

***The Gospel According to  
Matthew***

***by Steve Page***

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# *The Gospel According To Matthew*

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# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Introduction**

The first four books of the New Testament contain descriptions of Jesus' ministry and teachings. All the earliest manuscripts of these books had the title, *The Good News According to* and the author's name. The word *gospel*, which comes from the Anglo-Saxon *gōd spel* meaning *good news*, refers to the message about Jesus. We call these four books *Gospels*.

The Gospels are the core of the New Testament; they help us understand who Jesus was, what he taught, and how he died and then rose from the dead. From this spring, the rest of the New Testament flows.

The early Church considered the *Gospel According to Matthew*, or just *Matthew*, to be the chief of the Gospels. They thought it was the first Gospel written, and they used and quoted from it the most. From a modern perspective, it's still very important.

One reason is that it's highly structured; it places Jesus' teachings into five groups that separate the narratives about Jesus' early life, ministry, death, and resurrection. This makes Jesus' teachings easy to access. Another is that both Mark and Luke used *Matthew* as a primary source as they wrote their Gospels.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we must understand *Matthew* to analyze the other two. While all the Gospels are equally valuable, understanding *Matthew* is foundational to all Bible-believing Christians.

At the same time, *Matthew* is very Jewish, while the other Gospels writers had non-Jewish audiences in mind when they wrote. Where the other authors made efforts to smooth over the culture gap, *Matthew* assumed that his audience knew the Old Testament, the politics of the day, and the geography of Judea and Galilee. In fact, even Greek scholars in the early Church had problems with this.<sup>2</sup>

*Matthew*, in many places, simply doesn't make sense unless we know a fair amount of background material. Thus, this commentary will provide a lot of background before starting into the text. I have worked to keep only what I consider important in the *Background* section, having moved less important information to the *Additional Information* section at the end. Please don't feel compelled to remember all the background; you can refer back to it as needed.

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1 Scholars debate whether *Matthew* or *Mark* wrote first. See *Additional Information—The Order the Gospels Were Written* for a discussion.

2 See *Additional Information—Papias on Matthew* for a pun among early scholars on the difficulty of understanding *Matthew*.

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## **An Independent Perspective**

One of the challenges of writing about the Bible in general is that it covers events that occurred from 2,000 to 4,000 years ago. We have little firm evidence about ancient times. In addition, the early Church kept very few historical records until the beginning of the fourth century, and even then, it didn't record many things we would like to know. In particular, there are no records of who wrote which New Testament book when, where, and why, apart from a few references to *Mark*.<sup>1</sup> We simply don't have the amount of information we would like to make statements about the Bible with certainty. I've done my best to pull together an accurate picture, but everyone, including me, must fill in the many gaps as best they can.

As we will see, Matthew was a maverick; he had a falling out with the religious establishment, and he made no effort to conceal his feelings about them. For my part, I relate to Matthew. On one hand, I respect the efforts of conservative scholars; they are in a very difficult position because of the liberals, and I've certainly learned from them and been influenced by them. At the same time, I feel no need to agree with them or with tradition when the facts point in another direction. I'll only point out disagreements in places where I clearly disagree on a commonly held position.

## **A Note About Dates**

Dates from around the first century can be confusing for a couple of reasons. First, scholars decided to replace the familiar BC and AD with BCE and CE, which stand for Before Common Era and Common Era. In addition, since most of the events described occurred in the Common Era, I leave off the CE on dates. Unfortunately, all this leads to dates like 6, which refers to 6 CE, and 3 BCE.

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1 Papias, who wrote around 103, quoted the Apostle John. However, John said only that Mark had worked closely with the Apostle Peter, that he was careful about what he wrote down, and that he hadn't put the events he recorded in a strict order. Second century sources, including Irenaeus, state that Mark wrote his gospel in Rome after Peter's death.

