



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO  
**M A T T H E W**



**PART I**

## Table of Contents

Lesson 1: Our Mysterious And Majestic King (Matthew 1:18-25) .....	3
Lesson 2: The Gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 1:1-17) .....	13
Lesson 3: We <i>Two</i> Kings (Matthew 2:1-12) .....	23
Lesson 4: The King Fulfills Prophecy (Matthew 2:13-23).....	31
Lesson 5: The Ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12).....	39
Lesson 6: The Coronation of the King (Matthew 3:13-17).....	49
Lesson 7: The Tempted Son (Matthew 4:1-11) .....	59
Lesson 8: The Light Dawns (Matthew 4:12-17) .....	69
Lesson 9: Two Simple Words (Matthew 4:18-25).....	75
Appendix: Answer Guide.....	85
Sources.....	87



## Lesson 1 (12-31-23)

### Our Mysterious And Majestic King (Matthew 1:18-25)

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

- Matthew 1:18-25 ESV

Go here for an overview of Matthew:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/matthew/#overview>

The story of Jesus’ birth in Matthew’s **gospel** is seen through the eyes of Joseph; in Luke’s gospel, we see it through Mary’s. No attempt is made to bring them into line. The central fact is the same; but instead of Luke’s picture of an excited Galilean girl, learning that she is to give birth to God’s **Messiah**, Matthew shows us the more sober Joseph, discovering that his fiancée is pregnant. The only point where the two stories come close is when the angel says to Joseph, as Gabriel said to Mary, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ That is an important word for us, too, as we read the accounts of Jesus’ birth.<sup>1</sup>

#### Discussion Questions

When he heard that Mary was pregnant, Joseph naturally assumed that she had been unfaithful to him. Yet how did he respond (Matt. 1:18–19)? How did he change his actions after the angel visited him (vv. 20–24)? What personal qualities does he display in the way he handles the situation?

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 5–6.

What reason does Matthew give as to why Jesus was born (v. 21)?

How should Matthew 1:21 shape the way you read the rest of this Gospel?

What is the significance of the virgin birth? How does a denial of Jesus' virgin birth affect the gospel message?

What details of Jesus' earthly ministry demonstrate His full humanity?

List several characteristics of Jesus' ministry that display His divinity.

How would you explain to an unbeliever that Jesus is both God and man?

How did Jesus' birth fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15?

How did Jesus fulfill Isaiah 7:14?

Compare Matthew's version of Jesus' birth in 1:18–25 with Luke's version in Luke 1:26–2:20. How are they similar? What differs between them?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013)]

In the latter half of Matthew 1 we encounter the most extraordinary miracle in the whole Bible, and the most remarkable mystery in the whole universe. This miraculous mystery is described in eight simple verses. Referring to this miracle, J. I. Packer said, "It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the

Christian revelation lie” (Packer, “For Your Sakes He Became Poor,” 69). Our souls ought to be captivated with fascinating glory in the midst of a familiar story.

## How Jesus \_\_\_\_\_

Several aspects of this passage call for some explanation. Matthew begins by talking about the “birth of Jesus *Christ*” (18; emphasis added). Remember that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name; rather, it means “the Messiah,” the Anointed One. The word “engaged” in verse 18, which the ESV translates as “betrothed,” is also important to consider, since an engagement was much more binding in the first century than it is in the twenty-first century. Once you were engaged, you were legally bound, so to call off an engagement would be equivalent to divorce. After the engagement, the only thing left to do was for the woman to go to the man’s home to physically consummate the marriage and for them to live together (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 57). This would happen approximately a year after the engagement began. So when Matthew says that she was pregnant “before they came together” (v. 18), he is saying that Mary was with child before she and Joseph consummated their marriage physically.

Also of note is the comment in verse 18 that Mary was pregnant “by the Holy Spirit.” Matthew is clueing us in to something supernatural that was going on, though Mary and Joseph would not find out this “by the Holy Spirit” part until a little later. Put yourself in this young couple’s shoes: Mary, having never had a physical relationship with a man, finds out that she’s pregnant. Imagine the thoughts and emotions, the confusion and the worry, that would be going through your mind. Or consider Joseph: as a husband, you’ve yet to bring your wife into your home to consummate the marriage, and you find out that she is pregnant! There is only one possible explanation in your mind—she has clearly been with another man.

What would you do if you discovered that the woman you love, the one you’ve chosen to marry, was pregnant right before you took her into your home? Verse 19 gives us a glimpse into Joseph’s thought here: “So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.” Joseph had a couple of options at this point. He could either go public and shame Mary, or he could quietly divorce her. In righteous compassion, he resolved to do the latter.

Notice that Joseph is addressed by the angel as “son of David,” which reminds us that Joseph is in the line of King David. The angel gives Joseph the shocking news that “what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). The virgin birth may be familiar to us, but such a reality was absolutely unheard of for Joseph. Then the angel tells Joseph that Mary will “give birth to a son” (v. 21), a son whom Joseph had no part in bringing about, and that this son would be named “Jesus” because He would “save His people from their sins” (v. 21). So, Joseph was told to adopt this boy as his son, and the legal name by which He would be called—Jesus—means “Yahweh (the Lord) saves.” Now that’s an announcement! Matthew then says in verse 22,

*Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

*See, the virgin will become pregnant  
and give birth to a son,  
and they will name Him Immanuel,  
which is translated "God is with us."*

We don't know exactly what Joseph felt at this point, but I imagine he was puzzled. Nevertheless, Matthew gives us a great picture of Joseph's obedience in verses 24–25: "When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus." Joseph obeyed without questioning God or laying down conditions. He didn't ask for another night's sleep to see if anything changed; he simply obeyed. And when it says that he "did not know her intimately" in verse 25, Scripture is telling us that Joseph did not have physical relations with Mary. Matthew ends the chapter by telling us that Joseph called the child "Jesus," just as the angel had said. This is how the King of creation came into the world.

Based on what we've seen so far, we can say several things about how Jesus came. First, He was born **to a virgin mother**. This is an absolutely shocking pair of words—a "virgin mother" is naturally impossible, which points us to the supernatural aspect of Jesus' birth. **Physically, Jesus is Mary's son**, for even in the genealogy, where we read over and over that one individual fathered another, verse 16 identifies Joseph as Mary's husband and Mary as the one "who gave birth to Jesus who is called the Messiah." The text is careful not to call Joseph the father of Jesus. Instead, it points out that Jesus was biologically the son of Mary.

The fact that Matthew never explicitly refers to Joseph as Jesus' father reminds us that Jesus was born **to an adoptive father**. After being named and taken into the family by Joseph, **legally, Jesus is Joseph's son**. And being Joseph's son means that this adoption ties Jesus to the line of David as a royal son. Finally, in terms of how Jesus came, Matthew tells us that all of these things happened **amidst a fallen world**. Jesus came to a world of sin in need of salvation, which is why it is crucial to see that **ultimately, Jesus is God's Son**. The problem of sin needed a divine solution.

Part of the purpose of the virgin birth of Jesus is to show us that salvation does not come from man, but from God. Salvation is wholly the work of a supernatural God, not the work of natural man. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves from our sins, which is evident even in the way in which Jesus entered the world. This baby born in Bethlehem was and is the center of all history.

## **Who Jesus \_\_\_\_\_**

The story of the virgin birth in Matthew 1 forms the foundation for everything we know about who Jesus is. This truth is foundational for why we worship Him, why we follow Him, and why we proclaim Him to the nations. With so much at stake in this one doctrine, we need to think

carefully about how we understand this baby born in Bethlehem. The truth here is multifaceted.

As the Son of man, **Jesus is fully human**. He was born of a woman, so just like any other child, He came as a crying, cooing, bed-wetting baby boy. Don't let yourself picture Jesus apart from His true humanity. It was a holy night, but it wasn't silent. After all, whoever heard of a child coming out of the womb and staying quiet? After sleepless nights of putting my own children to sleep, I can only imagine trying to put a baby down when the cows keep mooing and the donkeys keep braying. Jesus wasn't born with a glowing halo around His head and a smile on His face; He was born like us.

As one who is fully human, **Jesus possesses the full range of human characteristics**. He is like us **physically** in that He possesses a human body, and as Matthew will later show us, this body grew tired at points (8:24). That's right, the Sovereign of the universe took on the human limitation of being dependent on sleep! Not only did Jesus grow weary, but He also became hungry (4:2). This was a baby that needed to be fed and nursed and nurtured. He had a body just like ours.

Jesus was also fully human **mentally**. He possessed a human mind that Luke says, "increased in wisdom" (2:52). He learned in the same way that other children do. Sometimes we get the idea that Jesus came out of the womb using words like "kingdom," "righteousness," "substitution," and "propitiation," but that's not the case. Jesus had to learn to say the first-century Jewish equivalent of "Ma-ma" and "Da-da." He possessed a human mind.

Jesus was also like us **emotionally**. In Matthew's Gospel we see the full range of human emotions: for example, Jesus' soul was troubled and overwhelmed, such that He wept with loud cries and tears (26:36–39). It also seems reasonable to conclude from Scripture that Jesus laughed and smiled; He was not boring.

Finally, after seeing that Jesus was like us physically, mentally, and emotionally, Matthew also says that He was like us **outwardly**. Or, to put it another way, Jesus' humanity was plain for all to see. For example, when Jesus taught in the synagogue in His own hometown, the people were amazed, saying,

*How did this wisdom and these miracles come to Him? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't His mother called Mary, and His brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, aren't they all with us? So where does He get all these things? (13:54–56)*

The people who were closest to Jesus for much of His life—His own brothers and the people in His own hometown—recognized Him as merely a man, just like everyone else. He was fully human (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 534–35).

So why is this important? Why emphasize Jesus' humanity? We must affirm Jesus' full humanity, because it means that **Jesus is fully able to identify with us**. He is not *unlike* us, trying to do something for us. No, Jesus is truly representative of us. Follower of Christ, you



have a Savior who is familiar with your struggles—physically, mentally, and emotionally. He is familiar with your sorrow. He is familiar with your suffering (Heb 2:18). This is why it's comforting to affirm that Jesus was born of a woman, as the Son of Man.

As we affirm Jesus' humanity, in the very same breath we must acknowledge that **as the Son of God, Jesus is fully divine**. Just as Jesus possesses the full range of human characteristics, so **Jesus possesses the full range of divine characteristics**. Consider all that Matthew shows us. First, Jesus has **power over disease**. He is able to cleanse lepers, give sight to the blind, and cause the lame to walk, all by simply speaking healing into reality. At strategic points, Matthew talks about how Jesus went about healing every disease and every affliction among the people (4:23–24; 9:35). He graciously exercises His power over the whole range of human infirmities.

Second, Jesus' divinity is on display as He shows His **command over nature**. In Matthew 8 Jesus rebukes the storm and it immediately calms down, to which the disciples respond, "What kind of man is this?—even the winds and the sea obey Him!" (8:27). Only God possesses this kind of power over nature.

Third, Jesus has **authority over sin**. That is, He is able to forgive sins, something Matthew tells us explicitly in Jesus' healing of the paralytic (9:1–6).

The fourth way in which Matthew points to Jesus' deity is in His **control over death**. Jesus not only brings others to life (9:23–25), but He even raises Himself from the dead (John 10:17–18). These claims may sound extravagant, yet this is precisely the portrait Matthew gives us of Jesus. He is fully able to identify with us, and as God, **Jesus is fully able to identify with God**.

When you put these truths concerning Jesus' nature together, you begin to realize that **the incarnation, the doctrine of Jesus' full humanity and full deity, is the most extraordinary miracle in the whole Bible**. And if this miracle is true, then everything else in this Gospel account makes total sense. After all, is it strange to see Jesus walking on the water if He's the God who created the very water He's walking on? Is it strange to see Him feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish if He's the One who created their stomachs? Furthermore, if what Scripture says is true, is it even strange to see Jesus rise from the dead? No, not if He's God. The strange thing, the real miracle, is that Jesus died in the first place. The doctrine of the incarnation and Christ's identity as fully human and fully divine is the fundamental point where Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and countless others disagree with Christianity. It is the ultimate stumbling block. Furthermore, if we're honest, this important doctrine contains some mystery even for those who hold firmly to the biblical witness. So how do we even begin to understand it?

There are some things we must keep in mind if we are to uphold the truth of the incarnation. **Clearly Jesus' human nature and divine nature are different**, that is, they are to be distinguished in certain ways. One of the heresies that had to be rejected in the early centuries of the church's life was the idea that the human nature of Christ was absorbed into His divine nature, with the result that a third nature was formed, a nature that was neither God nor man.

Such a view undermines Jesus' role as our mediator (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 556). Consider how Scripture holds together the separate truths of Christ's human and divine natures:

- He was born a baby and He sustains the universe.
- He was 30 years old and He exists eternally.
- He was tired and omnipotent.
- He died and He conquered death.
- He has returned to heaven and He is present with us.

While we have to maintain a distinction between His natures, we must affirm that **Jesus' human nature and divine nature are unified**. He is one person, so we don't have to specify in every instance whether Jesus performed a certain action in His divine nature, or whether it was His human nature that did it. The Gospel writers don't say that Jesus was "born in His human nature" or that "in His human nature he died." No, He acts as a unified person, even if His two natures contributed in different ways. Scripture simply says, "*Jesus was born*" or "*Jesus died*." One theologian gives the following analogy to illustrate this point: If I were to write a letter, though my toes had nothing to do with the writing process, I would still say, "I wrote the letter," not "My fingers wrote the letter, but my toes had nothing to do with it." I simply say that I wrote the letter, and the meaning is understood (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 562). Similarly, everything that is done by Jesus is unified in such a way that we don't need to distinguish between His two natures when we speak of Him. It does not matter whether His divine or His human nature is specifically in view, because they are always working in perfect unity.

**The Incarnation is the most profound mystery in the whole universe.** This mystery is encapsulated in what Matthew writes about the virgin birth of Jesus. There are, after all, other ways Jesus could have come into the world. On the one hand, if He had come without any human parent, then it would have been hard for us to imagine or believe that He could really identify with us. On the other hand, if He had come through two human parents—a biological mother and a biological father—then it would be hard to imagine how He could be fully God since His origin would have been exactly the same as ours. But God, in His perfect wisdom and creative sovereignty, ordained a virgin birth to be the avenue through which Christ would come into the world (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 530).

## **What Jesus** \_\_\_\_\_

In light of everything we've seen so far in Matthew 1, there are three clear takeaways. First, **God is the Creator and Re-Creator of all things**. Interestingly enough, the word Matthew uses for "birth" in verse 18 is transliterated "genesis," which means origin—the origin of Jesus Christ. The imagery, then, in the first book of the New Testament takes us all the way back to the first book of the Old Testament, for **in Genesis, the Spirit brings life to men**. Scripture opens with the Spirit giving life to all of creation: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths,

*and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters”* (Gen 1:1–2; emphasis added). Then the Lord breathes life into Adam, the first man (Gen 2:7). Now **in Matthew, the Spirit gives life to the Messiah**. There were pagan stories of mythological gods who physically procreated with mortal humans, but there is nothing of that kind in this text (Carson, *Matthew*, 74). This is a picture of the Spirit breathing life into the Messiah in Matthew 1, just as He did for man in Genesis.

You may recall that **in Genesis, God promises a seed from a woman**. Specifically, He promises to raise up a seed, a singular offspring, who would crush the head of Satan, the serpent (Gen 3:15). Now **in Matthew, God delivers that seed through a woman**. The parallels between Matthew and Genesis can be drawn out further: **in Genesis, a man is born who would succumb to sin**. The first man, Adam, initially lived in unhindered communion with his Creator before rebelling against God and falling into sin. Paul tells us in Romans 5 that from Adam’s one sin condemnation came to all men (vv. 12–21). We have all inherited a sinful nature from Adam, and we have all succumbed to sin. But with Jesus the story is different.

In the virgin birth, Jesus did not inherit a sinful nature, nor did He inherit the guilt that all other humans inherit from Adam. However, we shouldn’t conclude from this that Mary was perfectly sinless, as the Roman Catholic Church has historically taught. Scripture nowhere teaches this; instead, Jesus’ birth was a partial interruption in the line that came from Adam. A new Adam has come on the scene, a man who would not succumb to sin. In contrast to the first Adam, **in Matthew, a man is born who would save from sin**. The God who creates in Genesis 1 is re-creating and redeeming in Matthew 1. He is making a way, through the virgin birth of Christ, for humanity to be rescued from sin and reconciled to God. Just consider how glorious it is that God is the Creator and Re-Creator of all things:

- He takes the hurts in our lives, and He turns them into joy.
- He takes the suffering in our lives, and He turns them into satisfaction.
- He takes the rebellion in our lives, and He clothes us in His righteousness.
- He takes the sin in our lives, and He brings salvation.

In addition to being the Creator and Re-Creator of all things, Matthew 1:22 tells us that **God is always faithful to His Word**. What has been promised will be fulfilled. As Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 and the prophecy of the virgin birth, he says, “Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet.” This is the first of ten times that Matthew uses this kind of phrase to speak of Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and expectations (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9). Matthew makes clear throughout this book that when God makes a promise in His Word, He fulfills it in the world.

We can be certain that God is faithful to His Word, but **what we don’t know** for sure is how to understand the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. **Is Isaiah 7:14 a prophecy with a single or double fulfillment?** The prophet says, “Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.” This prophecy was given at a significant point in Israel’s history, approximately seven hundred years before Jesus’ birth in Matthew 1. King Ahaz, who was mentioned earlier in the genealogy (Matt 1:9), was a wicked king facing threats

from foreign nations, and instead of seeking the Lord for help, he sought the help of the Assyrian king. Isaiah brought news to Ahaz that God would deliver His people, but Ahaz refused to listen. This is the context of Isaiah's promise; despite the people's rebellion, God would give a sign as a guarantee that the people of God and the line of David would be preserved, not destroyed.

The question is whether or not that sign—the virgin giving birth—was in any way fulfilled around the time of Isaiah's prophecy. Some scholars believe that this sign was partially fulfilled by a virgin who got married, had relations, got pregnant, and gave birth in the seventh century BC, but then the sign was ultimately fulfilled in the birth of Christ hundreds of years later. Other scholars believe this sign was only fulfilled in the birth of Christ. In the end, it's difficult to determine whether this prophecy has a single or a double fulfillment; nevertheless, there are some things we *do* know.

**What we do know** is that **Isaiah 7:14 is a prophecy with certain fulfillment in Christ**. The God we worship made a promise through the prophet Isaiah that was fulfilled seven hundred years later in the virgin birth of Christ, and based on that picture, we can be sure that this same God will also prove Himself faithful to us today. So when God says, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Heb 13:5; Josh 1:5), that is a guarantee. When He says that He is your "refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble" (Ps 46:1), you can bank on it. And when He says that "not even death or life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come, hostile powers, height or depth, or any other created thing will have the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39), you can be confident in His sustaining power. And when God says that there is coming a day when "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will no longer exist; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away" (Rev 21:4), that too is a guarantee. God is always faithful to His Word.

Finally, Matthew 1:18–25 teaches that although **God is transcendent over us, He is present with us**. That is, in His glory, God is far above us, but in His grace, He is near to us. He is "Immanuel," which means "God is with us" (v. 23). Stop and consider who this is who promises to be with you: this is the God who spoke the world into being, the God who rules over all creation—every star in the sky, every mountain peak, every grain of sand, the sun and the moon, all the oceans and all the deserts of the earth—the God whom myriads of angels continually worship and sing praise to, the God whose glory is beyond our imagination and whose holiness is beyond our comprehension. *This* God is with you...

