



Spirituality of the Gospels

Spirituality of the Gospels

Patrick J. Hartin

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	7
What materials will you use?	8
How will you use these materials?	8
Lesson One (Introduction and Context for Exploring Biblical Spirituality)	11
Lesson Two (Exploring Matthew's Spiritual Vision)	23
Lesson Three (Exploring Mark's Spiritual Vision)	41
Lesson Four (Exploring Luke's Spiritual Vision)	55
Lesson Five (Exploring John's Spiritual Vision)	71
Lesson Six (Biblical Spirituality Incarnated and Conclusion)	85
Endnotes	111
Praying with Your Group	116
Reflecting on Scripture	118



Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Spirituality of the Gospels

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into six lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book and the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet six times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.


Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (littlerockscripture.org).

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree

how much of each lesson will be read each week, and only answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- Commentary by Patrick J. Hartin, which has also been published separately as *Exploring the Spirituality of the Gospels* (Liturgical Press).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the Scripture being studied. Some of these appear also in the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the video lectures online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is: [\[redacted\]](#)

[\[redacted\]](#) Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.
- Read the assigned material for Lesson One (pages 12–19) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session.

- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 20–22.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 22 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- View the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. View the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

A note to individuals

- If you are using this resource for individual study, simply move at your own pace. Take as much time as you need to read, study, and pray with the material.
- If you would like to share this experience with others, consider inviting a friend or family member to join you for your next study. Even a small group of two or three provides an opportunity for fruitful dialog and faith-sharing!

Spirituality of the Gospels

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Context for Exploring Biblical Spirituality

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Spirit of Wisdom, teach us to value the life-giving message of the gospels. As we study your word, may our eyes be opened and our hearts set aflame so that, like the first disciples, we too may be transformed.

Read the Introduction and pages 14–19, Lesson One.

Respond to the questions on pages 20–22, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 22 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In this book I invite you, the reader, to embark on a journey through the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to discover their spiritual vision. As part of Sacred Scripture, these gospels provide the foundation for the faith and life of Christians. Our exploration takes seriously Scripture as Scripture. Composed by people inspired by God's Spirit, Scripture communicates God's word through human words. The meaning of what the human authors had to say is the focus of our journey, as well as the understanding that Scripture continues to speak God's message to the lives of every generation and, in particular, to people today.

Our journey of exploration through these four early witnesses to the person and vision of Jesus seeks to discover the important themes, values, and ideas that have become foundational for spiritual traditions over the course of the centuries and that continue to speak to our present world. We view this "speaking to our world" in two ways: giving attention to aspects that resonate within our world, and taking seriously those dimensions that also challenge our world. Resonance and challenge work together in transforming the lives of believers. The spiritual message of Christianity is a message that is both formative and transformative: it forms believers in the vision opened up by the writings of Scripture; it transforms by illuminating ways believers can be changed into the image of Christ.

This book is a study in *biblical spirituality*. Spirituality is an area of thought that excites people of every walk of life today, as Lesson One will show. The term *spirituality* has a long and varied history within Christianity. However, in seventeenth-century France there was an awakening of interest in spirituality understood as the Christian's journey through sanctification in the spiritual life.¹ While much has been written today on different trends and traditions within Christianity, in this book I invite you behind these traditions to explore the roots of spirituality in the foundational docu-

ments of Christianity, the gospels. Whatever calls itself *Christian spirituality* must be based on their foundation and must always return to them to renew and revive its spiritual energy. Hopefully, this study will deepen and open for you the depth and breadth of the spiritual vision of the gospels.

A word needs to be said about the *methodology* used in this book. In the context of the Catholic Church, the historical-critical method has been endorsed as basic for any study of the Scriptures.² The Christian faith speaks about real events that occurred in history. To understand the Christian faith, one must understand the foundation on which it stands. Such an understanding can only be approached by using the historical and critical tools necessary to interpret it.³



The word **critical** in "historical-critical" does not imply any fault-finding with the text of Sacred Scripture; rather it refers to a *careful reading* of God's word that takes into account the literary form in which a given text is written as well as the historical/cultural context in which the sacred author lived and wrote. (See *Dei Verbum*, 12.)