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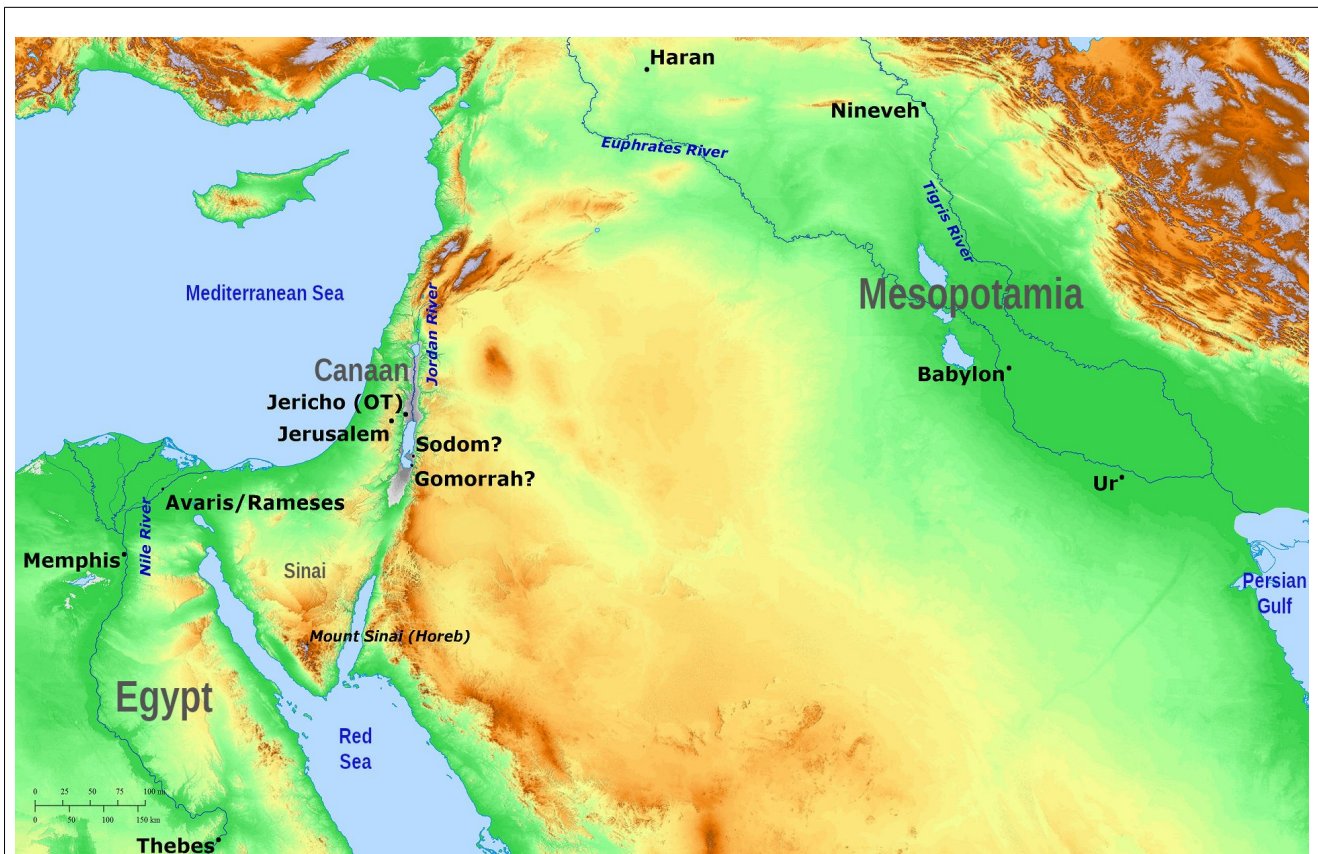
## Background

Jesus was a real person who lived in a specific place and time. To understand Jesus, we need to understand at least some of the history that led up to his time, the places where he lived, the politics, and the people with whom he lived and interacted.

## Geography

To understand Jewish history and the places where Jesus conducted his ministry, we need to know a little about the geography.

## Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan



*Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan around 1500 BCE.*

In ancient times, the regions of Egypt and Mesopotamia produced great civilizations. Both regions contained great rivers; Egypt had the Nile, and Mesopotamia had the Euphrates and the Tigris. A great desert separated the regions, but a narrow strip along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea connected them. Part of this strip, the portion along and west of the Jordan

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River, was called Canaan. Canaan was inhabited and had cities, but it wasn't as advanced as the kingdoms of Egypt or of Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia produced several empires; three were particularly important in the Old Testament. The Assyrians lived in the north; Nineveh was one of their main cities. The Babylonians lived around Babylon. The Medes and Persians came from the highlands to the east of Mesopotamia and made Babylon their western capital.

Egypt produced several great kingdoms; some of them exerted their influence up the Mediterranean coast past Canaan toward Mesopotamia. Four cities in Egypt served as capitals at different times. Memphis in the north was the capital in times before the Old Testament, when their kings built the pyramids. During the times from *Genesis* to *Joshua*, the capital moved south to Thebes.

The Israelites settled in the northeastern corner of Egypt. Soon after, during the times between *Genesis* and *Exodus*, the Hyksos, from an Egyptian word meaning "Foreign Rulers," controlled northern Egypt and made Avaris their capital. Around 1550, the Egyptians drove out the Hyksos and destroyed Avaris. Later, during times of *Judges*, the Egyptians built Rameses, near the old site of Avaris, and made it the capital.

Sinai was the desert region east of Egypt, across from northwestern arm of the Red Sea, and southwest of Canaan. It was mostly desert and sparsely populated. Mount Sinai, or Horeb, lay in the southern tip.