## **Conclusion**

This astounding truth of Christianity—the reality that God became flesh (John 1:14)—may be incomprehensible to many, but to those who believe it is irresistible. There is an infinitely great God, mighty in power, who out of His love for us has not simply sent a messenger to tell us about His love. Even better, He has come Himself. And what He came to do is the greatest news in the whole world:

- He came to heal the sick (Matt 4:23–25; 8:14–17).
- He came to feed the hungry (14:13–21 and 15:32–39).
- He came to bless the poor (specifically the poor in spirit; 5:1–12).
- He came to bind the brokenhearted (6:25–34 and 11:28–30).
- He came to deliver the demon-possessed (8:28–34).

As we reflect on these and other blessings of Christ's ministry, we must remember that **ultimately, He came to rescue the lost** (1:21). Jesus came to a sin-stained world to endure the penalty of sin and to stand in the place of sinners. He came to die on a cross, to give His body, to shed His blood—all so that you and I could be rescued from our sin and reconciled to God. That's the good news of the incarnation. That's why Jesus came.

## Lesson 2 (1-7-24)

### The Gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 1:1-17)

**1** The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, <sup>4</sup> and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup> and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup> and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup> and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup> and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup> and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup> and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

<sup>12</sup> And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup> and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup> and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup> and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup> and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

<sup>17</sup> So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

- Matthew 1:1-17 ESV

The average modern person who thinks “maybe I’ll read the New Testament” is puzzled to find, on the very first page, a long list of names he or she has never heard of. But it is important not to think that this is a waste of time. For many cultures ancient and modern, and certainly in the Jewish world of Matthew’s day, this genealogy was the equivalent of a roll of drums, a fanfare of trumpets and a town crier calling for attention. Any first-century Jew would find Jesus’ family tree both impressive and compelling. Like a great procession coming down a city street, we

watch the figures at the front, and the ones in the middle, but all eyes are waiting for the one who comes in the position of greatest honor, right at the end.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning this genealogy of our Saviour, observe the chief intention. It is not a needless genealogy. It is not a vain-glorious one, as those of great men often are. It proves that our Lord Jesus is of the nation and family out of which the Messiah was to arise. The promise of the blessing was made to Abraham and his seed; of the dominion, to David and his seed. It was promised to Abraham that Christ should descend from him, Ge 12:3; 22:18; and to David that he should descend from him, 2Sa 7:12; Ps 89:3, &c.; 132:11; and, therefore, unless Jesus is a son of David, and a son of Abraham, he is not the Messiah. Now this is here proved from well-known records. When the Son of God was pleased to take our nature, he came near to us, in our fallen, wretched condition; but he was perfectly free from sin: and while we read the names in his genealogy, we should not forget how low the Lord of glory stooped to save the human race.<sup>2</sup>

### Discussion Questions

What do you think Matthew hoped to accomplish by beginning his gospel with a genealogy?

If Luke's genealogy goes back to Adam to emphasize the universality of the gospel, what is Matthew's point in beginning with Abraham?

What names do you recognize from this genealogy? Which names surprise you from these verses? Why?

By calling Jesus the "son of Abraham" and "son of David" (Matt. 1:1), Matthew gives us a concise yet thick description of Jesus' identity. Reflect on the central promises God gave to Abraham (see Gen. 12:1–3; 22:18) and David (see 2 Sam. 7:11–16; Ps. 89:3–4). What light do these shed on what Jesus came to do?

Since ancient genealogies customarily traced lineage through men, the inclusion of five women—Tamar (Matt. 1:3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), Bathsheba ("the wife of Uriah"; v. 6), and Mary (v. 16)—is unusual. Further, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth were Gentiles (non-Jews), and Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba were women of questionable character. Why would Matthew draw attention to these aspects of Jesus' lineage?

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, Dale Larsen, and Sandy Larsen, *Matthew: 25 Studies for Individuals or Groups*, For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London: SPCK, 2009), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Mt 1:1.

What titles does Matthew assign Jesus in verses 1 and 16?

What is the significance of the term “Christ”?

What did the Old Testament prophets promise the Jewish “Messiah” would be, and how is He also good news for the Gentiles?

How did morally outcast people figure in to Jesus’ coming?

In what way does this Gospel have a global purpose?

Explain how the kingdom has arrived *and* is yet to arrive.

How should true disciples respond to Jesus as a result of Matthew’s Gospel?

What has been passed on to you spiritually from your forebears?

Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 6–16.]

## **Introduction of the \_\_\_\_\_**

As we consider Matthew’s genealogy in verses 1–17, it may be helpful to highlight several significant names along the way. This list is saturated with Old Testament history. Consider the following: David (1), the first name mentioned, is the king whose line God promised to establish for all time (2 Sam 7). Abraham (v. 1) was the one through whom God’s promised blessing would come to the whole world (Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–6). Isaac (v. 2), Abraham’s son, was a miracle-baby born to a mom named Sarah, who was shocked to find out that she would have a child. This supernatural birth would set the stage for Mary (v. 16), who was also pretty shocked (though for different reasons) to find out that she was going to have a child. Tamar is the first



woman mentioned (v. 3). According to Genesis 38, Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law, and it was sinful incest that led to the birth of the twins mentioned in verse 3, Perez and Zerah. The second woman mentioned is Rahab (v. 5), a prostitute who was spared when the people of God came into the promised land (Josh 2). Ruth is the third woman mentioned (v. 5). She was a Moabite (Ruth 1:4), a people known for their sexual immorality, and who at one time were forbidden to come into the assembly of God's people. These 14 generations leading up to King David make up the first of three sets of 14 generations.

In the second set of 14, we see the fourth woman mentioned (she is not explicitly named here)—Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (v. 6). Bathsheba was brought into David's kingly line through adultery and murder (2 Sam 11). Then, picking up with Solomon, Matthew lists the kings in Israel leading up to the exile (vv. 7–11). A few of these kings honored the Lord, but most of them were evil, leading the people of God into sin and idolatry. This eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon (Jer 52). Thus ends the second group of 14 generations, which, again, would have sparked images and conjured up emotions and stories in the minds of Jewish readers who knew their Old Testament.

In the third set of 14 generations, in verses 12–16, Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy from the deportation to Babylon to the birth of Jesus Christ.

All in all, this is one crooked family tree! Yet, this was the family tree through which the incarnate Son of God stepped onto the pages of human history. So why is this genealogy important? Why was it significant for Matthew to begin his Gospel in this way, both for the original hearers and for us today?

First, consider the original audience. Most of Matthew's readers were either Jewish people who had put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah, or they were Jewish people who were contemplating trusting in Jesus. Either way, this thoroughly Jewish genealogy would have been massively significant. Mark, by contrast, likely had a predominantly Gentile audience in mind, so it wasn't as critical for his original hearers to understand the Jewish lineage leading to Christ. But for Jewish men and women who were considering trusting in Christ as the Messiah, or for those Jews who had already trusted in Christ as the Messiah and were as a result losing their families, their possessions, and their own physical safety, this genealogy was extremely significant.

In his introduction of Jesus as the King, Matthew points out that **He is the Savior**. Verse 1 begins, "The historical record of Jesus Christ." The name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the name "Joshua" or "*Yeshua*," which means "Yahweh saves," or "The Lord is salvation." This theme fits with the angel's instructions to Joseph later in the chapter: "She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because *He will save His people from their sins*" (v. 21; emphasis added). Recall from the Old Testament that Joshua was the leader appointed by God to take His people into the promised land; now, Jesus is the leader appointed by God to take sinful people into eternal life.

After looking at the name “Jesus,” we turn to the title “Christ.” By applying this title to Jesus, Matthew is telling us that **He is the Messiah**. It is important to keep in mind that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. No, “Christ” literally means “Messiah” or “Anointed One.” Throughout the Old Testament there were promises of a coming anointed one, a Messiah, who would powerfully deliver God’s people. Here Matthew says of Jesus, “This is He, the One we’ve waited for!”

Next, continuing in verse 1, we learn of Jesus’ royal identity: **He is the son of David**. When we think about the son of David, we’re reminded of David’s desire to build the temple of the Lord in 2 Samuel 7. Here is God’s response:

*When your time comes and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. (2 Sam 7:12–13)*

The Lord informed David that he, David, would not be the one to build the temple, but that his son Solomon would. God made a covenant with David in the context of this discussion and promised him two primary things. First, David was promised that **a continual seed will endure to the end** (2 Sam 7:13). This was a promise that God would bless Solomon, David’s son. However, we know that the promise extends beyond Solomon, because God was not just referring to the next generation—the throne of this kingdom would be established “forever” (v. 13). That word “forever” is repeated over and over in 2 Samuel 7 (vv. 16, 24, 25, 26, and 29). God was telling David that his seed, his family, would endure forever. As readers in the twenty-first century, we should be struck by the fact that a promise given in 2 Samuel 7 is still active today. This promise is literally shaping eternity.

The second thing God promised to David was that **an honored son will reign on the throne**. This promise had an immediate reference to Solomon; however, God promised that the throne would be established *forever*: “Your house and kingdom will endure before Me forever” (2 Sam 7:16). The Old Testament had been pointing to a continual seed that would endure and an honored son from the seed of David who would reign on the throne. This is precisely what the prophets spoke of. See Isaiah 9:6–7; 11:1–3a,10; Jeremiah 23:5–6; Ezekiel 37:24–25.

In each of these passages there is an assumption that God’s promise is continuing. For instance, in the final passage—Ezekiel 37—the people are in exile, having been ripped away from their home city, Jerusalem. The temple has been destroyed and the people are wondering, “Have God’s promises failed?” And while King David was dead at this point, Ezekiel still speaks of David being king. The prophet is picking up on God’s promise that through the line of David, God’s kingdom would be established forever. The covenant would be an everlasting covenant (Ezek 37:26). To a people who for generations had longed for a Messiah from the line of David, Matthew is not just giving a list of names in this genealogy; he’s announcing the arrival of the King.

After telling us that Jesus is the Son of David, Matthew then tells us that **He is the son of Abraham** (v. 1). Once again we're thrust back into the Old Testament, all the way back to Genesis 12. Here is God's word to Abraham:

*Go out from your land,  
your relatives,  
and your father's house  
to the land that I will show you.  
I will make you into a great nation,  
I will bless you,  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
I will curse those who treat you with contempt,  
and all the peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:1–3)*

Based on this passage, we see the following:

- **God will form a covenant people.** God would make Israel into a “great nation.”
- **God will give them a promised inheritance on earth.** This inheritance would become known as the promised land.
- **God will use them to accomplish a global purpose.** Abraham and those who come from him will be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

God's promise to Abraham is reiterated in chapter 15 and then again in chapter 17. In 17:5–6 God says, “Your name will no longer be Abram, but your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you.” Through Abraham's line God says that **He will send a King**. Then in verses 15–16 of the same chapter, God says of Sarah, Abraham's wife, “I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; *kings* of peoples will come from her” (emphasis added). Speaking of Abraham's line again in these verses, God says that **God's kingdom will one day expand to all people groups**. This truth is reiterated later, in Genesis 49:10, where Jacob prophesies, “The scepter will not depart from Judah or the staff from between his feet until He whose right it is comes and the obedience of the peoples belongs to Him.” Again, God is promising a royal line.

God works out His promise to Abraham in Israel's history and ultimately through His Son, Jesus Christ. Nothing in history is accidental. Every detail in the Old Testament, even from the very beginning (Gen 3:15), was pointing to a King who would come. History revolves around a King who would come—a King who now *has* come! Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, is the center of it all.

You are not at the center of history. I am not at the center of history. Our generation is not at the center of history. The United States of America is not at the center of history. Billions of people have come and billions have gone; empires have come and empires have gone; countries, nations, kings, queens, presidents, dictators, and rulers have all come and gone. At the center of it all stands one person: Jesus the Christ. This is the bold claim of Matthew's Gospel. And if this Jesus is the King of all history, then it follows that He should be the King of your life. When you realize His rule and submit to His reign, it changes everything about how you live. Everything.

## Overview of the \_\_\_\_\_

In light of what we've seen above from Matthew's opening words and the promises of the Old Testament, God's kingdom figures prominently in this first Gospel. Consider how a number of concepts fit within this kingdom framework:

- **Gospel: The message of the kingdom.** The central message in the mouth of Jesus is clear: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Matt 4:17).
- **Disciples: The citizens of the kingdom.** In Matthew 5–7, which we refer to as The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins by telling us what kingdom citizens are like.
- **Discipleship: The demands of the kingdom.** Following this King is costly, for He says in Matthew 10, "Anyone finding his life will lose it, and anyone losing his life because of Me will find it" (v. 39).
- **Church: The outpost of the kingdom.** Matthew is the only Gospel writer who actually uses the word for church—*ekklesia*. We're going to see that Jesus has designed His people under His rule to be a demonstration, a living picture, of the kingdom of God at work. Do you want to see what people look like who live under the rule and reign of King Jesus? Look at the church, Matthew says.
- **Mission: The spread of the kingdom.** The church proclaims the gospel of the kingdom, and not even the gates of hell will be able to stop it (Matt 16:18).
- **Demons: The enemies of the kingdom.** The Gospel of Matthew makes very clear that the Devil and all his minions are absolutely opposed to this King and everyone and everything in His kingdom, including you and me. But, Satan's power is limited and his doom is assured.
- **Hope: The coming of the kingdom.** In the Gospel of Matthew we get a dual picture of the coming of God's kingdom.

On the one hand, **the kingdom is a present reality**. The great announcement in the book of Matthew is that **the King is here!** Jesus Christ has broken into a dark and hurting world,

bringing healing and forgiveness. He binds up the brokenhearted, He gives rest to the weary, He gives sight to the blind, and He gives life to the dead.

On the other hand, Matthew will also show us that **the kingdom is a future realization**. Jesus dies on the cross, rises from the grave, and before departing from His disciples, He promises to return. **The King is coming back**. At His first coming, Jesus came as a crying baby. At His second coming, Jesus will come as the crowned King.

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### through the King

We've seen already that Matthew's genealogy is so much more than a list of names or simply a historical record for first-century Jewish readers. It presents Jesus Christ as the climactic fulfillment of God's promises of a coming King and His kingdom. Also included in this genealogy is a picture of how God saves. Matthew tells us at least two things in this opening section about the nature of God's salvation.

First, **God saves only by His sovereign grace**. The list of names in verses 1–17 is full of evil kings and sinful men and women, a description that includes Abraham and David as well. Abraham was a polygamist patriarch who lied about his wife twice. David was an adulterous murderer. And the list goes on and on. It's amazing to think that the great, great, great, great, great grandparents of Jesus hated God and were leading other people to hate Him too. Clearly, then, **Jesus came not because of Israel's righteousness, but in spite of Israel's sinfulness**.

Throughout Scripture we **see the sinful responsibility of man**. Evil kings and evil men lived their lives in rebellion against God, and they were responsible for their sin. Nevertheless, God was working in and through these people. In the midst of man's sinfulness, we also **see the supreme will of God**. At no point were any of the men and women mentioned in this genealogy outside of the sovereign control of God. Yes, *they* were choosing to disobey God, and *they* were responsible for that. At the same time, God was ordaining all of this to bring about the birth of His Son.

In addition to the men mentioned earlier, the list of sinful women on Matthew's list is equally stunning. The message is clear: **Jesus came for (and through) the morally outcast**. Tamar was guilty of incest (Gen 38). Rahab was a prostitute (Josh 2). Ruth spent a rather shady night at Boaz's feet (Ruth 3), but more importantly she was a Moabitess, a people known for their sexual immorality. Finally, the wife of Uriah is mentioned (Matthew doesn't actually record her name—Bathsheba), even though she committed adultery with David. So we have adultery, sexual immorality, prostitution, and incest; you'd think Matthew would have chosen some different women to include here! You may also have recognized the last woman on this list—Mary, the mother of Jesus. As an unwed, pregnant woman, she was surrounded by rumors of sexual scandal (1:18–25). This is a surprising way to introduce the Savior of the world.

So why is this theme of sexual immorality so prominent in this genealogy, and why are *these* people included in the line that leads to Christ? For the same reason *your* name is included in

the line that leads *from* Christ—solely because of the sovereign grace of God. Praise be to God that He delights in saving sinful, immoral outcasts! This theme of sovereign grace even applies to Matthew, the author of this Gospel. Matthew was a tax collector, a Jew who made his living by cheating other Jewish people. When Jesus called Matthew to follow Him, the only people Matthew knew to invite to his house for a party were moral reprobates (9:10–13)! Matthew knew he was the least likely person to be writing this Gospel, which is fitting for a book that announces good news. God saves not based on any merit in us, but totally on sovereign mercy in Him. If He didn't save like that, we would all be damned.

Not only did He come for (and through) the morally outcast, but also **Jesus came for (and through) the ethnically diverse**. These women—Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Ruth—were all Gentile women. Bathsheba may have been an Israelite, yet Matthew calls her “Uriah’s wife,” for Uriah was a Hittite (2 Sam 11:3). This ethnically diverse genealogy leads to the second aspect of God’s salvation in this genealogy: **God saves ultimately for His global purpose**. Recall the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, that “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” God’s promise to His people is for the sake of all peoples. This universal plan will reappear throughout Matthew’s Gospel, and at the center of this plan is none other than Jesus Christ Himself.

Matthew shows us repeatedly that **Jesus fulfills God’s promise to bless His chosen people**. This helps explain why his Gospel is loaded with Old Testament references. Jesus came to bring salvation to the people of Israel, a point Matthew makes clear (15:24). But that wasn’t all: Just as God promised to bless His chosen people Israel for the sake of *all* peoples, so **Jesus accomplishes God’s purpose to bless all peoples**. Jesus would pour His life into twelve Jewish disciples, and then He would tell them, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (28:19). The end will not come, Jesus says, until the “good news of the kingdom” is “proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations” (24:14).

Matthew’s Gospel teaches us that an emphasis on missions is not just a made-up program that man has come up with; it’s all over the Bible. Missions have been the purpose of God from the very beginning of history, with His saving acts culminating in the person and work of Christ. Now all followers of Christ are on a global mission to make this King known among all nations, to spread the gospel of this kingdom at home and among every people group on the planet.

At the end of the day, how does God save us? Solely by His sovereign grace. Why does God save us? Ultimately for His global purpose. This is at the heart of Matthew’s genealogy. The question then becomes how we will respond.

## Conclusion

As we move forward in the book of Matthew, we are going to see three distinct groups of people: (1) The religious leaders who deny Jesus, (2) the crowds of people who follow Jesus as long as He gives them what they want and attracts their interest (but who ultimately and eternally walk away), and (3) the very small group of disciples who are going to follow Jesus,

learn from Him, and eventually lose their lives for Him. As you read Matthew's Gospel, you must decide which group you are in.

**Like the leaders, will you completely reject Jesus?** We are going to see attacks on Jesus' character and attacks on Jesus' claims throughout this book by people who pridefully choose to deny that Jesus is King.

**Like the crowds, will you casually observe Jesus?** This is the place where many church attenders, probably even many church members, find themselves today. Content to observe Jesus, to give Him token allegiance, they add Him as a part of their life. These are people who do good things and are actively involved in the church in different ways. They are, in some way or another, associated with Jesus. And one day they will say, "Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?" (7:22). And Jesus will say to them, "I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!" (7:23).

**Like the disciples, will you unconditionally follow Jesus?** In a day when nominal Christianity and lazy discipleship are rampant in America and in many places around the world, will you rise up and say to Jesus, "You are King, and because You are King, there are no conditions on my obedience to You. I will follow You wherever You lead me, I will give You whatever You ask of me. I will abandon all I have and all I am because You are King and You are worthy of nothing less"? This is the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus the Christ. How will you respond?