But, methods of interpretation must always be attuned to the purpose for which they are used. By its very nature, the historical-critical method aims at interpreting the past. It is interested in the history, origin, and growth of the text. As part of Sacred Scripture, the gospels are not simply documents from two thousand years ago. They also have significance and meaning for the lives of those who read them. In order to explore the spiritual dimensions of the gospels, we need to build on and go beyond the historical-critical method. As part of Sacred Scripture, the gospels belong to that theological and religious message of God's communication with humanity through the person of Jesus. They were ultimately recorded and transmitted for the faith of future genera-

tions. This present exploration discovers how the gospels relate the experience of the person of God in Jesus and how this experience transforms readers.

The approach adopted in exploring the spirituality of each of the gospels unfolds in two parts. After laying the groundwork for our study in Lesson One, the center of our exploration will be found in the next four lessons (Lessons Two through Five) as we explore the spiritual vision of each gospel. The second part of our study can then be found in Lesson Six, which offers brief illustrations of the distinctive transformative power of that spirituality in the lives of people who embraced that vision.

Lessons Two, Three, Four, and Five will explore the spiritual vision of each gospel by examining two questions:

Who is Jesus? Each gospel writer reflects on the person of Jesus to present a distinctive understanding of Jesus.

What transformative response does this encounter with Jesus invite? In reflecting on the experience of Jesus' early followers, each gospel

writer draws out the responses that believers are called to emulate.

In Lesson Six, examples will be given to illustrate those Christians whose writings and lives were modeled on the spiritual vision of these gospels. These brief explorations will indicate the distinctive ways in which these individual Christians appropriated in their lives various aspects of the gospels' spiritual vision. The following remarkable Christians will be considered:

From the past: St. Antony, Sts. Perpetua and Felicity, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Augustine.

From more recent times: Dorothy Day, Archbishop Romero, St. Damien of Molokai, and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein).

Throughout our exploration of the different spiritual visions of the gospels and the lives of those who incarnated their spirituality, we will indicate their relevance and importance for readers today. My hope is that this exploration will animate and challenge you, the reader, along your journey of transformation according to the image of Christ.

CONTEXT FOR EXPLORING BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

In recent years, interest in the area of spirituality has proliferated. Our culture exhibits a lively awareness that the human person is more than a physical body. In a recent visit to a local bookstore, I discovered under a section classified as “spirituality” items such as the following: New Age spirituality, spirituality of relationships, tarot cards. Surprisingly, there was no indication that Christianity had anything to do with spirituality since no works on Christian spirituality were filed there! A simple search on the web under the word “spirituality” produced some sixty-one million hits! These sites embraced everything from astrology to Zen and included mediums and psychic reading guides, shamanism and spiritism, New Age and kabbalah inspired spirituality. Christian spirituality was lost among this plethora of offerings.

The above trends illustrate how our culture seeks to satisfy a spiritual thirst at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The twelve-step program developed by Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, is an important spiritual process that continues to offer support and guidance to millions of people struggling to overcome alcohol addiction. The spiritual dimensions emerge clearly from the steps that include the recognition that one has a serious problem, the acknowledgment that an outside Power could help, and turning to that Power through prayer and meditation to overcome the problem. This program has been successfully adapted by numerous other groups also facing similar life-debilitating and -dependent issues, such as Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and Codependents Anonymous. One can also include here the numerous “self-help” books and websites that seek to provide techniques by which people can animate their lives to overcome and deal with problematic issues.

Without doubt, this new phenomenon within our culture shows a need to satisfy a spiritual hunger that is evident almost everywhere. In a materialist society with such a wealth of goods, opportunities, and posses-



sions, the human person still feels unsatisfied, still longs for something more. This “something more” can only be satisfied by devoting attention to an essential dimension of the human person: the spirit or the soul. These works on spirituality aim at answering this spiritual hunger at the core of the human person.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY

In its most basic sense, *spiritual* is defined as “pertaining to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature.”¹ The spirit is contrasted to the body, the material dimension of the human person. The spirit identifies that which gives life, that which animates. In the biblical writings, *spirit* (Latin, *spiritus*; Greek, *pneuma*; Hebrew, *ruah*) denotes “the human spirit, the breath of life,” which is not simply part of a human person, but rather the whole being.

The spirit is also used in a deeper sense in the biblical writings. Since God is Spirit, the communication of God’s grace is the gift of God’s life to us. Our spirits are imbued with God’s Spirit. When Paul extends his greetings in his letters and says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers [and sisters]” (Gal 6:18), he is referring to the com-