Canaan consisted of most of the area shown in the map below. Mount Hermon in the north was the highest point in the region, and it was the starting point of the Jordan River, which ran south into the Sea of Galilee and then into the Dead Sea.

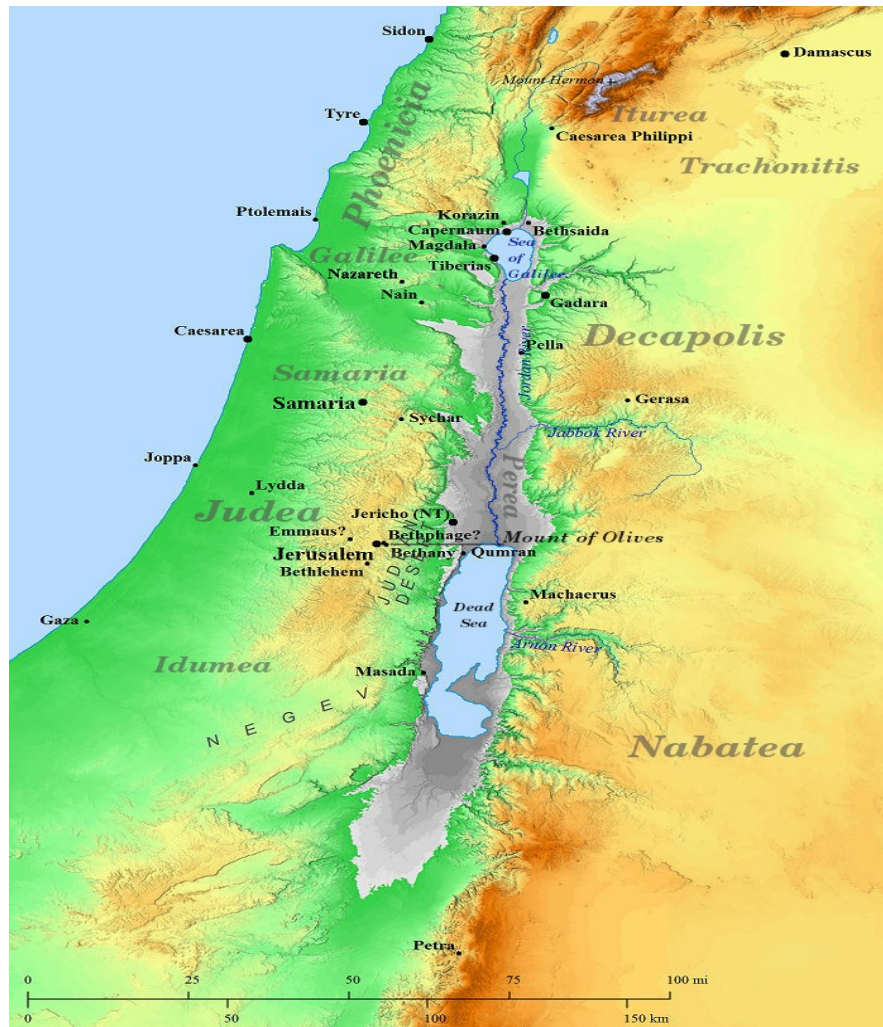
The Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea all lie in a very deep valley. The Sea of Galilee is 700 feet below sea level, while the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth, is 1,400 feet below sea level.

East and west of the Jordan River valley, the land rises up into high hills. Jerusalem, an ancient city of Canaan was 2,500 feet above sea level, while nearby Jericho was 850 feet below sea level. To the north, the highlands of Galilee are up to 2,000 feet above sea level.

When the Israelites conquered Canaan during the time of *Joshua*, God divided the land between the twelve tribes. Judah received the land the farthest south, and the other tribes received the rest. God had intended for the Israelites to take the entire land, but the Israelites failed to do so.

Later on, the Israelites split into two nations, Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Jerusalem, on the northern boundary of Judah, was the capital of Judah. Israel eventually established Samaria as its capital.

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The Lands of Jesus.

## In Jesus' Time

By the time of Jesus, the entire region, apart from the Arabian desert in the southeast, was under Roman control.

Along the north coast, Phoenicia was part of the Roman province of Syria. The cities of Sidon and Tyre were prosperous; at a later date, Rome granted them Roman citizenship.

The Decapolis, which means Ten Cities, consisted of ten cities that the Romans gave the right to govern themselves; Gadara, Gerasa, Pella, and Damascus were some of these cities. The cities and the surrounding areas were culturally Greek/Roman and closely tied to Rome.



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Nabatea, an Arab kingdom in the desert to the east and south, maintained its independence from Rome.