### Lesson 3 (1-14-24)

#### We *Two* Kings (Matthew 2:1-12)

**2** Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

- Matthew 2:1-12 ESV

This story, peculiar to Matthew, underlines several themes in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus the Messiah. It again makes explicit reference to the detailed fulfillment of Scripture, in his place of birth (vv. 5–6), as well as alluding to another Messianic passage (Num. 24:17). It presents Jesus as the true ‘king of the Jews’ (v. 2) in contrast with the unworthy king Herod. It begins to draw a parallel between Moses and Jesus which will be further developed in the rest of the chapter. And it shows Jesus as the Messiah of all nations, opposed by the leader of the Jewish nation but recognized as the fulfillment of the hopes of the Gentiles; this too is seen in the light of Old Testament expectation. The whole episode recalls the story in 1 Kings 10:1–13 of the visit, homage and gifts of a foreign dignitary to the son of David, king of the Jews, a theme which will be taken up more explicitly in 12:42.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 85.



## Discussion Questions

Read Genesis 12:1–3 to learn about God’s promise to Jesus’s ancestor Abraham. How does the appearance of these “wise men from the east” represent a partial fulfillment of that promise?

Isaiah 60:1–5 tells us that when a “light” comes to Israel it will be the time of salvation for his people and renewal for the world. This should cause the people’s hearts to thrill and rejoice (Isa. 60:5). When this “light” finally comes, who ends up responding properly and who does not (note Matt. 2:3, 10)?

Why would Herod be “disturbed” by this news? Why “all Jerusalem with him”? Why is it significant that Micah prophesied the place of Jesus’s birth? (Mc 5:2.)

The foreign wise men (or *magi*, i.e., magicians or astrologers) were likely familiar with Old Testament prophecies. How does Numbers 24:17 help us understand why they would follow a star to find a king?

How did the Magi react when they found Jesus? Do their actions provide any kind of example for us? Explain.

What can we learn from the fact that God used the wise men’s practice of astrology to lead them to Jesus? What can we learn from God’s use of pagan priests to supply the financial needs of Jesus’s family?

What is the “gold, frankincense, and myrrh” in your life? How have you offered this to Jesus?

Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from *Douglas Sean O’Donnell, Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013)*]

THERE ARE AT LEAST TWO historical inaccuracies in John Henry Hopkins’s otherwise wonderful Christmas carol “We Three Kings.” First is the number three. How many wise men were there? Were there three? Matthew doesn’t provide such a detail. He just says “wise men from the east

came to Jerusalem” (2:1). The plural subject of that sentence tells us there were more than one. Were there two? Were there twenty? We don’t know. Well then, where do we get three? This tradition comes from the three gifts mentioned in verse 11, the logic being that if there were three gifts there must have been three men...

So the “three” in “We Three Kings” is not necessarily accurate. Neither is the description “kings.” Again the gifts are to blame for this misunderstanding. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were very expensive. Such gifts tell us that these men had abundant resources. They had money that allowed them to travel and to give Jesus what they gave him. But such wealth does not necessitate royalty.

I’m sorry to ruin what might be your favorite Christmas carol, but here in 2:1–12 there are not likely three kings. However, there are two! Matthew wants us to take note of two kings—King Herod and King Jesus...So, *we two kings* is what we have here—Herod and Jesus. As readers of this Gospel, our task now is to figure out (which won’t be too difficult) which king is the true king, and thus the king to whom we should submit.

### Three Choices

So here in 2:1–12 there are not three kings but two. There is Herod, the Roman-appointed “king of the Jews,” and there is Jesus, *the God-appointed King of all kings*. Yet as it pertains to the second king, our Lord Jesus and our relationship to him, there are *three* choices:

#### **Choice 1:** \_\_\_\_\_

This is the choice made by the Jewish religious leaders. The wise men come to town and say in effect, “Where is he? Where is the Christ-child?” Herod gets wind of their question, and in his jealousy he is “troubled” (v. 3). While he gladly accepts the title “the King of the Jews,” his knowledge of the Hebrew Bible is insufficient. So he calls in the experts—the chief priests and the scribes. The scribes or “teachers of the law” especially knew their stuff. They spent all day meticulously copying the Holy Scriptures, word by word, line by line. They were professional Bible scholars and teachers. They didn’t have to open to Micah to know in which town the Messiah would be born. For them, Herod’s dilemma was “Bible Trivia for 100.”

It is not surprising that they knew the answer. It would be “shame on them” if they didn’t. What is surprising is that they did nothing with the answer. Unlike these foreigners who “traversed afar” over “field and fountain, moor and mountain,” these religious experts pushed their buzzer, won their prize, and went back to bury their heads in the Word of God. As Paul put it, they were “always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). They weren’t even curious—“Could this be the one of whom the Scriptures testify?” They were as indifferent to Jesus as the priest and Levite were to the bruised and battered man in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The religious leaders weren't alone in their indifference. Matthew gives the impression that the whole city of Jerusalem knew, yet not one person went to the nearby town to see if these wise men were truly wise, to see if indeed the "star ... out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17) had come into the world. What gross indifference to Jesus! "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11, KJV).

The church is full of people like this. The church, you say? Don't you mean the world? No, I mean the church. Sure, there are people in the world who are indifferent to Jesus. They know he was born in Bethlehem, his mother's name was Mary, he did miracles, he died on the cross, he rose from the dead. They know all this, and they just don't care. There are lots of people like that in the world. But there are also lots of people like that in the church. If you quizzed them on Bible trivia, they'd do just fine. But if you informed them, "God in the flesh is just five miles down the street. Would you care to join me to meet him?" they would shake their heads and say, "Oh, not this time. You know the NFL playoffs start today," or "I'm sorry, it's the last day of this unbelievable New Year's sale," or "I'd hate to miss my Sunday afternoon nap. Maybe next time."

What indifference! We live in a world—a church world—of indifference. People pack the pews each Sunday but live as though there is no King upon the throne but them. They are each their own king, and they do whatever is fitting in their own eyes. But rest assured, King Jesus is not indifferent toward such false, puny, self-appointed royalty. John the Baptist (see the next chapter) will tell us this in quite vivid, nonpolitically-correct language. He will say of Jesus, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:12).

## **Choice 2:** \_\_\_\_\_

We can choose indifference, as the scribes, chief priests, and all Jerusalem did. Or, secondly, we can choose *hostility*, as Herod did. We can choose to hate Jesus and be hostile to him and everything associated with him—his followers, teachings, church, and kingdom.

I don't know if you've noticed this, but recently there has been a sudden increase of such hostility in our country. Some of the best-selling books in the last few years are from these new atheists, self-professed "Brights" as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins call themselves, who are supposedly bringing light into our dark world, yet who are in reality seeking to suffocate the true Light of the World under the bushel basket of a social, quasi-scientific Darwinism.

For example, I read Christopher Hitchens's book, *god Is not Great* (the "g" in "god" is purposefully not capitalized). His subtitle is *How Religion Poisons Everything*. Chapter 7, where he begins to talk specifically about the Bible, he entitles "Revelation: The Nightmare of the 'Old' Testament," and Chapter 8 he calls "The 'New' Testament Exceeds the Evil of the 'Old' One."

In this book this intelligent man makes some surprisingly foolish statements. For instance, concerning the four Gospels he says, "Their multiple authors—none of whom published anything until many decades after the Crucifixion—cannot agree on anything of importance."

However, Hitchens's own statement disproves itself, for all four Gospel writers were certainly agreed on the centrality and importance of the crucifixion! In addition to such self-contradictory statements, many of his assertions seem to be driven by ungrounded hostility. Hitchens writes, "The doings and 'sayings' of Moses and Abraham and Jesus [are] so ill-founded and so inconsistent, as well as so often immoral." He refers to the Christian practice of teaching our children the truths of our faith as "child abuse" (he has a whole chapter on this).

At first I was surprised by such hostility. I thought to myself, *If God doesn't exist or if Jesus wasn't the Son of God, why make a big fuss? Why write a book against religion? People believe in far crazier things than our religion. Why attack Christianity? Why do these scientists, as many of them are, attack the faith that has thus far produced the world's greatest scientists and mathematicians, the likes of Newton and Pascal?* But then I remembered that an intelligent person only attacks what he knows to be a real threat to his way of thinking and, more importantly, his way of living. And Jesus is such a threat.

Jesus was a real threat to Herod because, as Lawrence W. Farris writes, Herod grasped what was "at stake in the birth of Jesus." If Herod didn't think Jesus was actually born, if he didn't think Jesus might indeed be a king—the king—if he didn't think this new king, though now just a child, could in fact dethrone him, rule over him, take allegiance from him, he would not have done what he did.

You see, Jesus is a real threat to anyone and everyone who thinks seriously about him. If Jesus is king—and you can almost hear in Herod's dungeon the prophetic voice of John the Baptist before his beheading (cf. 14:4)—it means you're not. It means your dethronement. It means your submission. It means you can't lead your life any longer, as Herod did and as I suggest these new atheists do, by the dictates of your unrepresented immoral desires. If Jesus is who he says he is, you either love him or you hate him! Which is exactly what Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (10:34). This is no nice Christmas story. This is a nasty conflict of kingdoms. Indifference, to me, is illogical. It is to ignore the facts. Hostility, however, is quite reasonable, given that we are naturally inclined to oppose God and his ways and his Son, and given the very controversial claims of Christ. If he is King, you and I are not.

### **Choice 3:** \_\_\_\_\_

We can respond to Jesus with indifference or with hostility (both equally reject his rule) or with *worship*. We can worship him as the wise men wisely did.

Matthew 2:11 reads: "And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." When read in the context of all that has come before (the long months of travel, the persistence in finding the child, etc.), I am very close to agreeing with J. C. Ryle who said concerning this verse, "We read of no greater faith than this in the whole volume of the Bible."

What makes it so “great” is not merely *what* they did, which T. S. Eliot labeled a “death” to themselves, since “they fell down and worshiped him.” What makes it so great is *who* did what. Who worships the King of the Jews? Does Herod, the earthly king of the Jews? No. How about the Jewish scribes and chief priests? No. Do all the Jews in all Jerusalem? No. But how about those Gentiles who are not from the promised land? Do they bow down in homage? Do they in essence “kiss the Son” (Psalm 2:12)? Yes, they do.

What is Matthew doing with this fact? What is the importance of who received Jesus? With the wise men, Matthew is echoing what the angel of the Lord said to the shepherds in Luke 2:10, 11: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be *for all the people*. For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” The kingdom of heaven is wide enough to accept Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, the seemingly righteousness and knowingly unrighteous. This King is for “you”—you lowly Jewish shepherds, you wealthy Gentile pilgrims.

The wise men were Gentiles, no doubt about it. They were either from Arabia, Persia, or Babylon. Following Origen of Alexandria, I think that they were from Babylon. I say this because we know from the book of Daniel that the Chaldeans or Babylonians had “wise men” (Daniel 2:12–14, 24, 27, 48; 4:6, 18; 5:6–8, 15) and also because of the theological significance attached to Babylon. Matthew is possibly saying that the pilgrimage of the nations to the holy city, the flood of Gentiles entering into the people of God, has begun, as the prophets predicted (Isaiah 2:2, 3; cf. Isaiah 60:1–5; Micah 4:1, 2). But I also think he is giving an ironic twist. The twist is this: the return from the Babylonian exile is certainly over if the Babylonians themselves are bowing before Zion’s King!

So the wise men were Gentiles, possibly Babylonian Gentiles. But more than that, they were “Gentile sinners,” to borrow a phrase from Paul in Galatians 2:15. Why do I emphasize “sinners”? It is because of their occupation. The word that the esv translates “wise men” in verses 1, 7 is *magos* in Greek, sometimes translated, “magi.” Now, what English word does that remind you of? It sounds like and looks like *magic* or *magicians*. In John Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” he calls them “the Star-led Wisards.” And I think that is quite close to the truth...while I don’t think that they were quacks or charlatans as are most astrologers today—for example, Sylvia Browne or Miss Cleo—I do think they believed in and practiced magic of sorts, the same kind as Pharaoh’s wise men (“Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt ...” [Exodus 7:11; cf. Genesis 41:8]) and as Simon *Magus* or Simon the Sorcerer, as he is known in Acts 8:9–24 (cf. Acts 13:6, 8).

In our Harry Potter world we tend to think of magic not only as “cool” but spiritually neutral. The Biblical authors never thought so. That is why magic and magicians were condemned. The Old Testament forbade playing with such stuff. Don’t toy with such people. What a Jewish rabbi wrote shortly before the birth of Christ summarizes well the Biblical attitude: “He who learns from a magus is worthy of death.” So these men were Babylonian magi—not the most spiritually-pristine class of people. They were Gentile sinners...

What a scandalous scene! Ah, but what a beautiful one as well. This scene depicts so perfectly the good news of the gospel of the kingdom. This good news is for all people, even the “least likely candidates for God’s love.” Like scrap metal to a magnet, this good news draws “a hodgepodge” of fallen humanity—Samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors on the take, despised Roman soldiers, ostracized lepers, me (the son of a poor man from Connemara on the west shore of the Emerald Isle), and even you (the son or daughter of whomever and wherever you are from). Are you a Gentile? Are you a sinner? If so, I have some good news for you! The grasp of the King of the kingdom of heaven can reach even you and even now.

## **Conclusion**

Matthew makes our decision rather easy, doesn’t he? Do you want a madman or the Messiah? Do you want a man who would order the massacre of innocent children (v. 16) or a man who would open his arms to children and lay down his life for the less-than-innocent of the world? Do you want a ruler who rules by force, aggression, and cruelty or a ruler who rules by love, compassion, and the cross of his own sufferings? Do you want a man who slaughtered the last remnants of the dynasty that ruled before him, put to death half of the Sanhedrin, killed 300 court officers, executed his wife and mother-in-law and three sons, and as he lay dying arranged for all the notable men of Jerusalem to be assembled in the Hippodrome and killed as soon as his own death was announced, so the people might weep instead of rejoice on the day of his death? Do you want him for king? Or do you want the One who when reviled did not revile in return, who when he suffered did not threaten but rather bore our sins in his body on the tree (see 1 Peter 2:21–25)? Whom do you want?

Is Jesus Your King? When our Lord Jesus was on trial before Pontius Pilate, that Roman governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered,

“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” Then Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:33–37)

We all have a choice to make. Who is the King of the Jews? Who is your king? Whose voice are you going to heed? Will you be indifferent to Jesus? Will you be hostile? Or will you bow low, with whatever gifts you have in hand, adoringly worshipping him?



## Lesson 4 (1-21-24)

### The King Fulfills Prophecy (Matthew 2:13-23)

<sup>13</sup> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

<sup>16</sup> Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. <sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> “A voice was heard in Ramah,  
weeping and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”

<sup>19</sup> But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, <sup>20</sup> saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” <sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup> And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

- Matthew 2:13-23 ESV

Matthew 2:13–23 reminds us that the Christmas story many of us are so familiar with actually relates to biblical stories that go back hundreds of years prior to Christ’s coming. God’s work throughout the Old Testament had everything to do with this baby born in Bethlehem, and if we listen closely to what Matthew is telling us, we just might find an altogether fresh perspective on Christmas. There may be more reason to rejoice than we ever knew.

A brief summary of these events may be helpful to set the context. Our passage begins after Jesus was born and after the wise men had visited Him some time later. When the wise men left they were warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, so they traveled home a different way (2:12). At the same time, Joseph had a dream in which God told him to take his family to Egypt, because Herod wanted to kill Jesus (v. 13). So in the middle of the night, Joseph took his



wife and his Son, and they traveled about 75–100 miles to Egypt (v. 14). And you thought your Christmas travels were rough!

Meanwhile, when King Herod heard nothing from the wise men, he decided he had only one option for destroying this child born King of the Jews. He had all the male children two years old and younger put to death (v. 16). It is estimated that the population of Bethlehem at that time was less than a thousand people, so there were likely somewhere between ten and twenty families that lost a son that day in a tragedy that surely shook the entire town to the core. Not long after that Herod died, and Joseph had another dream in which God told him to take his family back to the land of Israel (vv. 19–20). But Herod’s son Archelaus, another ruthless ruler, was now reigning over Judea, making it unsafe to go back there. So Joseph, warned yet again in a dream, took his family back to the place where he and Mary had once lived in Galilee—to Nazareth (vv. 21–23).<sup>1</sup>

### Discussion Questions

Review Exodus 1:15–22 and 2:11–15. In what ways were Herod’s actions in Matthew 2:13–16 parallel those of the ancient king of Egypt?

What does Herod’s response to the news of the coming Messiah say about his view of the Messiah?

Three times in Matthew 2:13–23 we hear that something happened to Jesus in order that the Old Testament might be “fulfilled” (2:15, 17–18, 23). What is Matthew trying to show us about the relationship between Old Testament expectations and the arrival of Jesus?

How does this passage flesh out Jesus’ claim in John 5:39 that (Old Testament) Scripture speaks of Him?

How does Jesus fulfill Hosea 11:1?

How is Matthew 1:23 a fulfillment passage if the Old Testament doesn’t mention Nazareth?

How was God’s providence evident in Jesus’ flight to and return from Egypt?

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<sup>1</sup> David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 42–43.

When, like Herod, have you felt threatened by Jesus' Kingship?

What can we learn about faith and obedience from Joseph's responsiveness? How long would it take you to say "yes" if God asked you to relocate?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from *John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 40–48.*]

The first of the four Old Testament passages around which Matthew presents the events of chapter 2 is that of the Messiah's being born in Bethlehem (2:6; cf. Mic. 5:2), which has been discussed in relation to the coming of the magi. The other three are given in the present text.

### **THE \_\_\_\_\_ TO EGYPT (2:13–15)**

The coming of the magi no doubt was a time of great encouragement and assurance to Joseph and Mary, confirming the wondrous words of the angels to them (Matt. 1:20–23; Luke 1:26–38), to Zacharias (Luke 1:11–20), and to the shepherds (Luke 2:8–14). It also confirmed the testimonies of Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–45) and of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25–38) about the Child to whom Mary gave birth. Even these wise men from far-off Parthia had been told the news by God and came to worship Jesus and give Him gifts.

But the rejoicing was short-lived. No sooner had the magi **departed** than **an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream**, giving him a warning from God. This news was not of joy and hope, but of danger and urgency. **Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.** Just as the magi had been warned by God to disobey Herod (v. 12), Joseph was now warned by God to flee the evil, murderous king...

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it seems reasonable that Joseph used the valuable gifts of the magi (the gold, frankincense, and myrrh) to pay for the trip to Egypt and the stay there, where the Lord instructed Joseph to keep his family **until I tell you**.

Obviously God could have protected His Son in many other ways and in many other places, even in Bethlehem or Jerusalem, under Herod's very nose. He could have blinded Herod's soldiers, destroyed them by an angel, or simply have miraculously hidden the family. But God chose to protect Him by the very ordinary and unmiraculous means of flight to a foreign

country. The commands to go to Egypt and then to leave were given supernaturally, but the trip itself and the stay there were, as far as we are told, marked by no special divine intervention or provision. The family was not instantly transported to Egypt, but had to make the long, tiresome journey on their own, just as hundreds of other Jewish families had done during the previous several centuries. To decrease the chance of being noticed, Joseph took the common precaution of leaving **by night**, probably telling no one of his plans.

We know nothing of the stay in Egypt except the bare fact that Jesus and His family were there...It is likely that the stay in Egypt **until the death of Herod** lasted no more than a few months. It is now that we are told the primary reason for the family's going to Egypt: **that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Out of Egypt did I call My Son."** The Old Testament writers were the Lord's spokesmen. Just as they had no way of knowing, apart from divine revelation, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, they had no other way of knowing that He would live awhile in Egypt. The flight to Egypt was one more piece of divine evidence that Jesus was God's Son, the promised Messiah.

