**Unbreakable Story Blocks contain ties that can't be cut up.**

Like Jesus going up and down the mountain

Or Jairus interrupting Matthew's party

**We can't rearrange *anything* within an Unbreakable Story Block.**

**Never ever sever God's USB Connections.**

In order to compare these Story Blocks *between* Gospels, I broke 'em down to their smallest components and unified their headings.

# Mark's Unified Headings

## Unbreakable Story Block 1

### The Beginning

**1 THE BEGINNING** of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. <sup>2</sup> It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— <sup>3</sup> "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

### John Prepares the Way

<sup>4</sup> And **SO JOHN CAME, BAPTIZING** in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

### Baptizing a Nation

<sup>5</sup> The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

### Christ is Coming!

<sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

### Coming to be Baptized

<sup>9</sup> **AT THAT TIME JESUS CAME FROM NAZARETH** in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

### Heaven Tears Open

<sup>10</sup> **AS JESUS WAS COMING UP OUT OF THE WATER**, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

### God Testifies

<sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

### 40 Days of Temptation

<sup>12</sup> **AT ONCE THE SPIRIT SENT HIM OUT INTO THE DESERT**, <sup>13</sup> and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

## Unbreakable Story Block 2

### Returning to Galilee

<sup>14</sup> **AFTER JOHN WAS PUT IN PRISON, JESUS WENT INTO GALILEE**, proclaiming the good news of God.

I didn't change any Scripture. This just made the Gospels easier to compare to each other. And then things got impossibly difficult. I felt the pain of every harmonizer who went before me. **I get why they gave up. So did I.** "Fine. He comes down the mountain before He goes up!" I came to the end of myself and my abilities again and again. And I began to cry out again and again for eyes that can see. I *wanted* shortcuts; God wanted me *deeper* in His Word. **I wanted to fix it. But, it was never broken. We don't ever give God grace. We give God worship and seek His face.** It wasn't broken; it was concealed. And **there are no shortcuts to truth. If you really want it, you have to prove it.** So, I would read and feed on His Word. Because **I knew that I knew that He's God and I'm blind.** And God would give me just enough to keep me seeking. Right up to the day He showed me what I didn't deserve to see. And I can't believe I'm on the other side of it now. *Want to see it?*



The Gospels contain flashbacks and flash-forwards. That's when something in a story is *purposely* told out of order for context or teaching.

Like, if I tell about a trip to Disneyland, and I say, "On the first day, I bought a coffee mug **just like the one I lost last year** (that's a *flashback*). **But, when I got home I found it; so, now I have two** (that's a *flash-forward*). Then, *that night* at Disneyland ..."

Here's an obvious **flashback** from Mark:

Herod said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" For Herod himself **had given orders to have John arrested**, and he had him bound and put in prison. ... **For John had been saying to Herod,** [A flashback in a flashback!] "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." – Mark 6:16b-18 NIV

And, here's an obvious **flash-forward** from Luke:

When John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: **He locked John up in prison.** When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. – Luke 3:19-21a NIV

These stories don't contradict just because Mark and Luke put 'em in different places in their narratives. *They're flashbacks.* (I'm just going to say "flashback" when I mean *both*.) **All four Gospels are chronological with flashbacks.** Did you notice the dark spots and the white Story Blocks on the Gospels on the walls in the back? *Those are the flashbacks.* **And, each flashback can be identified without any guesswork.** When an identical story is in two places in two Gospels, one writer will nail down where it goes; and the other will treat it as a deliberately vague "Mickey-mug" flashback. You just compare 'em to see which is which. Out of 77 total Unbreakable Story Blocks, only 18 are flashbacks. And Luke arranges 14 of 'em in two neat, white, *teaching stacks*. **Remove those 18 white Story Blocks and everything else in the four Gospels falls into a single, flawless, chronological narrative.** And then **each flashback can be returned to its chronological position** (along with its Unbreakable Story Block) by matching it to its partner. You just take the vague one and match it to the anchored one. And, there are no contradicting story-ties anywhere.

**The colored columns are the unbreakable story blocks.** The black space separates them. Nothing can be rearranged because there's always at least one colored column's Unbreakable Story Block overlapping the others. **You can't break this timeline without breaking a USB connection.** But, why would you? It's perfect. **Not a single story-tie has been severed.** All 77 Unbreakable Story Blocks have been preserved intact. Only the 18 white "Mickey-mug" flashbacks were moved. And they were only moved to where another writer anchors 'em. And **every single piece harmonizes from beginning to end. With no guesswork needed.**

So what's it all mean? **God is God. And we should take Him at His Word.**