The Romans considered the rest of the region too insignificant to incorporate into the Roman Empire. Instead, they divided it up into three districts and assigned local rulers over them. These local rulers functioned as kings, although the Romans did not always give them that title. These districts generally ignored the old national boundaries.

The northern district consisted of Iturea and Trachonitis, its capital was Caesarea Philippi. It played a small role in the New Testament.

Below that was a district composed of Galilee and Perea, a small area east of the Jordan River and south of the Decapolis.

The southern district was Judea; it was composed of Samaria, Judah, and Idumea. Samaria and Idumea were ethnically separate from the Jews, but the Jews had conquered them before the Romans took over. While Samaria was part of the district of Judea, the Samaritans and the Jews hated each other, which effectively split the district into two.

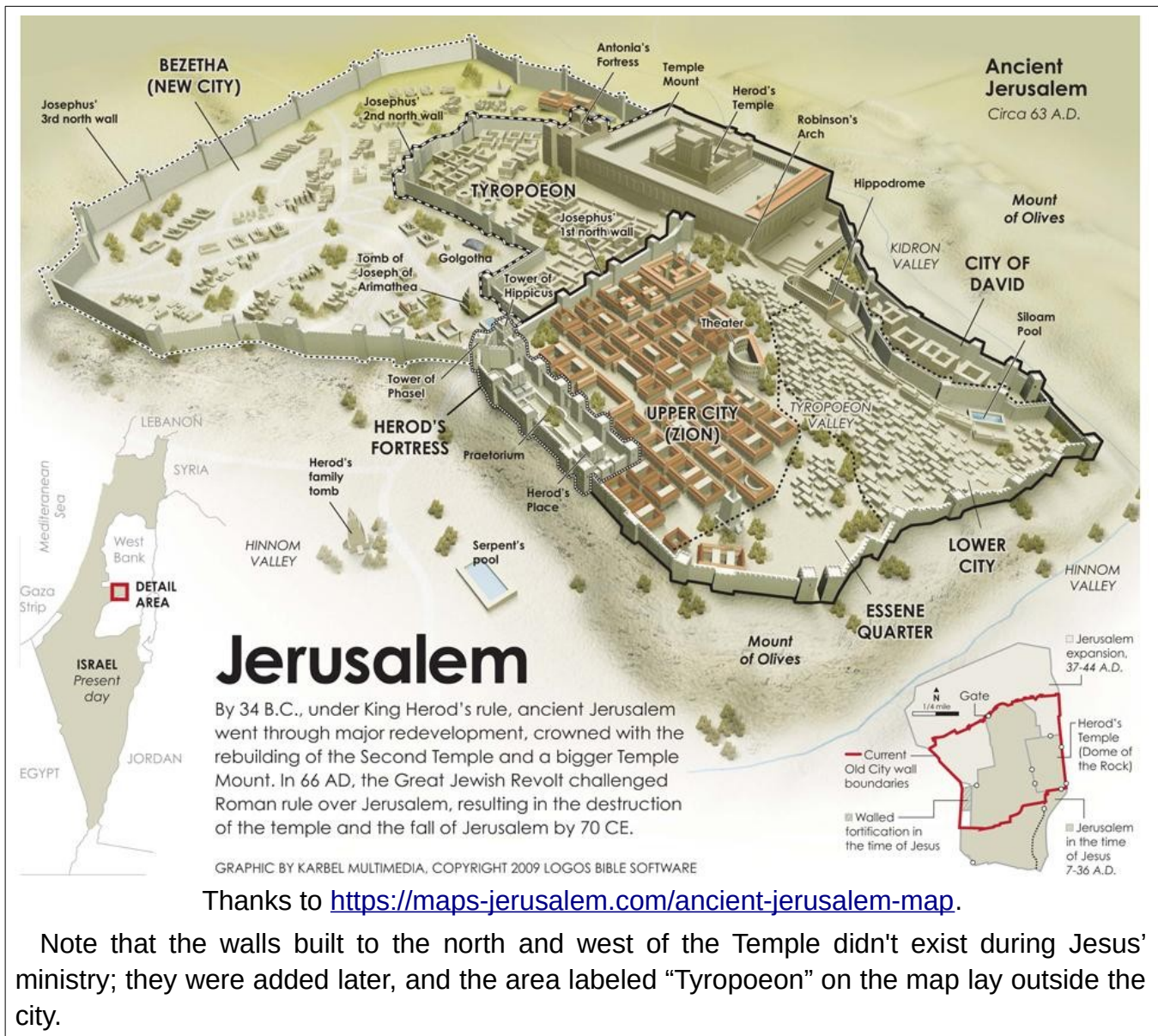
## **Jerusalem**

Jerusalem, with the Temple located in its northeast corner, was the center of the Jewish world. The city was a natural fortress, with deep valleys on the west, south, and east. The southeast corner of the Temple wall was 450 feet above the Kidron Valley below.