Seven centuries earlier God had told Hosea that "out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). Herod's threat was no surprise to the Lord, who, long before Herod was born, had made plans to foil that wicked king's plans against the true King... When Matthew quotes the last part of that verse from Hosea, he applies it to Christ. Though Hosea was not knowingly predicting that the Messiah would also one day be brought out of Egypt, Matthew shows that Jesus' return from Egypt was *pictured* by Israel's calling from that same country many centuries earlier. The Exodus, therefore, was a type of Jesus' return from Egypt with Joseph and Mary. As God had once brought the people of Israel out of Egypt to be His chosen nation, He now had brought out His greater Son to be the Messiah...

In a still deeper sense Jesus came out of Egypt with Israel under Moses. As Matthew has already shown, Jesus descended from Abraham and from the royal line of David. Had Israel perished in Egypt, or in the wilderness, or in any other way, the Messiah could not Himself have come out of Egypt or even have been born.

### **THE \_\_\_\_\_ AT RAMAH (2:16–18)**

The third fulfilled prophecy that Matthew mentions in chapter 2 is that of Herod's brutal slaughter in Bethlehem. After Joseph had secretly taken Jesus and His mother to the safety of Egypt, the malevolent Herod, enraged by the magi's failure to report back to him (see 2:7–8), committed one of the bloodiest acts of his career, and certainly the cruelest...

Herod's hatred of the newborn contender to his throne began when he first heard the news of His birth. The purpose of having the magi report back to him was to learn the exact information needed to discover and destroy the Child—not to worship Him, as he had deceitfully told the magi (2:8). The magi's going home by another way, and so avoiding Herod, added infuriation to hatred, so that **he became very enraged**...

Herod's rage was vented in the desperate and heartless slaughter of **all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under**. He went up to the age of **two** because of **the time which he had ascertained from the magi**. Jesus was probably no older than six months at this time, but even if that had been the age Herod determined from the magi's information (2:7), it is likely he would have taken no chances. Killing all the male babies up to age two was a small precaution in his evil thinking, in case the magi had miscalculated or deceived him.

Herod's crime was made even more vile and heinous by the fact that he knew that the Child he sought to destroy was the Messiah, the Christ. He questioned the chief priests and scribes specifically about "where the Christ was to be born" (2:4). He arrogantly and stupidly set himself against God's very Anointed (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22).

It seems as if, from the earliest part of his message, Matthew wanted to portray the rejection of the Messiah by those from among whom He came and in whose behalf He first came (Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16). The chief priests and the scribes, along with the many other Jews in Jerusalem who must have heard or known about the magi's message of the one "who has been born King of the Jews," showed no interest at all in finding Him, much less in worshiping Him (see Matt. 2:2–5). Though Herod was not himself a Jew and had no right to a Jewish throne, he nevertheless declared himself to be the king of the Jews and made a pretense of concern for Jewish religious and economic interests. In an illegitimate and perverted way, therefore, Herod's rejection of Christ both reflected and represented the Jews' rejection of Him.

The slaughter in Bethlehem was the beginning of the tragedy and bloodshed that would result from Israel's rejection of her Savior and true King. Those innocent and precious babies of Bethlehem were the first casualties in the now-intensified warfare between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God's Christ, God's Anointed. Within two generations from that time (in A.D. 70) Jerusalem would see its Temple destroyed and over a million of its people massacred by the troops of Titus. Yet that destruction will pale in comparison with that of the Antichrist—a ruler immeasurably more wicked and powerful than Herod—when in the Great Tribulation he will shed more of Israel's blood than will ever have been shed before (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21–22). All of that bloodshed is over the conflict with the Messiah.

The least of Herod's intentions was to fulfill prophecy, but that is what his slaughter did. **Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled**. Herod's beastly act is recorded only by Matthew, yet it was predicted in a text given to the prophet Jeremiah... In the passage (Jer. 31:15) from which Matthew here quotes, Jeremiah was speaking of the great sorrow that would soon be experienced in Israel when most of her people would be carried captive to Babylon. **Ramah**, a town about five miles north of Jerusalem, was on the border of the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. It was also the place where Jewish captives were assembled for deportation to Babylon (Jer. 40:1). **Rachel**, the wife of Jacob-Israel, was the mother of Joseph, whose two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, became progenitors of the two half-tribes that bore their names. Ephraim is often used in the Old Testament as a synonym for the northern kingdom. **Rachel** was also the mother of Benjamin, whose tribe became part of

the southern kingdom. She had once cried, “Give me children, or else I die” (Gen. 30:1), and now her beloved “children,” her immeasurably multiplied descendants, were being taken captive to a foreign and pagan land.

**Rachel weeping for her children** therefore represented the lamentation of all Jewish mothers who wept over Israel’s great tragedy in the days of Jeremiah, and most specifically typified and prefigured the mothers of Bethlehem weeping bitterly over the massacre of their children by Herod in His attempt to kill the Messiah. So even while Israel’s Messiah was still a babe, Rachel had cause to weep again, even as the Messiah Himself would later weep over Jerusalem because of His people’s rejection of Him and the afflictions they would suffer as a consequence (Luke 19:41–44)...The massacre of the little ones in Bethlehem signaled the start of terrifying conflict.

### THE \_\_\_\_\_ TO NAZARETH (2:19–23)

The fourth and final prophecy that Matthew mentions in chapter 2 pertains to the journey of Jesus’ family from Egypt to Nazareth. **When Herod was dead**, the greatest immediate danger to Jesus was over. In his *Antiquities* Josephus reports that Herod “died of this, ulcerated entrails, putrified and maggot-filled organs, constant convulsions, foul breath, and neither physicians nor warm baths led to recovery.” A rather fitting end, it seems, for such a man...

The angel of the Lord had told Joseph to stay in Egypt “until I tell you” (2:13). Now the angel reappeared to Joseph as promised, telling him, **Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead**. The fact that the angel spoke of **those who sought the Child’s life** indicates that Herod was not alone in his plans to destroy his supposed rival. But like Herod, the other conspirators seeking the death of **the Child** were themselves now **dead**.

Joseph was not instructed to return to any particular city or region but simply to **take the Child and His mother back into the land of Israel**. When he arrived in southern Israel, however, and **heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there**. The ones who had previously sought to kill the infant Jesus were dead, but **Archelaus** posed another, more general, threat. In one of his numerous acts of brutality shortly before he died, Herod had executed two popular Jewish rabbis, Judas and Matthias, who had stirred up their disciples and other faithful Jews in Jerusalem to tear down the offensive Roman eagle that the king had arrogantly erected over the Temple gate. The following Passover an insurrection broke out, and Archelaus, reflecting his father’s senseless cruelty, executed three thousand Jews, many of whom were Passover pilgrims who had no part in the revolt.

Any Jew, therefore, who lived in the territory of Archelaus was in danger. Consequently Joseph was again **warned by God in a dream**, [and] **he departed for the regions of Galilee**. That they **came and resided in a city called Nazareth** was not only because Joseph and Mary were originally from there (Luke 2:4–5) by divine providence, but **that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled**. Matthew focuses on two features through all of this narrative: (1)

divine revelation as indicated by angelic instruction for every move, and (2) the fulfillment of a divine plan revealed in the Old Testament.

The specific statement that the Messiah would **be called a Nazarene** does not appear in the Old Testament...Matthew does not tell us which prophets predicted that the Messiah would be called a **Nazarene**, but only that more than one of them did so. The prophecy is said to be **fulfilled** when Jesus was taken to live in Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary had formerly lived. Matthew's original readers were largely Jewish, and it was probably common knowledge among them who the specific prophets were that had made the prediction. For later readers, the Holy Spirit obviously felt it was enough that we simply know that the prediction was made and that it was fulfilled as Matthew explains.

**Nazareth** was about 55 miles north of Jerusalem, in **the regions of Galilee**, where the Lord had directed Joseph to go. The town was in an elevated basin, about one and a half miles across, and was inhabited largely by people noted for their crude and violent ways. The term *Nazarene* had long been a term of derision, used to describe any person who was rough and rude. That is why Nathanael, who was from Cana, a few miles to the south, asked Philip, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). The question is especially significant coming from Nathanael, who by Jesus' own word was "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (v. 47). Nathanael was not given to maligning his neighbors, but he was shocked that the one "of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote" (v. 45) actually could come from such a disreputable place as Nazareth.

The early Jewish persecutors of the church apparently considered Jesus' being from Nazareth as evidence that He could *not* be the Messiah, rather than, as Matthew tells us, a sign that He *was*...Jesus' living in Nazareth not only fulfilled the unnamed prophets' prediction, but gave Him a name, Jesus the Nazarene, that would be used as a title of reproach, thus fulfilling many other prophecies that depict the Messiah as "despised and forsaken of men" (Isa. 53:3; cf. 49:7; Ps. 22:6–8; 69:20–21). The gospel writers make clear the fact that He was scorned and hated (see Matt. 12:24; 27:21–23, 63; Luke 23:4; John 5:18; 6:66; 9:22, 29). It was therefore at lowly and despised Nazareth that the royal Son of God, along with the righteous Joseph and Mary, made His home for some thirty years.

## Conclusion

The final quotation in verse 23 brings chapter 2 to a fitting conclusion. The King of the universe has come to save sinners, and from the start He is defied and derided by the very sinners He came to save. Whether it's Herod, the chief priests, or the scribes, they are all setting themselves up against Jesus as His enemies. The reality is, we do the same thing...

The story of Matthew 2 and the story of Christmas are not simply about what happened two thousand years ago in the time of the New Testament, or three thousand years ago in the time of the Old Testament. This story is also about you and me. We're all enslaved to sin, in need of an exodus, in need of deliverance. And we are familiar with pain and hurt in this sinful world.

We know suffering in our own lives and we see suffering all around us, and we long for an end to mourning. Yet, in our sin, we are enemies of the Savior. But He, Jesus, has come to inaugurate a new exodus, to make our deliverance from sin possible. He has come to end our mournful exile, to bring hope in the midst of hurt and life in the midst of death as a new King with a new covenant that unites us to God. And none of this is based on our work for Him, but on His work for us. And He has come to love us in all our sinful rebellion, though in our minds and in our hearts we have all rejected Him. **By His grace and for His glory, He has redeemed us.**

Christ has come. He has given His life for us, He has shed His blood as a perfect sacrifice, and He has risen from the grave to bring eternal life to all who believe in Him. This is the gospel that brings Christmas pleasure in the midst of worldly pain.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 46–47.

## Lesson 5 (1-28-24)

### The Ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12)

<sup>3</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight.’ ”

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

- Matthew 3:1-12 ESV

Many years have passed between Matthew 2 and 3. At the end of Matthew 2, Jesus was a boy; by Matthew 3, He is a young man about to begin His ministry. But before He begins that ministry, two important events must take place.

The initial twelve verses of Matthew 3 describe the ministry of John the Baptist, sent to “prepare the way” for the coming Messiah. John baptizes the Christ, inaugurating his own ministry. Immediately following that, another “baptism” occurs, a baptism of fire where Jesus faces terrible temptation. By successfully overcoming this temptation, the Messiah proves ready to undertake His Father’s work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Navigators, *LifeChange: Matthew*, ed. Karen Lee-Thorp, The LifeChange Bible Study Series (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 33.



John was an important figure in his own right. His preaching created a widespread revival movement (see v. 5), and his followers constituted a significant group within Judaism which maintained its separate existence beyond the New Testament period. His ministry is recorded by Josephus (*Ant.* xviii. 116–119) more amply than that of Jesus. But for Matthew his significance lay only in his relation to Jesus, and his account of John lays emphasis on the connection (see on v. 2). Wherever John is mentioned in the Gospel it is to throw light on the mission of Jesus. Here his preaching prepares the way for Jesus' ministry, and provides the setting for the launching of Jesus' mission.<sup>2</sup>

### **Discussion Questions**

What message did John preach?

How are people to respond to the news of the nearness of God's kingdom-rule (Matt. 3:2, 6, 8)?

What does it mean to "repent"? What is the difference between regretful confession and true repentance?

How would you counsel someone who professes Christ but shows no marks of repentance?

How would you explain the "kingdom of heaven" to someone who has never heard of it?

How did Isaiah describe John's ministry (3:3)?

Read the full prophecy about John the Baptist in Isaiah 40:1–5. What do those verses reveal about John? What do they reveal about Jesus?

What was the primary theme or purpose of John's ministry? What are the key images John used in these verses? What do they communicate? What did John teach about the coming Messiah?

Why do you think John reacted to the Pharisees and Sadducees in the way that he did (3:7–10)? What prompted such a reaction?

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<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 94–95.

What warning did John give in 3:10? Whom was he warning?

What characteristics does John use to describe the one coming after him (3:11–12)? List the characteristics he mentions, and explain why each is significant.

What is baptism? What does it signify?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 49–55.]

In order to understand Matthew 3 and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, we need to remember the context, including how the Old Testament ended. Just a few pages before Matthew's Gospel, in the last two verses of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi predicted the following:

*Remember the instruction of Moses My servant, the statutes and ordinances I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Look, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome Day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse. (Mal 4:5–6)*

God announced through Malachi that He would send Elijah the prophet to announce the fearsome Day of the Lord. This Elijah would turn people back to one another, but he would also bring a decree of destruction. After this prediction there were four hundred years of silence, and then John the Baptist came on the scene. John is a figure who is in many ways parallel to Elijah—a prophet calling the people back to God after a long drought. Consider Jesus' description of John the Baptist in Matthew 11:7–15:

*What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothes? Look, those who wear soft clothes are in kings' palaces. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and far more than a prophet. This is the one it is written about:*

*Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You;*

*he will prepare Your way before You.*

*I assure you: Among those born of women no one greater than John the Baptist has appeared, but the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been suffering violence, and the violent have been seizing it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John; if you're willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who is to come. Anyone who has ears should listen!*

## The \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus makes clear in these verses that Malachi was not prophesying a literal reappearance of Elijah, but rather the coming of a prophet just like Elijah who would prepare the way of the Lord. Matthew 3 tells us at least four things about the man John the Baptist. First, he would come **prophesying boldly**. Matthew quotes from Isaiah 40:3, where Isaiah told of a prophet who would come crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness." The imagery here in ancient times is of a herald who would come before a king, announcing the king's coming and making sure the road on which the king would travel was smooth and ready. John's first words in verse 2 speak to this preparation ministry: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" Clearly, this was no ordinary king.

Second, not only is John prophesying boldly, but he is also **living simply**. John was in the wilderness with a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt. This is how 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah, as a "hairy man with a leather belt around his waist." Matthew also tells us that John ate locusts and wild honey (3:4), so there was nothing elaborate or attractive about him at all.

Third, John was **baptizing openly**, which is where he gets the name "John the Baptist" or "John the Baptizer." From the beginning of the New Testament, the picture we have of baptism is of immersion in water. John was, after all, in a river that people came down into to be baptized. This word "baptize" literally means "to plunge" or "to dip" (BDAG, 164–65). So the prophet could even be called "John the Dipper."

Fourth, John came **serving humbly**. The prophet knew his role. Later, in verse 11, he says of Jesus the Messiah, "I am not worthy to remove His sandals." John didn't feel worthy to do one of the lowliest, most servile tasks imaginable in relation to his Lord. We hear John's heart most clearly summarized in John 3:30, where he says, "He must increase, but I must decrease." John the Baptist knew that his place in human history was not to point people to himself, but to prepare people for the King.

## The \_\_\_\_\_

After considering the man, now we turn to the message. In order to prepare people for the King, John came preaching, "**Repent**, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (3:2) But what does it mean biblically to repent? In the Greek, this word "repent" (*metanoeo*) was

sometimes used to describe a change of one's mind, but the biblical idea of repentance, the kind of repentance John was calling for here, involves much more than simply a change of thoughts. Biblically, **repentance involves confession (admission of sin)**. We read in verse 6 that people were coming out to the wilderness to be baptized by John, and they were confessing their sins. Throughout Scripture, God calls His people to take responsibility for their sins by confessing them. Simple recognition or admission of sin is useless.

In several different places in Scripture we read about people who merely acknowledged their sin but went no further. In Exodus 9:27 Pharaoh acknowledged his sin against the Lord before Moses and Aaron; in Joshua 7:20 Achan admitted his sin to Joshua; in 1 Samuel 15:24 an insincere Saul confessed to Samuel his sin of keeping back what the Lord had commanded him to destroy. The examples of Pharaoh, Achan, and Saul teach us that there's more to repentance than confession. Beyond mere confession, **repentance involves contrition (sorrow over sin)**. There must be a deep realization in your heart that you have sinned against God. It's the kind of sorrow we see in Psalm 51 as David, in contrite brokenness, cries out to God, saying, "Against You—You alone—I have sinned" (v. 4). This is not merely sorrow over getting caught, the kind of worldly sorrow Paul speaks about that is nothing more than selfish regret; rather, godly sorrow is deep realization that you have offended God, and this leads to godly repentance (2 Cor 7:10).

Biblical repentance means more than simply feeling bad about sin. Later in Matthew, we'll see the rich young ruler who walked away from Jesus was sorrowful but not repentant (19:16–22), for he didn't want to part with his possessions. And later we read that Judas was sorrowful for betraying Jesus, but he wasn't repentant (27:3–10). These examples lead us to a third aspect of biblical repentance: **Repentance involves a conversion (turn from sin)**. That's what this word "repent" means: to "be converted" (BDAG, 640). So yes, we must recognize our sin and be sorrowful for it, but we must also renounce it, or turn from it. We must do what Elijah commanded the people to do in 1 Kings 18 when he was surrounded by the prophets of Baal: "If Yahweh is God, follow Him. But if Baal, follow him" (v. 21). Next we learn why this kind of repentance is so urgent.

We must repent, John the Baptist tells us, **for the kingdom of heaven has come near**. This is the first of 32 times in the book of Matthew that we will see this phrase "kingdom of heaven." The other Gospel writers typically use the phrase "kingdom of God," which basically has the same meaning. The kingdom of heaven is the rule and reign of God, and it was breaking into the world in a new way in the ministry of Jesus.

With the arrival of this kingdom, two realities are crystal clear, one of which is this: **salvation is here**. When we put together the truths of the coming of the kingdom in Matthew 3:2 and the naming of Jesus in Matthew 1:21 ("He will save His people from their sins"), it's evident that God's salvation has come in the person of Jesus Christ. This is why God graciously warns us through John the Baptist to confess our sins—because the One who has come to save us from our sins is here. The proclamation that the kingdom of heaven is at hand is a great word of

encouragement, but there is also a strong warning in these words, too, a warning that's reiterated throughout chapter 3.

The arrival of the kingdom means salvation is here, but it also means that **damnation is near**. This sobering reality becomes clear in verse 12, but even at the outset of John's announcement, the good news of God's kingdom was terrible news for all who refused to repent. The day of the coming of the Lord, prophesied throughout the Old Testament, was a day of blessing *and* judgment (Joel 2:1–2; Amos 5:18–20; Zeph 1:14–16). This is why John's message of repentance comes with such urgency.

## The \_\_\_\_\_

We've seen the man and the message, and now finally we turn to the method of John the Baptist. The picture of baptism that we see in Matthew 3 is particularly instructive here, both **the baptism of Jews** and of Jesus. Baptism was not common in Old Testament history leading up to the time of John the Baptist. In fact, the only people who were baptized were Gentiles who decided to become followers of Yahweh. Baptism was a way of saying, "I am an outsider, renouncing my former ways, and embracing faith in the one true God, the God of Israel." Therefore, it is astonishing that people from Jerusalem and Judea—*Jewish* people—came to be baptized. They were admitting that their Jewishness did not guarantee them a right standing before God. They realized that they needed to personally confess their sins and profess faith in God. Here, for the first time in Scripture, we begin to see the significance of baptism.

To be baptized is to **renounce your dependence on self** and to acknowledge that there is nothing inherent in you that can save you before God, including **your family heritage**. Ethnicity was extremely important to Jews, many of whom believed that simply being an Israelite meant that they were right before God. This kind of belief helps explain why John sternly confronts the Pharisees and Sadducees in verses 7–10. These two groups of Jewish leaders were on different pages in a number of ways, but they were on the same page in one central way: they both believed that their Jewish heritage made them right before God. However, when these groups came out to John's baptism, John referred to them as a "brood of vipers!" (v. 7), literally the offspring of snakes. He warns them in verse 9 not to presume that their status before God was safe simply because they could trace their lineage to Abraham. A refusal to repent will result in judgment, regardless of one's ethnicity. And this judgment is near, for John tells these religious leaders that "the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees!" (v. 10).

We continue to need to be reminded that our family heritage cannot save us. With all due respect to brothers and sisters from traditions where infant baptism is practiced, many of whom are close friends of mine, the New Testament picture of baptism indicates that Jesus is opposed to the idea that one is born into God's family by physical birth. It is dangerous and potentially damning for people to believe that because they were born into a Christian family, and maybe even baptized into a Christian family, their status before God is secure. This kind of thinking is rampant around the world, where "Christian" is a family or social identification. However, in Scripture baptism is not a sign that you have been born into a covenant family;

instead, it's a sign indicating that regardless of what family you've been born into, you must personally repent, confess your sins, and put your faith in the Lord.

In baptism you not only renounce your family heritage; you renounce **your personal righteousness**. The Pharisees, in particular, were known for their extensive study and attentive keeping of the law. They based their lives on Jewish laws and traditions, working to attain righteousness before God. Yet, as we've already seen, baptism is an admission that you are not righteous and you need to renounce your sinful ways.

Baptism also means renouncing **your worldly success**. This applies especially to the Sadducees, who were known as rich landowners and beneficiaries of profits at the temple. They lived for present reward in this world, but baptism is a confession that we are living for future reward in the world to come.

Baptism is such a common symbol for many in the church today that if we're not careful, we'll miss some of the imagery here. This is a picture of death. Dipping (immersion) symbolizes a decisive, even violent, turn from yourself and your way of life, including any dependence on your heritage, your righteousness, or your success. Baptism indicates that you are going to **rely on the mercy of God**. It is a confession, a profession, that there's nothing you can do to save yourself from your sins; you need the Lord to do that. That's the good news John brought in verse 11: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the One who is coming after me is more powerful than I. I am not worthy to remove His sandals. He Himself will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Baptism is a foretaste of a greater reality to come.

The good news, John says, is that **the Savior King is coming**. The One who will save you from your sins is coming, and He will baptize you with "the Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 11). This verse is potentially confusing on a couple of different levels, so a brief explanation may be helpful. First, when John talks about Jesus coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit, he isn't saying that water baptism won't be important once Jesus comes on the scene. We know that because Jesus tells His disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel to go and baptize people in all nations (28:19), and that's exactly what we see the followers of Jesus doing in Acts (2:41; 8:12). Baptism with water would be an outward symbol of an inward reality, the inward reality of the baptism of the Spirit.

A second clarification may also be helpful here related to this baptism with the Spirit. The baptism of the Spirit is not a special baptism for a few select Christians that some associate with speaking in tongues; rather, baptism with the Spirit is a way of referring to Jesus' transforming work of putting His Spirit in us and changing our hearts from the inside out. This baptism with the Spirit happens at the point of our salvation. John says that **Jesus will transform your hearts**. The Old Testament prophesied about this new work of God, for Jeremiah tells us that God's law would be written on the hearts of His people as a part of a new covenant (31:33). Ezekiel likewise speaks about God giving His people a "new heart" and a "new spirit" (36:26), while Joel speaks of a day when God would pour out His Spirit on all His people (2:28–29). Jesus will transform your heart, John says, and **He will purify your lives**. That's what it means when it

says that Jesus will baptize with “fire” (Matt 3:11). There’s a debate about whether fire here refers to purification or the judgment that Christ brings. In Acts 2:3 we see the Spirit coming on the church in tongues of fire, so at least at that point purification is in view. At other times in Scripture, fire is a picture of purification, refining, and cleansing (Num 31:23; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2–3).

The coming of the Savior King wasn’t all John announced. He also warned people that **the Righteous Judge is close**. In verse 12 He said of Jesus, “His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff He will burn up with fire that never goes out.” This imagery of winnowing may not be familiar to us, but it refers to the process of separating *grain*, the seeds, from *chaff*, the hulls that cover the seeds. A farmer would take a winnowing shovel, toss both the grain and the chaff together into the air, and the grain, which was heavier, would fall to the ground, while the chaff would blow to the side. The farmer would then keep the grain, and he’d sweep all the chaff together and throw it into a fire. This winnowing process is a vivid picture of the judgment of God. Jesus’ ministry means not only that God’s salvation is near, but also that **His wrath is imminent**.

When Jesus refers to the “fire that never goes out” (v. 12), He is making clear that **His judgment is eternal**. This may sound severe, but we must keep in mind that God is righteous, and He is wholly set against sin. Some might think of John as the first “hellfire and damnation” preacher, but don’t forget that John was also the first to preach grace, mercy, and rescue in Jesus Christ. He announced to the people that though they were condemned in their sin, destined to receive the imminent wrath of God, there was a way out. The Savior King had come.

## Conclusion

In many ways the ministry of John the Baptist was unique, but there are also many ways in which the church’s ministry today is similar to John’s. At least two ways in which we should imitate John’s ministry are worth highlighting.

First, we must tell people to **repent and be baptized**. This initial message of John’s was repeated verbatim by Jesus in 4:17: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Clearly, the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus is the message of the Bible to every single person in the world today. You must **turn from your sin**, which means renouncing dependence on yourself, your family heritage, your personal righteousness, and your worldly accomplishments. All of these things will burn up when it matters most, at the day of judgment.

Repentance is not simply turning from your sin; you must also **trust in the Son**. The beloved Son of God came to save you from your sin. As you trust in Him, you **rest in His righteousness**. Matthew 3:17 says that Jesus is God’s beloved Son in whom He is well pleased, so unite your life to Jesus by faith. Then, when the Father looks on you, He will see His Son and be pleased in you. It is amazing to think that we are right before God, not by trusting in anything we have done, but simply by trusting in Christ, by resting in His righteousness. And as you rest in His righteousness, **bear the fruit of faith in Him**. This was John the Baptist’s message to the

Pharisees and Sadducees: “Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance” (3:8). But what does it mean to bear the fruit of faith?

First, as a Christian, you should be baptized. I am always shocked to see how many followers of Christ have never been baptized. If that’s you, don’t wait another minute, because you are living in disobedience to Jesus Christ. And you’re missing out on the joy of identification with the Christ, the King who died and rose from the grave for you. Though other kinds of public professions of faith have become common—raising hands, walking aisles, taking stands—baptism is *the* biblical, visible, public picture of saving identification with Christ.

Second, for those followers of Christ who have been baptized, live your lives as the overflow of faith in Him. The essence of following Christ, as initially displayed in baptism, is death to self and to every effort to improve yourself by obeying God in your own strength and resolve. Don’t look to yourself; trust in Christ. Then ask Him to work in you so that you might trust Him more with every aspect of your life—your marriage, your family, your schedule, and your possessions. Ask Him to do things in and through you that you could never do on your own. That’s what it means to bear “fruit consistent with repentance” (3:8).

After repenting and being baptized, the second overall application we can take from John’s example is that we must **resolve to proclaim this gospel**. John’s purpose on the pages of human history was to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Everything he did was for that purpose. Obviously, we don’t prepare the way for Christ’s coming; instead, we tell the world that **God’s Son has come**. We don’t say, “He’s coming,” but “He’s come!” This is good news: Jesus, the King, has come to save us from our sins. But there’s bad news too. Just as John the Baptist warned of impending judgment, we must do the same. We must tell people that **God’s judgment is coming**—imminent wrath and eternal punishment. You may think, “I can’t tell somebody *that*,” but in reality, there’s nothing more unloving than *not* telling people that. Proclaim the good news to friends, coworkers, and everyone else you meet. Tell them about the Savior who has come.





## Lesson 6 (2-4-24)

### The Coronation of the King (Matthew 3:13-17)

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup>John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup>But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup>And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup>and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

- Matthew 3:13-17 ESV

When Jesus goes to the desert to receive John’s baptism, John initially tries to deter him because he recognizes Jesus as the more powerful one who brings Messianic baptism. But John consents after Jesus says this water baptism will “fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15). With these words, Jesus reveals that God’s saving activity, which was prophesied throughout the Old Testament, is now being fulfilled with the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry, a ministry that will culminate in his death on the cross. Jesus’ baptism is an endorsement of John’s ministry and message, and it links Jesus’ cause to John’s. Though Jesus needs no repentance or cleansing, through water baptism he identifies with the sinful humanity he came to save (cf. 2Co 5:21).

Upon Jesus’ baptism, God opens up the heavens and anoints Jesus with a visible manifestation of his Spirit. God’s voice from heaven audibly confirms the existing relationship between Jesus the unique Son and God the heavenly Father (v. 17; cf. Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1–4). The Father is pleased to send his Son to carry out his divine mission to bring salvation to the nations. The anointing and pronouncement formally confirm Jesus’ Messianic identity as Israel’s true king and commission him as God’s appointed servant for ministry, and Jesus will carry out his public ministry in the power of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

#### Discussion Questions

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan specifically to be baptized by John (3:13). Why do you think Jesus did this, especially since John’s baptism was one of repentance?

Why did John try to deter Jesus from being baptized (3:14)?

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<sup>1</sup> David Gundersen, “Psalms,” in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1293.

What was “proper” about Jesus being baptized by John (3:15)? How did it “fulfill all righteousness”?

What’s the difference between water baptism and Spirit baptism?

What is significant about each of the things that happened after Jesus’ baptism (Heaven opened; Spirit of God descending like a dove; Voice from heaven)?

How are all three members of the Trinity present in Matthew 3:15–17?

For the reader who reflects on Old Testament allusions, Jesus’ baptism is thick with implications for understanding his identity and mission. Read Isaiah 42:1; 61:1; and 2 Samuel 7:12–14 in their respective contexts (see also Ps. 2:6–7). Note any parallels with Matthew 3:16–17. What does this tell us about Jesus’ unique identity?

What would you say to make a case for baptism by immersion (as opposed to sprinkling)?

Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from *John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 73–74.*]

Though Matthew does not use the terms, we see in this passage what might be called the divine commissioning, or the coronation, of the King. The gospel writer has given us the King’s ancestry (1:1–17), His arrival (1:18–25), His adoration (2:1–12), His attestation (2:13–23), and His announcement (3:1–12). Now we see His anointing, His coronation.

There is something strikingly majestic about this great event that brings all the preceding events into focus. Here, for the first time, the Lord Jesus Christ comes fully onto the stage of the gospel story. Here is where His ministry and work truly begin. Everything before this, even those events which directly involved the young Jesus, were introductory and preparatory. Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth are all behind. From this day on the Son of Man would call no place His earthly home (8:20), but was to move about fulfilling His mission.

After an eternity of glory in heaven and some thirty years of virtual obscurity on earth, the Messiah-King is manifested publicly for the world to see and know. As “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” John the Baptist had faithfully prepared the way for the King, even as Isaiah had prophesied (3:3; Isa. 40:3). The herald of the King had announced the coming of the King, and now the King Himself appears for His coronation. One cannot fail to be aware that in these few verses Matthew reports the three central and absolutely critical aspects of Jesus’ coronation as King of kings:

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### OF THE SON (3:13–15)

We will first look at some of the details of the baptism and then at its significance. We are not told the exact time to which the **then** refers, and Matthew no doubt uses the term simply to show the general sequence of events. We do not know the precise length of John’s ministry, but according to Luke he began preaching “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee ... in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (3:1–2). The best assumption is that it occurred in the year A.D. 29, quite a few months, perhaps nearly a year, before Jesus’ baptism. John also continued to preach for a while afterward, causing his ministry to be ending as Jesus’ ministry was beginning.

We know that John was about six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:26) and that Jesus began His ministry when He “was about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). If John began preaching at the same age, he would have been ministering for about six months when Jesus came to him for baptism. But we have no reason to believe that the two began ministering at the same age. And though we know how old Jesus was when He began, we are given no reason as to why He began at that age...

We know from the parallel passage in Luke that when **Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan**, He did not come for a private ceremony. “Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized” (Luke 3:21). Jesus was not to have a private, secret anointing as David first did (1 Sam. 16:13; cf. 2 Sam. 2:4)...

We know from John’s greeting to Jesus that he recognized Him immediately, but we have no idea how well they knew each other at this time. They were cousins, and before their births Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months in the hill country of Judah, where the two women shared with each other their wonderful blessings (Luke 1:39–56). Elizabeth knew before Jesus’ birth that Mary’s child would be the Messiah, because she addressed Mary as “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43). Surely Elizabeth would often have shared this wonderful news with her son John, the one whom the angel had told her husband would be “the forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17; cf. v. 66). Both boys grew physically and spiritually (Luke 1:80; 2:40), but they did so separately—Jesus in Nazareth and John in the wilderness. It may be, therefore, that they had little, if any, ongoing firsthand acquaintance with one another.

Jesus came **to John** specifically **to be baptized by him**, as indicated by the aorist passive infinitive (*baptisthēnai*), which emphasizes purpose. But the idea of Jesus' being baptized by him was unthinkable to John. He not only knew Jesus' human identity but His divine identity. The apostle John tells us that John the Baptist "saw Jesus coming to him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' " (John 1:29). John knew that this was God's own anointed Messiah, come to fulfill God's redemptive purpose. The Baptist's first reaction to Jesus' request for baptism was **I have need to be baptized by You**.

It is not difficult to understand John's concern. His baptism was for confession of sin and repentance (3:2, 6, 11), of which he himself had need; but Jesus had no sins to confess or be forgiven of. John's baptism was for those who turned from their sin and thereby became fit for the arrival of the great King. Why, then, would the sinless King Himself want to be baptized?

...John resisted baptizing Jesus for exactly the opposite reason that he resisted baptizing the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were in great need of repentance but were unwilling to ask for it and gave no evidence of having it. John therefore refused to baptize them, calling them a "brood of vipers" (3:7). Jesus, by contrast, came for baptism, though He alone of all mankind had no need of repentance. John refused to baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they were totally unworthy of it. Now he was almost equally reluctant to baptize Jesus, because He was too worthy for it.

John knew that his baptism for repentance from sin was totally inappropriate for Jesus. John acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Why should the One who takes away sin submit Himself to a ceremony that represents confession and repentance of sin?

John's attempt to **prevent** Jesus from being baptized is therefore a testimony to Jesus' sinlessness. This prophet, of whom the Lord Himself said there had "not arisen anyone greater" (Matt. 11:11), knew that he himself was not sinless. **I have need to be baptized by You**, he told Jesus, **and do You come to me?** "I am only a prophet of God," John was saying, "and I am sinful like everyone whom I baptize. But You are the Son of God and sinless. You are not a sinner. Why, then, do you ask me to baptize You?" Among John's many God-given insights into who Jesus was, what He was like, and what He had come to do, was his knowledge that the One who now stood before Him was without sin. In a less direct but yet definite way, John declared with the writer of Hebrews that Jesus, though "tempted in all things as we are, [is] yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). So even in his reluctance to baptize Christ, John was fulfilling the role of a herald and the office of a prophet by proclaiming the perfection of the Savior.

Why did Jesus, who was even more aware of His own sinlessness than John was, want to submit Himself to an act that testified to confession and repentance of sin? ...Jesus Himself explains to John His reason for wanting to be baptized. In His first recorded words since the age of twelve, when He told His parents, "Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" (Luke 2:49), Jesus said, **Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness**. These are words of royal dignity and humility.

Jesus did not deny that He was spiritually superior to John or that He was sinless. **Permit it at this time** was an idiom meaning that the act of His baptism, though not seemingly appropriate, was indeed appropriate for this special **time**. Jesus understood John's reluctance and knew that it came from deep spiritual commitment and sincerity. He gave permission for John to do what, without divine instruction, he would never have been willing to do. He assured the prophet that **in this way it is fitting**, and went on to explain to John that His baptism was important for both of their ministries, **for us to fulfill all righteousness**. For God's plan to be perfectly fulfilled, it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized and to be baptized specifically by John.

It seems that one reason Jesus submitted to baptism was to give an example of obedience to His followers. As the King of kings Jesus recognized that He had no ultimate obligation to pay taxes to a human government. When Peter on one occasion asked about the matter, Jesus replied, " 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?' And upon his saying, 'From strangers,' Jesus said to him, 'Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense, ... give it [a stater coin] to them for you and Me' " (Matt. 17:25–27). As Scripture makes clear in many places, it is proper and right for believers, even though they are sons of God, to honor and pay taxes to human governments (see Rom. 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–15). In every case, Jesus modeled obedience. In His baptism He acknowledged that John's standard of righteousness was valid and in action affirmed it as the will of God to which men are to be subject.

Jesus came into the world to identify with men; and to identify with men is to identify with sin. He could not purchase righteousness for mankind if He did not identify with mankind's sin. Hundreds of years before Christ's coming, Isaiah had declared that the Messiah "was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Jesus' baptism also represented the willing identification of the sinless Son of God with the sinful people He came to save.

That was the first act of His ministry, the first step in the redemptive plan that He came to fulfill. He who had no sin took His place among those who had no righteousness. He who was without sin submitted to a baptism for sinners. In this act the Savior of the world took His place among the sinners of the world. The sinless Friend of sinners was sent by the Father "in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3); and He "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Isa. 53:11). There was no other way **to fulfill all righteousness**.

Jesus' baptism not only was a symbol of His identity with sinners but was also a symbol of His death and resurrection, and therefore a prefigurement of Christian baptism. Jesus made only two other references to personal baptism, and each related to His death. Not long before His final trip to Jerusalem He told His disciples, "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50). On the other occasion He was responding to the request by James and John that they be given the top positions in His heavenly kingdom. "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be

baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus’ supreme identification with sinners was His taking their sin upon Himself, which He did at Calvary.

Though John, having been given such a brief explanation, could not possibly have comprehended the full meaning of Jesus’ baptism, he accepted His Lord’s word and obeyed. **Then he permitted Him.**

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### OF THE SPIRIT (3:16)

John’s baptism, and that of Jesus’ disciples during His earthly ministry (John 4:1–2), represented cleansing, or washing, from sin. Christian baptism represents the believer’s identification with Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12). In both cases the significance of the act is lost if it does not involve immersion. Sprinkling or pouring does not fit either the symbolism of cleansing or of dying and being raised.

The Greek word itself (*baptizō*) means literally to dip an object into water or other liquid, not to have the liquid put on the object. If all the forms of this word in Scripture had been translated (as “immersed”) instead of being simply transliterated (as “baptized”)—first into Latin and then into modern languages—the confusion we now see regarding the mode of baptism would never have arisen. In relation to other things the same word is translated—as we see in Luke 16:24, where the rich man in Hades asks that Lazarus might “dip [from *baptizō*] the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue,” and John 13:26, where Jesus “dipped [also from *baptizō*] the morsel.” As can be determined from any Greek lexicon, the original word never had a meaning other than dipping or submerging, and no other term is used for baptizing.

The Christian church knew no form of baptism but immersion until the Middle Ages, when the practice of sprinkling or pouring was introduced by the Roman Catholic church—which itself had previously always baptized by immersion. The great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) said, “In immersion the setting forth of the burial of Christ is more plainly expressed, in which this manner of baptizing is more commendable.” The Catholic church did not recognize other modes until the Council of Ravenna, held in France in 1311. It was from the Catholic church that Lutheran and Reformed churches inherited the form of sprinkling or pouring. The Church of England did not begin the practice of sprinkling until 1645. The Eastern Orthodox church has never permitted any mode but immersion.

That Jesus **went up immediately from the water** indicates that He had been all the way into the water. John was baptizing *in* the Jordan (3:6), and his custom was to baptize where “there was much water” (John 3:23), which would have been pointless if only sprinkling were used (cf. Acts 8:38–39).