The Temple dominated the northeast corner of the city and had its own wall. The wall had a fortress built into its northwest corner called the Antonia Fortress. The Romans maintained a garrison in the fortress, so they could look down into the Temple courtyards and respond to any signs of trouble.

Herod the Great had started rebuilding the Temple in 20 BCE, and he finished the sanctuary within three years. By the time of Jesus' ministry, the Temple was largely complete, although work continued until the first Jewish Rebellion in 66. Herod had the Temple Mount built up to form a platform that was 900 by 1,600 feet. The sanctuary and its courts sat on the west side of the platform and had their own walls as well, including an enormous gate with bronze doors that an ancient source said was around 75 feet tall.

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The southeast corner of the city was called the City of David or the Old City. This was where, over a thousand years before, King David had built his capital. The west side of the city was called the Upper City or Zion; this was where the wealthy, including Herod and the chief priests, maintained their palatial homes. Between the City of David and Zion was the Tyropoeon Valley, where the masses of Jerusalem lived. Between 50,000 and 100,000 people lived packed within the city walls; during the three main Jewish festivals, hundreds of thousands of visitors poured in as well.

Jerusalem was surrounded by valleys on the west, south, and east. The Hinnom Valley, also called the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, stretched from the west around to the south, while the

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Kidron Valley lay to the east. The Mount of Olives lay across the Kidron Valley and actually rose above Jerusalem, allowing a view down into the Temple.

A notorious spot lay in the southeastern corner of the Hinnom Valley. King Solomon had established an altar there where worshipers burnt children as offerings to Molech, the god of the neighboring Ammonites. Hundreds of years later, the Judean king Josiah had defiled the place; the Old Testament called it Topheth. Possibly, the area became Jerusalem's city dump, and fires were kept burning there to help eliminate the waste. Legends arose that demons lived in this part of the Hinnom Valley and that the spot was a gateway to the underworld, where the wicked went to be tormented in fire. The Hebrew name *Gei Hinnom*, meaning *Valley of Hinnom*, came into Greek as *Gehenna*. Often, English versions often translate Gehenna as Hell, but this isn't correct. We should think of it as a filthy spot just south of Jerusalem associated with demons, the underworld, and eternal punishment.

## **Galilee**

Galilee<sup>1</sup> was the region west of the Sea of Galilee and north of Samaria, which left it isolated from Jerusalem. Herod Antipas built its capital city, Tiberias, on an old graveyard, so observant Jews avoided it. The Sea of Galilee, actually a lake, sustained fishermen, and the plain along the northwestern shore and the hills to the west supported agriculture.

## **History**

Jesus was a Jew, and so were the vast majority of people with whom he interacted. The Jews of Jesus' time were a people with a unique identity and worldview; God had spent over 2,000 years preparing them for Jesus to appear. To understand the Jews, we need to understand the most important events of their history.

## **The Old Testament**

The Old Testament is our primary source of information about the history of the Jews, as well as their religion. The following is an extremely condensed summary of the Old Testament, with a few concepts from the New Testament thrown in.

Note that the *entire* purpose of God's working, as described in the Old Testament, was to prepare the Jews for the coming of Jesus. A major aspect of this process was to instill in the Jews a sense of their own rebelliousness and thus their need for a savior. The Old Testament can seem overwhelmingly negative, and God can appear to be harsh and demanding. This is the glass-half-empty view. The glass-half-full view sees God persevering with the Jews,

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1 Galilee actually consisted of two regions, Upper Galilee and Lower Galilee. Galilee in *Matthew* refers to Lower Galilee.

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attempting to bless them, to reason with them, and to discipline them, in spite of their ongoing refusal to obey. Either way, the Old Testament is incomplete by itself; it cries out for resolution. That resolution starts with *Matthew*.

## ***Creation and Fall of Humankind***

### ***Note on Heaven and Earth***

In ancient times, “heaven” or “heavens” could refer to three different regions. The first heaven was the sky, where the birds fly. The second heaven was a dome covering the seas and the land, which were flat. The Sun, Moon, planets, and stars existed in this dome. Above the dome was water, and gates in the dome allowed rain to fall. These first two heavens were part of God’s creation. The third heaven was above the water, where God and the angels reside. It was eternal.

Matthew uses a convention where he uses the plural form, *heavens*, when speaking of the third heaven. I will use *Heaven* in that case. When Matthew refers to the first heaven, I will use *sky*. When Matthew refers to the second heaven or the first and second together, I will use *the heavens*.

To the ancients, *the earth* referred to dry land that was surrounded by seas. They did not have any concept of Earth as a planet. I will use *the earth* to refer to all the dry land as a whole. I will use *Earth* when referring to the planet in a modern sense.