At the moment Jesus came out of the river, **behold, the heavens were opened**. When Ezekiel saw the heavens opened and had the vision of God, he saw such things as the four living creatures, the chariot, and the wheels (Ezek. 1:1–19). Just before he died, Stephen saw “the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56), and

John the apostle had several heavenly visions (Rev. 4:1; 11:19; 19:11). Paul's experience of being "caught up to the third heaven" was so wonderful and amazing as to be "inexpressible" (2 Cor. 12:2–4). As one commentator suggests, "Just as the veil of the Temple was rent in twain to symbolize the perfect access of all men to God, so here the heavens are rent asunder to show how near God is to Jesus, and Jesus is to God."

When the heavens opened before John the Baptist, **he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him**, just as the Lord had promised (John 1:33). The confirming sign was that of **a dove**, the only instance in which the Holy Spirit was ever so represented. To the Jewish mind of that day the dove was associated with sacrifice. Bulls were sacrificed by the rich and lambs by the middle class, but most of the people were poor and could only afford a dove.

Why did the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus? When He became a man, Jesus did not lose His divinity. He was still fully God in every way. In His deity He needed nothing. But in His humanity He was here being anointed for service and granted strength for ministry. The Spirit anointed Him for His kingly service, as Isaiah had predicted: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners" (Isa. 61:1). Among other things, the Spirit of God came upon Jesus in His humanness in a special way (John 3:34) that empowered Him to cast out demons (Matt. 12:28), to do miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 2:22), and to preach (cf. Acts 10:38). Like every human being, Jesus became tired and hungry and sleepy. His humanness needed strengthening, and that needed strength was given by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:14).

Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit was unique. It was given to empower Him in His humanness, but it was also given as a visible, confirming sign to John the Baptist and to everyone else watching. Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the great King whose coming the Lord had called John to announce and to prepare men for.

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### **BY THE FATHER (3:17)**

All the Trinity participated in Jesus' baptism. The Son had confirmed His own kingship by saying, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15), and the Spirit had confirmed His right of messiahship by resting on Him (v. 16). The final aspect of Jesus' coronation, or commissioning, was the Father's confirming word. For a sacrifice to be acceptable to God it must be pure, spotless, without blemish (Ex. 12:5; Lev. 1:3; Deut. 17:1; etc.). Of this One who willingly identified Himself with sinners by His baptism and who was marked by the Holy Spirit as the dove of sacrifice, the Father now said, **This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.**

No Old Testament sacrifice, no matter how carefully selected, had ever been truly pleasing to God. It was not possible to find an animal that did not have some blemish, some imperfection. Not only that, but the blood of those animals was at best only symbolic, "for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:12). But the sacrifice Jesus



would make on the cross would be “with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19). Thus God could say He was **well-pleased** with the perfection of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 17:5; John 12:28, where God repeats this superlative commendation).

**Beloved** (*agapētos*) connotes a deep, rich, and profound relationship. It is used here of the Father’s great love for His **Son**, but it is also used elsewhere of His love for believers (Rom. 1:7) and for what believers’ love toward each other should be (1 Cor. 4:14). Jesus is the Father’s **beloved** above all those He loves, the beloved apart from whom no other could ever be beloved (cf. Eph. 1:6). Only in His **Son** could the Father ever be fully **well-pleased** (*eudokeō*). God had examined, as it were, His **beloved Son**, who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of those with whom He was willing to identify Himself. No imperfection could be found in Him, and God was delighted.

As believers, we too are a delight to the Father, because we are now in the Son. Because the Father finds no imperfection in His Son, He now by His grace finds no imperfection in those who trust in Him (cf. Rom. 3:26; 5:17, 21; Gal. 2:20; 3:27; Eph. 1:3–6; etc.). The fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is central to the gospel (See Hebrews 1:1–8)

Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God, superior to and exalted above everything and everyone else. He is the beginning of all things, Creator; the middle of all things, Sustainer and Purifier; and the end of all things, Heir (see also Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16). The Son is the manifestation of God, the radiance of God’s personal glory, the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4). In Him all deity dwells (Col. 1:15–19; 2:9). Because of His deity, He is superior to the angels who worship Him. (For a fuller explanation of Jesus’ sonship, see the author’s *Hebrews* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], pp. 27–29.)

Even God’s title as Father is a reference to His essential relationship to Jesus Christ. God is presented in the New Testament more as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:27; John 5:17–18; 10:29–33; 14:6–11; 17:1–5; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3, 17; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Pet. 1:3; 2 John 3) than as the Father of believers (Matt. 6:9).

When Jesus called God “Father,” He was not emphasizing primarily submission or generation but sameness of essence—that is, deity. John 5:23 sums it up by demanding “that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father.” No one can worship God unless he worships Him as the God who is one with King Jesus—“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

## Conclusion

Part of the challenge of this passage is to learn afresh to be surprised by Jesus. He comes to fulfill God’s plans, not ours, and even his prophets sometimes seem to misunderstand what he’s up to. He will not always play the music we expect. But if we learn to listen carefully to what he says, and watch carefully what he does, we will find that our real longings, the hunger beneath the surface excitement, will be richly met.

Those who in **repentance** and **faith** follow Jesus through baptism and obedience will find that as we learn to put aside our own plans and submit to his, we may be granted glimpses of his greater reality. And at the center of that sudden sight, we will find our loving father, affirming us as his children, equipping us, too, with his spirit so that our lives may be swept clean and made ready for use.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 22.



## Lesson 7 (2-11-24)

### The Tempted Son (Matthew 4:1-11)

<sup>4</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup> But he answered, “It is written,

“ ‘Man shall not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup> and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

“ ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’

and

“ ‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God  
and him only shall you serve.’ ”

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

- Matthew 4:1-11 ESV

In 4:1–11 we come again to our Lord Jesus Christ. We come to look at his victory over temptation. And as we do so, we’ll see how his victory reinforces his *identity*—“Truly this is the Son of God”—and how it gives us an *example*, the ultimate example, of resisting the devil. Jesus was tempted in order to show us that we have a Savior who “is able to help” us when we “are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18), a Savior who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses,” because, as Hebrews 4:15 says, he was tempted in every respect as we are, “yet without sin.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 82.

The temptation of Jesus (vv. 1–11) parallels the testing of Israel in the wilderness. The forty days correspond to the forty years of wandering (cf. Num. 14:34). His temptation recalls Deut. 8:1–5, which He quoted in response to one of the temptations. The experience of Israel in the wilderness was the type or shadow of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness after His baptism.

The temptations appeal to common motivations: physical drives, pride, and the desire for possessions (1 John 2:16). But each is pointed specially at the Messiah. Satan challenges Jesus to prove the truth of the Father’s words at His baptism: “If you are the Son of God” (vv. 3, 6; cf. 27:40). The third temptation offers Jesus a path to kingship that avoids the cross. Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are (Heb. 4:15), but He did not sin. He represents us before God as a “merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17), one who knows through His human nature what it is to endure temptation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Discussion Questions**

Jesus was “led” into the desert by the Spirit specifically to be “tempted by the devil” (4:1). Why do you think the Spirit would lead Jesus into such a difficult situation?

For each of the three temptations: (a) What is its nature? (b) What potentially might appeal to Jesus? (c) What price would there be were he to yield?

How did Jesus overcome the temptations of the devil? What can we learn from Jesus about how we should respond to temptation?

Both Jesus and Satan quoted Scripture. What was the difference in how they quoted it?

What was Jesus’ final response to Satan’s temptations (4:10)? How did Satan react? What does this show about the authority of Jesus?

Why is 4:11 important to this incident? What does it tell us about Jesus?

How would you answer the following question: “If Jesus was fully God, then how can His victory over temptation help a weak and sinful person like me?”

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<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 1676.

Does God tempt us?

Could Jesus have sinned?

What have you found helpful in overcoming temptation?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 82–89.]

### **A \_\_\_\_\_ but \_\_\_\_\_ Objection**

A common objection to Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15 sounds something like this: “How can Jesus, if he was without sin—if he never thought, said, or did anything wrong—sympathize with me?” It's like looking at whoever you might think is the most morally pure person in your church and saying, “How could he or she possibly sympathize with my struggles? They've never done what I've done.”

This common objection is, however, ungrounded. Sure, when you share with fellow sinners who have never been tempted to do the same thing, they might react, “What kind of man is this?” They might think they are morally superior. But that is never how Jesus reacts. He never reacts with self-righteousness, for Jesus understands the weight of every particular temptation, even that particular temptation that so easily entangles you, because he was tempted to cheat God, to follow his own agenda, to take the detour to glory. Furthermore, just because Jesus never gave in to a particular temptation that you or I always seem to give in to does not mean he has never felt the tug of such a temptation.

For example, picture a tug-of-war. What usually happens? At first both teams try their darnedest. But soon the weaker team discovers who they are, and instead of pulling harder to try to overcome the stronger team, they usually give in, fall backward or forward, and collapse. Now, let me ask you, who felt the tug more—the winners or the losers? The winners did.

Or think of two weightlifters. Let's say both athletes are trying to lift 500 pounds over their head. The first pulls the bar off the ground, then quickly up to his knees, but then he drops it after a two-second struggle. The second lifter also pulls the bar off the ground, up to his knees, but then he lifts it up to his waist and finally, with two great thrusts, up and over his head. Who

knows better the heaviness of those weights? The point is this: those who resist temptation are those who feel the weight of it most.

Jesus was (and is!) a real human being who knew the weight of sin and the heaviness of temptation. He was not shadowboxing with the devil. He was vulnerable. Like Adam (perfect in nature), he could have been hit. He could have fallen. But he didn't. He is the undefeated champion of the world. He won! As such, he shows us what to expect in the ring and how to jab and how to land the winning right hook.

In this chapter we will look at Jesus' identity and example, and we will briefly examine five characteristics of his temptation. We do so not merely to admire the great fighter but to become great fighters ourselves, to learn the nature of temptation so that we might win the victory.

### **God-\_\_\_\_\_ but Not God-\_\_\_\_\_**

In verse 1 we read of this subtle but important distinction: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Notice the "by" and "by." The first "by" — "by the Spirit" — tells us this temptation was God-ordained (cf. Deuteronomy 8:2). Then once Jesus is in the desert or wilderness, Satan slithers upon the scene. Here is our second "by." God ordained the temptation, but the tempting comes not from God (cf. James 1:13) but from the accuser. Jesus was tempted "by the devil." So, quite similar to the story of Job, Satan is allowed to have his way with God's man. Satan is allowed to put God's righteous "servant" (cf. Job 1:8) to the test. And it is a test here. Perhaps "test" is a better word than "temptation." Both terms/translations are fitting. Jesus is certainly *tested*: Is he the true Son of God? Will he hold fast to God's plan of salvation? But he is also *tempted*: He is tempted to exalt himself, to avoid the pain of the cross, and to bow down to Satan's rule.

Now, what is the lesson of this "by" and "by" for us? The lesson is this: if you want to follow Jesus, know that the road to Heaven is not paved with gold and lined with daisies. Jesus, who is loved by God, was sent into the wilderness to be tested. If you are his follower, you can expect the same. Baptism into Christ does not mean health and wealth and a shallow happiness. Baptism into Christ means self-denial, suffering, trials, and temptations. This is not because God doesn't like us or love us. Rather, it is because he does. Gold is refined through fire, not by being thrown into a pile of marshmallows. We move, like our Lord did, from our baptisms into a battle that will prove and refine our character.

...We must be willing to do battle against sin, the world, and the devil, for our flesh, this world, and the devil will fight against us. We can run and hide. We can lie down and give in. Or we can fight, and in doing so, use our trials and temptations for the purposes for which God has ordained them—to make us stronger and purer.

## When His \_\_\_\_\_ Was Most \_\_\_\_\_

Look at verse 2 and the beginning of verse 3: “And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And [then!] the tempter came....” ...Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus was tempted after eating nothing for forty days, not even locusts and wild honey. Nothing! He was alone. He was hungry. He was physically weak. He was the perfect victim for a roaring, roaming, hungry lion. And yet how strong he was!

Think of Peter, the leader of the apostles. When Peter’s flesh was weak, what did he do? He gave in to temptation. He slept when his Lord most needed him to pray (26:40, 43, 45), and he lied when his Lord most needed his support (26:69–75). Or think about Israel in the wilderness. If they missed a meal, boy, would they grumble. You would think they grew up in some posh neighborhood. If they got a little thirsty, they would try to blackmail God—“If you don’t do something, we’re getting rid of Moses and you, and we’re going back to Egypt!” Or think about Adam and Eve. Read what James Montgomery Boice says about them in contrast to Jesus:

Adam and Eve were in paradise; Jesus was in the vast, desolate wilderness of Judah. Adam and Eve were physically content and satisfied. They were free to eat from any of the trees of the garden, save the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; Jesus was hungry, having fasted for forty days and forty nights. Adam and Eve were together. They had each other for company and mutual support; Jesus was alone. Yet Adam and Eve rapidly succumbed to Satan’s wiles, carrying the entire human race into sin, misery, destruction, and both physical and spiritual death, while Jesus stood firm as the Savior who was to bring life and salvation to the race.

What Adam didn’t do, Jesus did. What Israel couldn’t accomplish, Jesus accomplished. And in doing so, he left us an example of sober-mindedness, watchfulness, and firmness of faith (1 Peter 5:8, 9), as well as an example of preparedness. We should be prepared to fight when we are most weak.

## \_\_\_\_\_ Yet \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus’ temptation was unique. This is obvious. Most people aren’t tempted *where* he was (in the wilderness), *when* he was (after forty days of fasting), or *by whom* he was tempted (by a clear manifestation of the devil). So where, when, and by whom Jesus was tempted are unique, as well as *how* or *with what* he was tempted.

I have been tempted in a great many ways, but I have never been tempted to turn stones into bread. Neither have I been whisked away to the top of the temple (or any significant structure for that matter) to be tempted to throw myself off, testing to see if God really loves me and would save me. And I most certainly have not been tempted by the devil to rule the world in exchange for my soul. I have not even been asked to sell my soul in order to be a rock star. I trust my experience is similar to yours.



Jesus' temptations were unique because he is unique. The divine comment in 3:17 is an apt summary of his uniqueness: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus is the beloved Son of God, *and* he is the Suffering Servant of God. In the last chapter I explained how this verse is a mix of two important Old Testament themes—about the Son (Psalm 2) and the Servant (Isaiah 42). Jesus is the Son of God, the promised King, who has come to be the Servant, to suffer and die so as to make atonement for our sins (1:21).

The temptations here, unique to Jesus, were all temptations to rely on his divine sonship to the neglect of his servanthood (the suffering he was called to take upon himself). This is why the devil twice says, "If you are the *Son* of God ..." (vv. 3, 6). All the temptations were to grab the crown without first enduring the cross. The Father promised that Jesus will be King, and we see this clearly in Psalm 2 ("I will make the nations your heritage," v. 8) as well at the end of Matthew ("All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," 28:18), but only if he follows the road to Calvary. The tempter tempts him to take the shortcut to glory by bypassing Gethsemane and Golgotha. That's what all these temptations are about...

Jesus is not opposed to feeding the hungry. We shall see him twice in Matthew feed the multitudes (14:13–21; 15:32–39). Nor is he opposed to food. Jesus feasted on earth—at a wedding, with friends, in sinners' houses—and because of this he was even called (falsely) a glutton and a winebibber (11:19). Moreover, at the end of all history, the messianic banquet will be the feast of all feasts...

Jesus is not opposed to food or providing food. What Jesus is opposed to is bribing someone into the kingdom with his miraculous powers—turning stones into bread. If someone wants to come to him and into his kingdom, they must come spiritually hungry—"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6a).

Jesus doesn't want to bribe anyone into the kingdom. Nor does he want to "remove the symptoms without dealing with the disease." This is why Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3, where it is written, "[M]an does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." There is more to life than what is "visible and edible, tangible and collectible, bankable and investable." To die hungry with the gospel in your heart is to die with the hope of everlasting life. But to die with your mouth stuffed, your belly filled, but your heart cold to the gospel is to die everlastingly. Better to die with an empty belly and a full soul than with an empty soul but a full belly. Do you remember the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man? Jesus makes this very point. Lazarus dies hungry but goes to Heaven; the rich man dies full but goes to Hell.

So Jesus' temptations are unique. But they are also universal. What I mean is this: aren't we all tempted to grab the crown without the cross? Aren't we all tempted to think that the physical is more important than the spiritual? Aren't we all tempted to sell out the gospel through gimmicks, entertainment, and worldly means—our own version of turning stones into bread? Aren't we tempted, as Jesus was (and as Adam and Eve were), with "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" (1 John 2:16)? Aren't we all tempted to move away

from “holy reliance upon the Father to an unholy independence”? Jesus’ temptations were unique but also universal. We are all tempted in similar ways. That’s the third characteristic.

### **The Shield of the \_\_\_\_\_ Shields the \_\_\_\_\_**

The fourth characteristic is that *Jesus resisted these temptations with the Word of God*. On this point the early church father Jerome says of Jesus, “He breaks the false arrows of the devil drawn from the Scriptures upon the true shields of the Scriptures.”

I like this *shield* analogy. At first I thought I’d go, quite naturally, with Paul’s *sword* analogy from Ephesians 6, that great passage on the armor of God, where the apostle writes of taking up “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (6:17). Yet here Jesus is more on the defensive than on the offensive, and I think it is his trust in his heavenly Father, which includes believing in the promises of his Word, that Jesus best demonstrates. So he holds up “the shield of faith,” as Ephesians 6:16 says, with which he extinguishes “the flaming darts [or arrows] of the evil one.”

The devil tempts our Lord with what must have been most tempting to him. That’s why he toys with and twists the promises of God in each and every temptation. That’s why he tempts Jesus, not with “obvious evils”—steal this, lie about that, lust after her—but with what is normally good. He tempts Jesus with God’s good creation—bread. He takes Jesus to the temple pinnacle (God’s holy place), he quotes the Bible (God’s Holy Word), and he says, “Beloved Son, does God really love you?” (God’s holy provision). Yet with each “false arrow” the Son of God puts up his shield of faith. “It is written ... it is written ... it is written” (vv. 4, 7, 10).

Paul writes in Romans 10:17, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (cf. Galatians 3:2, 5). Do you know the Word—its content? Do you know how to interpret it correctly? And do you trust what God has written? After forty days of hunger—or whatever the equivalent would be for you—do you still believe that we do not live on bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God?

### **\_\_\_\_\_ but \_\_\_\_\_**

The fifth and final characteristic of Jesus’ temptations is this: The temptations were certainly *tough but also temporary*. This is taught in verses 10, 11. After the final temptation to worship Satan, Jesus says to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’ ” (v. 10; cf. Deuteronomy 6:13). Then what happened? “Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him” (v. 11).

Jesus says, “Be gone,” and Satan leaves him. Temptations are always temporary. This is a grace of God. If you can “[r]esist the devil ... he will flee from you” (see James 4:7). Our God only allows Satan to tempt us for our good, to try and test and refine our faith. And as 1 Corinthians 10:13 makes clear, there is no temptation (1) that is not common to everyone—don’t think

your particular temptation is so tough that no one else struggles with it, (2) that is not beyond your ability to resist with our Lord's help—Jesus is “able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18), and (3) from which God does not provide a way of escape—if you say, “No,” the devil will go.

Temptations are tough, but they are temporary. Remember that. Say to yourself, “If I can just get through this, if I can just say ‘be gone’ like Jesus did, or run out of the room as Joseph did with Potiphar’s wife, then the devil will gain no foothold.” But if you give him an inch, stay in the room longer than you should, or toy with the temptation, then watch out. He’ll have you by the heel, then the leg, then the heart. Temptations are tough but always temporary. Resist the devil, and he *will* flee from you.