## ***In the Beginning***

God and his Son existed in Heaven before they created the Universe; the Bible provides no information about pre-creation Heaven. Then God and his Son created the Universe, including the heavens, the seas, the earth, and humankind. Humankind lived in a state of purity and happiness because they had no knowledge of good and evil. However, dissatisfied with their situation, they chose to violate God’s one command in order to obtain this knowledge. With the knowledge of good and evil came sin, as humankind were incapable of resisting the temptation to do evil.

God watched as most humankind became violent and oppressive, although a few sought to walk with God. After a time, God attempted to cure humankind of sin by choosing one upright man, Noah, along with his family, to repopulate the earth. God sent a flood that destroyed humankind; he preserved only Noah and his family. However, Noah and his sons retained the knowledge of good and evil, and they quickly fell into sin, and their offspring became just as wicked as before.

## ***Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, Twelve Sons***

In response, God set a new plan in motion. Around 2100 BCE, he called a man named Abraham to leave his wealthy urban lifestyle in Ur of Mesopotamia and to move to a relatively

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primitive land called Canaan. God made promises to Abraham; one was that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan; Canaan thus became known as the Promised Land. Another was that one of his offspring would become a blessing to all the nations.

Abraham had a son named Isaac, and Isaac had two sons, Edom, also called Esau, and Jacob. God chose Jacob over Edom, but Edom went on to become a nation to the southeast of Canaan. God worked on Jacob's character for 20 years and then renamed him Israel. In Hebrew, Jacob sounds like *deceitful*, while Israel sounds like *struggles with God*; the new name reflected that God had changed Jacob. Israel had twelve sons who became known as the Twelve Tribes of Israel; two of the sons were Judah and Levi.

Around 1825 BCE, God led Israel and his sons to Egypt; he did this so that they could grow from around 70 people into a nation of around two million over the next several centuries, as they lived in peace and relative isolation.

Israel and his descendants settled in the northeast corner of Egypt. Soon after, foreigners began to move into the area as well. Around 1650 BCE, an advanced group whom the Egyptians called "Foreign Rulers" took over the north of Egypt and partially controlled the south as well. They built the fortress city of Avaris. These Foreign Rulers allowed the Israelites to prosper and multiply.

### ***Moses, the Exodus, the Law***

Around 1550 BCE, the Egyptians in the south overthrew the Foreign Rulers and destroyed Avaris. The Egyptians, suspicious of the Israelites and their vast numbers, enslaved them and put them to work building fortress cities around the site of Avaris. When the Israelites continued to grow in number, the Egyptians resorted to forcing the Israelites to throw their male babies into the Nile River.

Around 1527 BCE, a woman of the tribe of Levi built small raft for her infant son and left him where a young Egyptian noblewoman bathed. The Egyptian woman took the infant in as her own and named him Moses. Moses grew up among the Egyptian nobility, but he never forgot his Israelite heritage.

When Moses was around 40, he murdered an Egyptian overseer who was mistreating an Israelite slave. Moses fled to the south of Sinai, where he lived for the next 40 years as a shepherd.

Around 1446 BCE, God called Moses, along with his brother Aaron, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and back to Canaan. When the Egyptian ruler <sup>1</sup> refused to let them leave, God struck Egypt with ten plagues, and the Egyptian ruler temporarily changed his mind. As the Israelites fled, they reached the Red Sea, and the Egyptians followed close behind. Moses, at God's

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<sup>1</sup> See *Additional Information—Pharaoh and Egypt* for details.

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command, held up his staff, and God parted the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to escape. When the Egyptians foolishly pursued, God caused them to get stuck and then destroyed them as the waters flowed back together.

God led the Israelites to Mount Sinai in the south of the Sinai Peninsula. Here, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which God inscribed on stone tablets. God also gave Moses a substantial number of other laws, including a detailed description of how the Israelites must worship. God set up Aaron, Moses' brother, and his descendants to serve as priests. Moses wrote five books, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. They contained Israel's history and all of God's commands. These were called the Books of the Law.

Throughout this process, the Israelites rebelled against Moses and angered God. While God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments, the Israelites threw a riotous party. The Levites, the tribe of Moses and Aaron, rallied to Moses and stopped them; thus, God set apart the tribe of Levi, or the Levites, as assistants to the priests.

The Israelites' rebellious behavior finally caused God to give up on the entire first generation, except for two faithful men, Joshua and Caleb. God caused the Israelites to wander for 40 years in the deserts of Sinai until all the first generation had died, including Moses and Aaron.

### ***The Conquest of Canaan and the Judges***

Around 1407 BCE, God called Joshua to replace Moses. God, using Joshua, led the second generation of Israelites into Canaan, the land that he had promised to Abraham. The conquest of Canaan started with the heavily fortified city of Jericho; God caused the enormous wall around the city to collapse, allowing the Israelites to take it.