Our Lord Jesus was tempted in every respect as we are, yet was without sin. He never sinned. We sinners must learn from our Lord and cling to him, that we might by faith win the victory for his glory and our good.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that Matthew had two primary purposes in presenting Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. First, as mentioned above, Jesus’ victory demonstrated His divine kingship, His royal power to resist the only other great ruler and dominion in the universe, Satan himself. Christ here won His first direct battle with His great enemy, and thereby gave evidence of His glorious right and power as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the supreme Ruler of all creation, the only God. By so doing, He sealed His final victory yet to come. Satan’s purpose in the temptations was, of course, just the opposite: to conquer the newly commissioned King, to overthrow the Messiah, and to claim all His royal rights and prerogatives for himself.

Matthew’s other purpose was to demonstrate the pattern found in Jesus’ human victory over sin, a pattern that He longs to share with all who belong to Him. When we face testing and temptation in the same way our Lord did, we too can be victorious over the adversary’s attempts to corrupt us and to usurp the Lord’s rightful place in our lives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 85.

## Postscript

When we consider Jesus' temptation in Scripture, there are two questions that often arise.

### ***Does God tempt us?***

Matthew 4:1 says that Jesus was led "by the Spirit" to be tempted by the Devil in the wilderness. But in what sense did the Spirit lead Jesus to be tempted? Did the Spirit of God tempt Jesus? The clear answer from Scripture is, "No." God never tempts us in the sense of enticing us to evil. James 1:13 says, "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God.' " Instead, Satan is seen in Scripture as "the tempter" (Matt 4:3). Therefore, we can say that **we are tempted by Satan (who is subordinate) for evil**. Only the Devil and demons tempt us to evil, but even their tempting, though directly attributable to them, is ultimately under the sovereign control of God. *Nothing* happens in the universe apart from the sovereignty of God.

There is a flip side to Satan's temptations in Matthew 4: **We are tested by God (who is sovereign) for good**. If we put the two points together we can say that temptation by the Devil (who is subordinate) toward evil is ultimately a part of a testing by God (who is sovereign) for good. The book of Job teaches us that Satan is on a leash; he can do nothing that God does not allow him to do. Now to be sure, when Satan tempts, he intends it for evil, but God uses these temptations to refine His children and to teach them His faithfulness (Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 1:6–7). The apostle Paul experienced this when God gave him a "thorn in the flesh ... a messenger of Satan" to torment him (2 Cor 12:7). The purpose of the trial was so that Paul would know the strength and sufficiency of Christ (2 Cor 12:9–10). Consider also Joseph in the Old Testament, who was sold into slavery and tempted in a number of ways. God used these trials to bring about good—for Joseph *and* for his brothers who sold him into slavery (Gen 50:20).

We can say definitively that God was not tempting Jesus, nor was He tempting Adam, Joseph, Israel, or Paul, toward evil. For that matter, He will never tempt you toward evil. Instead, in His sovereignty, God uses even Satan's temptations to evil in order to bring about good in your life (Rom 8:28).

### ***Could Jesus have sinned?***

The answer to the second question this passage raises is no ... and yes. Pointing out four truths from Scripture may help explain the complex answer to this question. First, **Jesus is fully man**. He was and is fully human, as human as you and me. Second, **Jesus was fully tempted**. The Bible says He was tempted as we are (Heb 4:15), that is, He was tempted with things that are common to man (1 Cor 10:13). Now you may read these temptations in Matthew and think, "I'm not tempted in these ways." If you're honest, these temptations may even seem quite trivial; however, these temptations Jesus faced are at the core of every temptation that you and I face. There are no new temptations—just new ways of succumbing to old temptations.

The third truth we must keep in mind as we think about whether or not Jesus could have sinned is that **Jesus is fully God**. This is a truth we've already seen in Matthew, and one that will continue to unfold in the chapters ahead. Let it suffice to say, the One who is called Immanuel, "God is with us" (Matt 1:23), is more than just a man. Fourth, keep in mind that **God cannot be tempted**. James 1:13 says explicitly, "God is not tempted by evil." So here are the four truths that we must affirm: Jesus is fully man, Jesus was fully tempted, Jesus is fully God, and God cannot be tempted. The difficulty comes when you try to figure out precisely how these truths work together, which leads us back to the mystery of the Incarnation.

In an earlier chapter we saw that Jesus' human nature and divine nature are different, yet unified, leading to some wonderful mysteries. As a picture of His humanity, Jesus was asleep on a boat in the middle of a storm (8:23). Then, as a demonstration of His deity, He stood up and calmed the wind and the waves (v. 26). He was (and is) fully human and fully God. So, in His humanity, Jesus was tempted as we are. Yet, in His deity He was not tempted, for God *cannot* be tempted (Jas 1:13). These are mind-boggling realities, for which an illustration from Russell Moore may help.

Think of the person in this world that you love the most. Picture their face, and then ask yourself, "Could I murder that person?" Immediately you're thinking, "Absolutely not!" And in that response, what you're thinking is, "I don't have the *moral* capability of murdering that person." But if you understood my question, "Could you murder that person?" in terms of *physically* performing an action, though it's unfathomable to you, it would be *physically* possible. Even so, Jesus, in His deity, as the light of the world in whom there is no darkness, could not have sinned. He is *morally* incapable of such an action. Yet at the same time, Jesus could have sinned in the sense that He was *physically* capable of eating bread or throwing Himself off a temple or bowing the knee to Satan. In this way, Jesus was fully tempted as we are (Heb 4:15).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 66–68.

## Lesson 8 (2-18-24)

### The Light Dawns (Matthew 4:12-17)

<sup>12</sup> Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. <sup>13</sup> And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

<sup>15</sup> “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,  
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—  
<sup>16</sup> the people dwelling in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,  
on them a light has dawned.”

<sup>17</sup> From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

- Matthew 4:12-17 ESV

John the Baptist is imprisoned by Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. John the Baptist had publicly condemned Herod Antipas for having an affair with, and eventually marrying, Herodias. Jesus does not flee but returns to Galilee, a region at the center of Herod Antipas’s jurisdiction, and he makes Capernaum, a town in Galilee, his base of operations for the length of his public ministry in Galilee. Political turmoil and forced Gentile infiltration in the region have brought about darkness and hopelessness as the Jews in the area awaited deliverance. But these oppressed Galileans are the first to see the great light of God’s deliverance in Jesus. The phrase “from that time on” marks a significant turning point in Matthew’s narrative (cf. 16:21). It indicates that the preparations for Jesus’ Messianic ministry are complete. Jesus begins preaching the same message of repentance as John the Baptist. <sup>1</sup>

#### Discussion Questions

How does Jesus react to John’s imprisonment?

Jesus intentionally began his ministry in Galilee, the land of Gentiles (Matt. 4:12–15). How does this connect with what we learned about certain women in Jesus’ genealogy? How does this link up with his commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:19?

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<sup>1</sup> David Gundersen, “Psalms,” in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1294–1295.

Matthew connects Jesus' move from Nazareth to Capernaum with a prophecy from Isaiah 9:1–2. What does he want his readers to see?

Note that Jesus' message in 4:17 is identical to John's in 3:2. How is this significant? What is Matthew trying to show?

What does it mean to repent?

What does it mean that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand?”

What is the relation between repentance, the kingdom of heaven, and the light?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson we adapted from *John F. MacArthur Jr., Matthew, vol. 1, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 103–109.*]

In 4:12–17, Matthew picks up the story of that first year where the apostle John leaves off, giving three features of Jesus' early ministry that show God's perfect work through His Son. It was at the right time; it was in the right place; and it was the right proclamation.

### **THE RIGHT \_\_\_\_\_ (4:12a)**

In Matthew's presentation, Jesus' official ministry began when the herald of the King went to jail. The Son of God always worked on His Father's divine timetable. He had, as it were, a divine clock ticking in His mind and heart that regulated everything He said and did. Paul affirms that “when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son” (Gal. 4:4). Jesus spoke of His hour as not having yet come (John 7:30; 8:20) and then of its having arrived (Matt. 26:45; John 12:23; 17:1).

Jesus chose not to use His supernatural powers to accomplish things that could be accomplished by ordinary human means. He submitted Himself to human limitations. Although He knew what was in every man's heart (John 2:24–25), He learned of John's imprisonment by common report, just as did everyone else. It was only **when He heard** of John's arrest that He went back to Galilee.

**John had been taken into custody** by Herod Antipas and thrown into the dungeon at the palace at Machaerus, on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. John's reproof of Herod for his great wickedness, including the taking of his half-brother Philip's wife, Herodias, for himself (14:3–4; Luke 3:19–20), cost the prophet his freedom and eventually his life. This non-Jewish Idumean was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea and, like his father before him, held office by Rome's appointment. He was one of several sons (by several wives) of Herod the Great who were appointed over parts of the region ruled by their father before his death. Herodias was the woman—vile even by Roman standards—who would induce her daughter, Salome, to trick Herod into serving the head of John the Baptist on a platter before his guests at a royal dinner (14:6–11). The act was so unusually barbaric that even the hardened Herod himself “was distressed” (v. 9, NIV).

...John the Baptist's imprisonment and death, just as his heralding the King of kings, were in God's divine plan and timetable. The end of the herald's work signaled the beginning of the King's. Herod and Herodias believed they freely controlled their province, and certainly the destiny of the insignificant Jewish preacher who dared condemn them. It is amazing how the proud and arrogant think they act in perfect freedom to accomplish their selfish ends, when in truth their decisions and actions only trigger events that God scheduled before the foundation of the world.

#### **THE RIGHT \_\_\_\_\_ (4:12b–16)**

Nothing is accidental or circumstantial in the Lord's work. Jesus did not go from Judea, through Samaria, and into Galilee because He was forced to do so by Herod or by the Jewish leaders or because He had nowhere else to go. He left Judea because His work there was finished for that period of His ministry. He went through Samaria in order to bring light to the half-Jew, half-Gentile Samaritans. He then **withdrew** (*anachōreō*, used often to convey the thought of escaping danger) **into Galilee** because that was the next place where the divine plan scheduled Him to minister. By divine determination Jesus went to the right place at the right time.

When Jesus **withdrew into Galilee** after hearing of John's arrest, it was not out of fear of Herod. He feared no man, and was surely no less brave than John. Had He wanted to escape possible trouble from Herod, He would not have gone to **Galilee**, because that, too, was under Herod's control... Jesus was no more afraid of the Pharisees than was John, but He wanted to avoid a premature confrontation. When the time came, Jesus faced the Jewish religious leaders without a wince, and His denunciations of them were longer-lasting and immeasurably harder than those of John the Baptist had been (see, e.g., Matt. 23:1–36). Jesus knew that He was eternally safe from any danger that men could devise. His life would be forfeited, but by His own divine will, not by the wills or power of His enemies (John 10:17–18). And He would live again!

...The Jews who lived in **Galilee** were less sophisticated and traditional than those in Judea, especially those in the great metropolis of Jerusalem. Josephus observed that Galileans “were



fond of innovations and by nature disposed to change, and they delighted in seditions.” They even had a distinct accent in their speech (Matt. 26:73). Perhaps Jesus chose His disciples from that area because they would be less bound to Jewish tradition and more open to the newness of the gospel.

It is evident from the text that Jesus was in **Nazareth** for a while. Luke explains that, after Jesus came from Judea through Samaria, He “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, ... and He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read” (Luke 4:14, 16). At first “all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’ ” (v. 22). But after Jesus exposed their true spiritual condition, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things.” They would have thrown Him over a cliff to His death had He not escaped (vv. 23–30).

After Jesus’ hometown rejected Him, just as He had said they would (Luke 4:23–27), **He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali...** Isaiah had long before prophesied that in **Galilee of the Gentiles—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned** (cf. Isa. 9:1–2). The fact alone that Jesus so accurately and completely fulfilled Old Testament prophecy should be enough to convince an honest mind of the Bible’s truthfulness and authority. Just as Isaiah had predicted eight centuries earlier, the despised, sin-darkened, and rebellious Galileans were the first to glimpse the Messiah, the first to see the dawning of God’s New Covenant! Not mighty and beautiful Jerusalem, the queen city of the Jews, but **Galilee of the Gentiles** would first hear Messiah’s message. Not the learned, proud, and pure Jews of Jerusalem, but the mongrel, downcast, nontraditional mixed multitude of Samaria and Galilee had that great honor. To those who were neediest, and who were most likely to recognize their need, Jesus went first.

The fact that Jesus began His ministry in Samaria and Galilee, rather than in Jerusalem and Judea, emphasizes the fact that His gospel of salvation was for the whole world. It was the fulfillment of Old Testament truth, which God had chosen to reveal through the Jews (cf. Rom. 3:1–2), but it was in no way an accommodation to the traditional, proud, and exclusive Judaism that had developed during the intertestamental period and that was so dominant in Jesus’ day. The Son of God was sent to be “a light of revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 52:10). It was no coincidence of history that “the light of the world” (John 8:12) first proclaimed Himself in **Galilee of the Gentiles**.

It was in and around Galilee that Jesus had spent all but a small part of His childhood and early manhood, and it was there that His ministry first developed and began to spread. As the new day of the gospel dawned, the first rays of light shined in **Galilee**. Into this land of oppression, dispersion, and corrosive moral and spiritual influences—and impending death at the word of divine judgment—Jesus came with words and deeds of mercy, truth, love, and hope: **“To those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.”**

## THE RIGHT \_\_\_\_\_ (4:17)

Preaching was a central part of Jesus' ministry and remains a central part of the ministry of His church. **From that time**, when He went to Galilee, **Jesus began to preach**. *Kērussō (to preach)* means "to proclaim" or "to publish," that is, to publicly make a message known. R. C. H. Lenski comments, "The point to be noted is that to preach is not to argue, reason, dispute, or convince by intellectual proof, against all of which a keen intellect may bring counterargument. We simply state in public or testify to all men the truth which God bids us state. No argument can assail the truth presented in this announcement or testimony. Men either believe the truth, as all sane men should, or refuse to believe it, as only fools venture to do" (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964], p. 168).

Jesus preached His message with certainty. He did not come to dispute or to argue, but to proclaim, **to preach**. Preaching is the proclamation of certainties, not the suggestion of possibilities. Jesus also preached "as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:29). What He proclaimed not only was certain but was of the utmost authority. The scribes could not teach authoritatively because they had so mingled biblical truth with the interpretations and traditions of various rabbis that all certainty and authority had long vanished. They could no longer distinguish God's Word from men's words, and all that remained were opinions and speculations. For God's people once again to hear someone preach as the prophets had preached was astonishing (cf. Matt. 7:28–29).

Jesus not only preached with certainty and authority but preached only what He was commissioned by His Father to preach. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God" (John 3:34). Jesus Himself said, "I speak the things which I have seen with My Father" (John 8:38). Later he gave the same testimony even more pointedly: "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak" (John 12:49).

In His high priestly prayer Jesus spoke to His Father of His disciples, saying, "Now they have come to know that everything Thou hast given Me is from Thee; for the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them; and they received them" (John 17:7–8). And it is in His own authority that Jesus sends out His ministers to the world: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:18–19). That is God's commission to everyone who preaches in His name. The faithful preacher and teacher will proclaim God's certain truth, with God's delegated authority, and under God's divine commission.

## Conclusion

When the King's light dawned, the message that His light brought was clear. He began where His herald, John the Baptist, had begun: **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (cf. 3:2).

The darkness in which the people lived was the darkness of sin and evil. Jesus was saying, "The great darkness has been upon you because of the great darkness that is within you. You must

be willing to turn from that darkness before the light can shine in you.” To turn from sin is to **repent**, to change one’s orientation, to turn around and seek a new way. *Metanoeō* literally means a change of perception, a change in the way we see something. To **repent**, therefore, is to change the way a person looks at sin and the way he looks at righteousness. It involves a change of opinion, of direction, of life itself. To repent is to have a radical change of heart and will—and, consequently, of behavior (cf. Matt. 3:8).

That was, and has always continued to be, the first demand of the gospel, the first requirement of salvation, and the first element of the saving work of the Spirit in the soul. The conclusion of Peter’s Pentecost sermon was a call to repentance: “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Many years later Paul reminded Timothy that repentance leads “to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25).

Israel would not be ready for or worthy of the King until she repented. Repentance, of course, had always been in order and had always been needed, but now that **the kingdom of heaven** [was] **at hand**, it was all the more imperative. The King had arrived, and the kingdom was near. Messiah’s time had come—to usher in the age of righteousness and rest, to subdue Israel’s enemies, to bring all of God’s people back to their land, and to reign on the throne of David.

Tragically, because most of Israel did not repent and did not recognize and accept the King, the promised earthly kingdom had to be postponed. As Matthew later explains, the literal, physical kingdom was set aside for a period of time. The spiritual kingdom presently exists only in the hearts of those who have trusted in Jesus Christ, the King. He is not ruling the nation Israel and the world as He one day will, but He rules the lives of those who belong to Him by faith. The world does not have peace, but those do who know the Prince of Peace. The external kingdom has not yet come, yet the King Himself indwells those that are His. The Messiah, the Christ, now rules in those who have received Him who is “the light of men.”

## Lesson 9 (2-25-24)

### Two Simple Words (Matthew 4:18-25)

<sup>18</sup> While walking 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 fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup> Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

<sup>23</sup> And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

- Matthew 4:18-25 ESV

In the previous passage, Jesus settled in Capernaum and began his public ministry. His first act was preaching (4:17), and in this passage his next act of public ministry is to call his first four disciples. All four men are fishermen from around the Sea of Galilee who leave their jobs and begin to follow him. These verses describe in brief terms the expansion of Jesus’ work in Galilee. The onset of his ministry in 4:17 was only preaching in Galilee, but here his ministry expands significantly to teaching and healing. Although Jesus remains in Galilee, his presence and impact expand to other regions, with people from many places following him.<sup>1</sup>

#### Discussion Questions

How did Jesus call the first disciples (4:19)?

What did Jesus mean by saying Andrew and Simon would “fish for people”?

How did Simon, Andrew, James and John respond to Jesus? What strikes you about how they responded?

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament*, Lexham Context Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), Mt 4:23–25.

Why is an understanding of Matthew's teaching about Jesus' identity up to this point so crucial to understanding Jesus' command to "Follow Me?"

What three things was Jesus doing throughout Galilee (4:23)?

How did the people respond to Jesus' ministry (4:24–25)?

What is the cost of discipleship? What is the cost of non-discipleship?

In what ways has the call to follow Jesus been watered down in our culture?

Do you know of someone who set aside a promising or lucrative opportunity to take a job or follow a career because of Christian values or convictions? If so, describe the situation.

The fishermen by the Sea of Galilee had no idea where following Jesus would lead them. How has being a disciple taken you in unexpected directions or turned out differently from the way you expected?

In times of difficulty, what has kept you following Jesus?

Explain the idea that every disciple is to be a disciple-maker. What might this look like for a mom with young kids? For an accountant? What about a college student?

Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

**Lesson Outline** [This lesson was adapted from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 77–88.]

Two simple words: Follow Me. This is the life-changing call of Jesus in Matthew 4:18–25. This passage helps us see what it means to follow Jesus at the most basic level. In response to this

passage, we should be asking ourselves the question, “Am I following Him?” No more important question can be asked.

## **Me**

Many people are familiar with Jesus’ command to “Follow Me” in verse 19. The command is not complicated, but what do those two words actually mean? It will help to consider these words in reverse order, so that we first get a grasp of the “Me” we’re called to follow.

This is where it may be helpful to quickly review the first four chapters of Matthew, because this Gospel has already given us a stunning and majestic picture of Jesus from a number of different angles. Consider what we’ve already seen.

### **Matthew 1**

The first verse of Matthew’s Gospel speaks of “the historical record of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.” From the very beginning Matthew makes clear that **Jesus is the Savior**, which is actually what His name means. Jesus is also **the Messiah**, which is signified by the title “Christ.” Christ is not simply Jesus’ last name; rather, it designates Him as the Anointed One. Matthew also points out that Jesus is **the Son of David**, born into Israel’s kingly line. Then, at the end of verse 1, Jesus is called **the Son of Abraham**, the father of the people of Israel. Matthew’s genealogy helps us see that the whole Old Testament points to Jesus Christ. That’s a theologically loaded first verse! In the second half of chapter 1, we considered the mystery of Christ’s incarnation. **He is fully human and fully divine**. Jesus was born of the Spirit through a woman, something no other man can claim. The Incarnation is a miracle and a mystery. Jesus Christ is Immanuel, literally “God is with us” (1:23).

### **Matthew 2**

In the second chapter Matthew shows us that **Jesus is the Sovereign over the wise and the Shepherd of the weak**. Wise men came looking for a King, a Sovereign, and they bowed before the child Jesus. Matthew quotes from Micah 5:2, where Jesus is prophesied as the “ruler” who would shepherd God’s people. Using other Old Testament quotations, Matthew shows that Jesus **inaugurates the new exodus** (2:15 citing Hos 11:1) as God brings His Son out of Egypt, and He **ends the mournful exile** (2:18 citing Jer 31:15) by bringing hope to God’s beleaguered people. Jesus also **loves His fiercest enemies**. The Son of God came for the despised and the destitute, even those committed to destroying Him.

### **Matthew 3**

Jesus was proclaimed by John the Baptist, and John announced that **He is the Savior King and Righteous Judge**. “Repent,” John said, “because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” (v. 2). In other words, the King is here and the King is coming to save all who will trust in Him. Yet, this will also bring judgment: “His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff He will burn up with fire that never goes out” (v. 12). John also tells us that **Jesus is filled with the Spirit and loved by the Father**. In a

rare glimpse into heaven, we hear the very voice of God declaring, “This is My beloved Son. I take delight in Him!” (v. 17).

### **Matthew 4**

Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted by the Devil, where we find that **He is the new Adam and the true Israel**. Whereas the first Adam gave in to the temptation of the Devil in the garden, Jesus stood against that same serpent. He did what no one else in history has ever done or will ever do—He resisted temptation fully and completely, never giving in once to sin. Jesus is the true Israel, the faithful and obedient Son of God who passed the test of Satan’s temptation and conquered sin. Here, in the latter half of chapter 4, Matthew continues to paint a portrait of Jesus Christ, the One whom we’re called to follow. At the end of Matthew 4 we read that Jesus was “teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (v. 23). Matthew describes His ministry as threefold: teaching, preaching, and healing. Jesus’ teaching and preaching were accompanied by His healing ministry; He healed the sick, diseased, demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics (v. 24). This ministry consisted of both word and deed—proclamation of the good news of the kingdom alongside demonstrations of the greatness of the King.

### **Follow**

After seeing the portrait of the One who used those two simple words, “Follow Me,” we need to see what it means to respond. Having looked at the “Me,” we turn to the “Follow.”

### **Radical**

Matthew is clear that to follow Jesus means to **live with radical abandonment for His glory**. This word “abandonment” takes us back to Jesus’ call to repent in verse 17, and prior to that to the beginning of chapter 3 where John the Baptist said the exact same thing that Jesus now says: “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!” (3:2; 4:17). That word “repent” means to admit your sin (confession), to express sorrow over your sin (contrition), and to turn from your sin (conversion). Repentance is illustrated in baptism, which is a picture of totally renouncing your dependence on self. Consider how that “renouncing” played out in the lives of the disciples.

Just as Jesus’ invitation to those first disciples was a call to leave behind all things, so also when we follow Him **we leave behind all things**, including our comfort. The early disciples left behind everything that was familiar and natural for them. They exchanged comfort for uncertainty. They didn’t know *where* they would be going; they only knew *who* they would be with. All followers of Christ must respond to this same call today: we may not always know all the details about *where* Christ is leading us, but we do know *who* we’re following.

As followers of Jesus, we also leave behind our careers and our possessions. The disciples re-oriented their life’s work, being willing to follow Jesus with nothing in their hands. Now to be sure, these guys may not have been among the economically elite in society, but the fact that

they had this boat and a successful trade as fishermen shows that they had much to lose in following Christ. When we follow Jesus, we also lose our position. In Jesus' day, disciples would attach themselves to a rabbi to promote themselves. Discipleship could be a step up the ladder toward greater status and position. But this wasn't the case with these early disciples; they were stepping down the ladder. They would eventually find this out when the One they were following was tried and killed.

In addition to leaving behind comfort, careers, possessions, and position, we also leave behind our families, our friends, and our safety. Jesus would later tell the disciples, "I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves" (Matt 10:16); "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). Obedience to Christ is costly. Following Him must be put even before our own physical security. Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress" says it well: "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever."

While following Christ requires abandoning everything, at the core it means that we must abandon our sin. That is, we admit our sin in brokenness before God, and then we run from it. That's what it means to abandon ourselves. This is the central message for any prospective disciple: "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt 16:24). That's where following Jesus starts. In a world where everything revolves around self—protect yourself, promote yourself, preserve yourself, take care of yourself—Jesus says, "Slay yourself."

Now let me be very careful here: I am not saying, and I would not say based on the whole of the New Testament, that all followers of Jesus must lose their careers, sell or give away all their possessions, leave their families behind, and physically die for the gospel. But the New Testament is absolutely clear that for all who follow Jesus, comfort and certainty in this world are no longer your concerns. Your career revolves around whatever Jesus calls you to do and however He wants to use you to spread the good news of the kingdom. Your possessions are not your own, and you forsake material pleasure in this world in order to live for eternal treasure in the world to come. And this *could* mean that you sell or give away everything you have. After all, position is no longer your priority.

When it comes to family, the Bible is clear that you are to honor your parents (Eph 6:1–3; Exod 20:12), love your spouse (Eph 5:22–33), and provide for your children (1 Tim 5:8). So don't use a command like "Follow Me" to justify being a lousy husband, wife, or parent. Nevertheless, as we'll see in Matthew 10:37, your love for Christ should make love for your closest family members look like hate in comparison. God may call you to leave your family for His own purposes, perhaps to make His gospel known across the world.

The costly call to abandon everything for Jesus can be stated another way. We lay down all things so that **we live for one thing: to honor the King**. To follow Jesus means to hold loosely to everything else and to cling tightly to the person of Christ and the mission of His kingdom. This may sound extreme to some people, but we can't forget who the "Me" is here. To lay down



everything in your life doesn't make sense until you realize who the King is. Once you realize this, leaving behind all things is the only thing that makes sense. Remember Matthew 13:44: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field." We have Someone worth losing everything for!

## ***Joyful***

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It should be clear by now that following Christ is not easy. However, this is not a call to earn something from God by our sacrificial lifestyles. As we live with radical abandonment for Christ's glory, we are to **live with joyful dependence on His grace**. See the beauty and wonder of God's grace in those words, "Follow Me." **God takes the initiative to choose us**. While potential disciples in first-century Judaism would seek out a rabbi to study under, Jesus did the seeking in this passage. The disciples didn't come to Jesus—He came to them. Jesus does at the beginning of the New Testament what God did throughout the Old Testament. God always chooses His partners. He chose Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. He also chose the prophets. And he chose Israel to be His people (Deut 7:6–7). Just as the Father chose His people in the Old Testament, so Jesus chose His disciples in the New Testament. Jesus will tell the disciples later, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). This choice was not because of anything in them; it was all because of grace in Him.

It's common to hear people give reasons for why Jesus would choose fishermen to be His disciples. It may be that four to seven of these men were actually fishermen, and, it is pointed out, fishermen have certain tasks and skill sets that make them likely candidates as disciples and disciple-makers. But if that's the direction we go, we'll miss the whole point of the text. Jesus did not call these guys because of what they brought to the table. These four guys, and the disciples that came later, didn't have many things in their favor. For starters, they were Galileans, deemed to be lower class, rural, and uneducated by many. They were hardly the cultural elite, and they certainly weren't the most spiritually qualified for this task. Instead, they were narrow-minded and superstitious, full of Jewish prejudices, misconceptions, and animosities. *These are the ones* Jesus chose.

This may sound like a harsh description of these 12 men, but the reality is that it's not just them; it's us too! You and I have nothing in us to draw Jesus to us, to elicit this invitation. We are sinners—rebels to the core—running from God. And the beautiful, gracious, glorious reality of the gospel is that Jesus comes running to us. He calls our name. He chooses us. To use the words of Ephesians 1:4–6,

*For He [God] chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will, to the praise of His glorious grace.*

God the Father sent the Son to bear the wrath you and I deserved on a cross so that we, by His grace, might be drawn to Him. Praise be to God that He takes the initiative to choose us! But why does He do this?

Right after telling us that He chose the disciples, Jesus gives us the purpose of their choosing: “I appointed you that you should go out and produce fruit” (John 15:16). Likewise, the command to “Follow Me” has a purpose: “Follow Me ... and I will make you fish for people!” (Matt 4:19). So Jesus not only takes the initiative to choose us, but also **He provides the power to use us**. Notice that Jesus does not command the disciples to fish for people; rather, He says, “*I will make you fish for people.*” In other words, “I am going to do a transforming work in your life that will enable you to spread the message of My kingdom around the world.” The power to follow Christ and make Him known comes only as we rely fully on His strength. In John 15:4 Jesus tells His disciples, “Remain in Me, and I in you.” The fruit we bear in following Jesus only comes as we remain in Him by faith. There’s no way these men could carry out the commands given from Jesus, and so Jesus says, in effect, “I will enable you to do all that I command.”

God takes the initiative to choose us, He provides the power to use us, and **He gets the glory through us**. Consider how God used this unlikely group of men:

- Peter, the disciple with the foot-shaped mouth, preached the first Christian sermon and led more than 3,000 people to Christ, literally increasing the church by 2,500 percent in one day (Acts 2).
- John wrote books contained in the NT that are still used to lead people to Christ 2,000 years later.
- Other disciples would scatter to the nations proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom, even at the risk of their own lives.

Human history was altered forever by this group of disciples, and it began with four local fishermen. Hardly a world-changing task force! But this is the beauty of God’s design, namely, to take weak and lowly sinners and enable them to do far more than they (or anyone else) could ever imagine, all to the praise of His glorious grace! May He use us and our churches to change our own world today.

## ***Faithful*** \_\_\_\_\_

Next, we see that to follow Jesus means to **live with faithful adherence to His person**. This is what the disciples did; their commitment wasn’t perfect and their understanding was often cloudy, but they were loyal to their Lord. It’s worth noting that the word “disciple” appears more than 250 times in the New Testament, but it doesn’t always refer to these 12 men. Sometimes the word “disciple” refers to the crowds who were following Jesus and simply listening to Him (Luke 6:17). Other times, the word “disciple” refers to the people who seemed to be convinced of what Jesus was saying, but they weren’t “all in.” However, there were 12 guys, and a few women, who after these many days of teaching and preaching and healing in Galilee, would follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem to the cross. As we’ll see clearly in the upcoming Sermon on the Mount, nominal adherence to Jesus is not something new to the twenty-first century (Matt 7:21–23). It has been prevalent ever since the first century.

Throughout history, there have been crowds of people who were content to hear from Jesus, maybe even to agree with Jesus, but they didn't truly follow Him. In the place where I pastor, Birmingham, Alabama, it is no big deal to go to a church. In fact, so many people go to church that it becomes a game to see which church can draw the biggest crowd. But this is not New Testament Christianity. New Testament Christianity is a narrow road, a costly road of continual obedience. Anyone who wants to become a follower of Jesus needs to know what they are signing up for.

First, **we are not casual listeners**. True disciples don't simply listen to the words of Jesus week by week and then move on with their lives. Second, **we are not convinced listeners**, people who are content to merely *affirm* belief in Jesus. Even demons believe Jesus is who He says He is (Jas 2:19)! Intellectual belief alone ultimately damns. Followers of Jesus are not simply casual or even convinced listeners; **we are committed learners and followers**. In a world, even a church world, full of casual and convinced listeners, I want to invite you to yield your life as a learner and follower of Jesus, being willing to go wherever He asks and to do whatever He says, no matter what it costs.

### **Total** \_\_\_\_\_

Next we need to see that to follow Jesus means to **live with total trust in His authority**. We might put it this way: **He is the Master of every domain in our lives**. Luke records that just before Jesus called these four fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James, and John), He was able supernaturally to determine where they should drop their nets for a massive catch (Luke 5:1–11). From the beginning, then, the disciples realized that Jesus was sovereign, even over the fish of the sea. For them and for us, it is important to realize that there is nothing in our lives or our professions that is outside Jesus' authority.

All of us have the dangerous tendency to compartmentalize Christianity. We relegate Jesus to the religious realm, not realizing that **He is the Lord of every detail in our lives**. He is Lord over politics and policies. He is Lord over budgets and bank accounts. He is Lord over houses and cars. He is Lord over words and thoughts, attitudes and actions. And to follow Him is to live with total trust in His sovereign, supreme authority in every domain and in every detail of your life.

### **Urgent** \_\_\_\_\_

Finally, to follow Jesus is to **live with urgent obedience to His mission**. This is integral to why He called us in the first place. **Every follower of Jesus is a fisher of men**. Using imagery that was familiar to their vocation, Jesus was calling the disciples to a mission. Instead of searching for fish all over the lake, they would spread the gospel all over the world. At the close of this Gospel, this message remains front and center. Jesus met the disciples on a mountainside in Galilee, and He commanded them, "Go ... and make disciples of all nations."

The theme of mission is prominent in Matthew's Gospel, for **every disciple is a disciple-maker**. This is admittedly an unconventional plan. With the good news of a kingdom to spread throughout the world, Jesus gathered a few men around Him for three years. He loved them,

cared for them, taught them, and trained them, and when He left this earth, He only had a handful of people who were actually following Him. But each one of them knew that he (or she) had one mission—to fish for men and make disciples. The advancement of the gospel in the world came about as the Spirit of God used every single one of those early disciples to accomplish His grand and global purpose.

We desperately need to be reminded that the Great Commission and the call to fish for men are every Christian's privilege and responsibility. **This is an unconventional plan that demands a universal response.** This is one of the deepest burdens of my heart for the church I pastor. I want every member, every disciple, to see themselves as disciple-makers. So biblically, if we're not making disciples, then we have missed what it means to be a disciple in the first place. This is one of the reasons I encourage every member of our church to be a part of a small group, where the goal is not simply to meet, but to come alongside other believers and ask, "How can we make disciples?"

You may be thinking, "I can't do that." To which I say, "Yes, that's the point." We can't do it. That's why we need Jesus to make us what we cannot be in and of ourselves. This is the core of discipleship: we follow Him, and *He* makes us fishers of men.

## **Conclusion**

In light of everything we know about Jesus from the first four chapters of Matthew, we should feel the wonder and weight of the One who gives this invitation, this command, to four fishermen to "Follow Me" in verse 19. This is Jesus, the Savior, the Messiah, the One promised to come in the kingly line of David and from Abraham, the father of Israel. He was fully human and fully divine, the One to whom wise men from the nations bow down, the One whose birth and life are the culmination of generations of prophecy and anticipation. He is the Savior King and Righteous Judge of the world, perfectly filled with God's Spirit and loved by God the Father. He is the only man who has conquered sin, and the true Son that Israel could never be.

There is only one conclusion to draw when we hear the invitation "Follow Me": **Jesus is worthy of far more than church attendance and casual association.** We have such a dangerous tendency to reduce Jesus to a poor, puny Savior who is just begging for you and me to accept Him into our lives. As if Jesus needs to be accepted by us! Jesus doesn't need our acceptance; He is infinitely worthy of all glory in the whole universe, and He doesn't need us at all. We need Him.

We dare not patronize Jesus, for **He is worthy of total abandonment and supreme adoration.** We're talking about the Savior King of the universe and Righteous Judge of all nations—God in the flesh—saying, "Follow Me." That thought alone is mind-boggling. There is no potential casual response to Jesus. It's either "turn and run" or "bow and worship." Luke's Gospel records that as soon as Peter caught a glimpse of Jesus' power and authority, He fell on His face, and then rose and followed (Luke 5:1–11). Everything is different once you meet this King. That's

why we know that people who profess to be Christians but whose lives look just like the rest of the world are lying.

Many people claim to have made a decision, prayed a prayer, signed a card, walked an aisle, accepted Jesus into their hearts, but their lives don't look any different. These people say they're Christians, but the reality is that they've never met Jesus. Because when you do, everything changes.

Discipleship is undoubtedly costly, but as you consider the cost of discipleship, I beg you to **consider the cost of non-discipleship**. What if you choose to reject Jesus, to live for yourself and to die in your sin? What if you choose to settle for casual, cultural Christianity that never truly encounters Christ?

Consider what the cost will be for our lives. Eternity is at stake. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), and death apart from a saving relationship with Jesus Christ means that an eternal hell is your destination. Don't be deceived: the cost of non-discipleship is far greater than the cost of discipleship.

And also consider the cost for our community. Your non-discipleship means that the people who know you get a picture of a half-hearted, lukewarm Christianity and a puny, pathetic Christ. Instead, we want to show people that Jesus is worthy of more than Sunday morning or even small group attendance; He's worthy of our lives and our possessions, our dreams and our ambitions. He's worthy of it all, and we gladly lay it all down for Him. Let's make known the good news of a King for whom it is worth losing everything.

Finally, consider the cost for the world if we aren't committed learners and followers of Christ. How is it that billions of people have still never heard this gospel? Surely it is at least in part because we have been content with business as usual in the church, instead of realizing what it means to really follow the Jesus of the Bible and to spend our lives spreading the gospel of the kingdom to the ends of the earth. Failing to follow Jesus truly has global consequences.

## Appendix: Answer Guide

Lesson 1 (12-31-23)

Our Mysterious And Majestic King (Matthew 1:18-25)

**How Jesus Came**

**Who Jesus Is**

**What Jesus Confirms**

Lesson 2 (1-7-24)

The Gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 1:1-17)

**Introduction of the King**

**Overview of the Kingdom**

**Salvation through the King**

Lesson 3 (1-14-24)

We Two Kings (Matthew 2:1-12)

***Choice 1: Indifference***

***Choice 2: Hostility***

***Choice 3: Worship***

Lesson 4 (1-21-24)

The King Fulfills Prophecy (Matthew 2:13-23)

**THE ESCAPE TO EGYPT (2:13–15)**

**THE SLAUGHTER AT RAMAH (2:16–18)**

**THE RETURN TO NAZARETH (2:19–23)**

Lesson 5 (1-28-24)

The Ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12)

**The Man**

**The Message**

**The Method**

Lesson 6 (2-4-24)

The Coronation of the King (Matthew 3:13-17)

**BAPTISM OF THE SON (3:13–15)**

**ANOINTING OF THE SPIRIT (3:16)**

**CONFIRMATION BY THE FATHER (3:17)**

Lesson 7 (2-11-24)

The Tempted Son (Matthew 4:1-11)

**A Common but False Objection**

**God-Ordained but Not God-Inflicted**

**When His Flesh Was Most Weak**

**Unique Yet Universal**

**The Shield of the Spirit Shields the Savior**

**Tough but Temporary**

Lesson 8 (2-18-24)

The Light Dawns (Matthew 4:12-17)

**THE RIGHT TIME (4:12a)**

**THE RIGHT PLACE (4:12b-16)**

**THE RIGHT PROCLAMATION (4:17)**

Lesson 9 (2-25-24)

Two Simple Words (Matthew 4:18-25)

***Radical Abandonment***

***Joyful Dependence***

***Faithful Adherence***

***Total Trust***

***Urgent Obedience***

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