The Canaanites were particularly wicked, and God told the Israelites to completely eliminate them, or the Canaanites would corrupt them. God enabled the Israelites to capture large portions of the land. However, the Israelites allowed the Canaanites to remain in many places, and the practices of the Canaanites corrupted the Israelites, just as God had warned them.

This led to a long downward spiral. Sadly, hardship produced faithfulness, but peace produced waywardness. The Israelites would remain faithful for a time, and God would give them peace. Then, they would turn away from God, who would allow foreigners to oppress them. The Israelites would cry out to God, who would raise up a judge, or leader, to restore the Israelites and give them peace. Then the cycle would repeat, with the Israelites becoming less faithful and more wayward each time. The last of these judges was a priest and prophet named Samuel.

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## ***Kings David and Solomon***

During the time of Samuel, the Israelites demanded that God give them a king. Saul, the first king of Israel, failed, but God raised up David to replace him. David was from Bethlehem in the tribe of Judah. Around 1010 BCE, after many trials, David became king, first over Judah and then over all Israel.

David walked with God, although he stumbled at times. God gave him victories over all the surrounding nations, so that Israel became a regional power. David took the city of Jerusalem, which was a natural fortress, and established it as his capital.

God also promised that David's descendant would reign on his throne forever. This became a key prophesy about the Christ.

David's son Solomon became king after him. Initially, Solomon walked with God, and God gave Solomon supernatural wisdom. Israel became immensely prosperous and had peace all around. David had wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem, and Solomon built it, based on David's plans. This established Jerusalem as the religious center of Israel, as well as the capital.

However, Solomon married a thousand women, many of them foreigners, in violation of the Law of Moses, and they corrupted him. God was angry with Solomon, and he determined to tear the kingdom away from Solomon's son. However, because of David, God determined to leave the tribe of Judah to David's descendants.

## ***The Divided Kingdoms***

Around 930 BCE, after Solomon died, God split Israel into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Many priests and Levites moved to Judah because of the Temple, while the king of Israel set up idols as a substitute for the Temple. Over time, both nations turned away from God, but Israel more so. God sent prophets to both in an effort to call them to repentance; in spite of this, both became increasingly unfaithful.

God sent the prophet Elijah to Israel during a the reign of Ahab, a particularly wicked king. Elijah came from a rugged wilderness region of Israel and dressed the part; he wore an outer garment made of woven hair secured by a leather belt. God did a number of miracles through Elijah, and in some ways he was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets.

A key point in Elijah's ministry came when Elijah, after a major victory, realized that the Israelites wouldn't repent. He fled to Mount Sinai, where God had given Moses the Ten Commandments. At Mount Sinai, God spoke to Elijah and restored the prophet's confidence.

In spite of the prophets, Israel continued to turn away from God. In 722 BCE, God allowed the Assyrian Empire to conquer Samaria, the capital of Israel. They deported and scattered the

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Israelites into the nations to the east. At the same time, the Assyrians brought in foreigners and settled them in Samaria. These foreigners generally accepted God and the Law of Moses; they became the Samaritans.

After this, only Judah remained intact, and foreign nations began to refer to Israel as the Jews. During this time, God raised up the prophet Isaiah; late in his long life, he made many prophecies about the restoration of Israel and the coming of the Christ.

## ***The Exile***

Judah held out against the Assyrian for over 100 years. However, by 605 BCE, the Babylonians had destroyed the Assyrian Empire and defeated the Egyptians. They came and took many Jews into exile in Babylon. One of them was Daniel, whom God made into a prophet and a great hope for the Jews in Babylon.

God raised up the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel to warn the Jews and to prepare them for coming fall of Judah. In 586 BCE, the Babylonians demolished Jerusalem and the Temple; they took the survivors to Babylon. The few Jews the Babylonians left behind soon fled to Egypt. Jerusalem was desolate, and the Jews lived in exile.

The exile caused distinct factions to form among the Jews. The wealthy conservatives only accepted the Books of the Law, while the liberals were scholarly and open to new ideas, such as a spiritual realm with angels, Satan, and the resurrection of the dead. Over time, the conservatives would become the Sadducees, and the liberals would become the Pharisees.

## ***Post Exile***

In 539 BCE, the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon. Their king, Cyrus, allowed all the nations in exile to return to their own lands. Some Jews took advantage of this opportunity and returned to Jerusalem, while others remained in Babylon. Slowly, the Jews rebuilt the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem; however, Judah was no longer a sovereign nation.

Malachi was the last writing prophet of the Old Testament, he ministered around 430 BCE. After Malachi came the 400 silent years, during which the Jews waited for God to restore them.

## ***Post Old Testament***

Around 330 BCE, Alexander the Great and the Greeks overthrew the Persians and took over their empire. The Jews generally fared well under the Greeks, until around 170 BCE. An unstable Greek king banned the Jewish religion and defiled the Temple. This led a single priest and his sons to rebel; in time, the sons, known as the Maccabees, won Jewish independence.

Around this time, the Pharisees emerged from the highly devout liberals; the Sadducees emerged from the wealthy conservatives.



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In 161 BCE, while the Maccabees were still fighting against the Greeks, they made an alliance with Rome, which was an emerging power. The Romans continued to honor one aspect of this alliance even after they took control of the Jews; they tolerated the Jewish religion and didn't require the Jews to worship Roman gods. This was a critical win for the Jews, as the Romans considered the Jewish belief that there were no gods but their own to be atheism, a very serious crime.

In 142 BCE, one of the Maccabees became Chief Priest and king of the Jews. The descendants of these Jewish warrior priest/kings waged war and gained control over Galilee, Samaria, and Edom. They awarded themselves and their relatives with large estates, particularly in Galilee, which made them extremely wealthy. Eventually, these priest/kings sided with the Sadducees against the Pharisees. However, the Pharisees retained some power and became the defenders of the common people.

Around 63 BCE, the Romans took control of the Jewish nation. They appointed an Edomite named Herod as king over the Jews and Samaritans, along with other lands; he established control in 37 BCE. Herod was a brutal leader and an ambitious builder.

## ***During Jesus' Life***

Jesus was born in the summer of 2 BCE in Bethlehem, King David's town. *Matthew* tells us that Herod attempted to kill Jesus by wiping out all the infant males in the area soon after his birth. Herod died early in 1 BCE, and the Romans divided his kingdom among three of his sons.

They gave Judea, including Samaria, to Archelaus. Archelaus remained in power only until 6; after this, the Romans administered Judea with a series of minor Roman officials.

The Romans gave Galilee and a small region east of the Jordan River to Herod Antipas. He was more temperate than his father. This effectively split the Jews between two administrations.

The Romans gave the regions north of Galilee to Philip.

Pontius Pilate administered Judea and Samaria from 26 to 36. He was an equestrian, a second-level Roman nobleman, petty, stubborn but ultimately timid, with little conscience. He had several run-ins with the Jews and Samaritans until his behavior finally caused the Roman proconsul of Syria to remove him.

## ***Destruction of Jerusalem***

In 66, some Jews in both Galilee and Judea openly rebelled against Rome. They destroyed a Roman legion of auxiliary soldiers in battle, which caused the Roman emperor Nero to send

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Vespasian and his son Titus with a much larger force. Vespasian rapidly put down the rebellion but did not attempt to attack Jerusalem, which was a natural fortress.

In 68, Nero committed suicide out of Rome. The civil war that followed distracted Vespasian, and he left Titus, who was 28 years old, in charge of the armies in Judea. Vespasian ended up becoming the Roman emperor in 69.

During this period, the Christians in Judea fled to Pella, one of the cities of the Decapolis east of the Jordan River.

In 70, Titus decided to take Jerusalem. He allowed many Jews to go into Jerusalem for the Passover. Once they were inside the city, Titus prevented them from leaving. This left hundreds of thousands of people trapped within the city walls.

What followed was a brutal siege. Titus crucified anyone who left the city, up to hundreds of people each day. Rebel factions inside the city fought with each other and made conditions worse, leading to mass starvation.

In August 70, the Romans breached the north wall of Jerusalem and massacred hundreds of thousands of Jews inside. Early in the fighting, a Roman soldier burned the sanctuary to the ground. After the battle, the Romans tore down the city's walls, which included tearing apart the Temple grounds. They left only a piece of a Temple support wall as a reminder that something had been built there before; this is called the Wailing Wall today.

The rebellion officially ended in 73, when a group of rebels holding out in the fortress of Masada by the Dead Sea committed suicide, rather than be slaughtered by the Romans.

Titus became emperor in 79 after Vespasian died, but he died of a sudden illness two years later, at age 41.

The destruction of the Temple effectively put an end to the sacrifices required by the Law of Moses and thus the priesthood. In a real sense, this brought an end to the Old Testament nation of Israel. Of course, millions of Jews retained their identity, and the Pharisees eventually reinvented Jewish worship around the synagogue and their traditions, retaining as much of the worship under the Law as practicable.

Jews continued to live in the ruins of Jerusalem until 132, when a second rebellion started that lasted four years. Hundreds of thousands of Jews died, and the Roman emperor Hadrian banned Jewish worship. He built a new city on the site of Jerusalem and built a temple to Jupiter over part of the old Temple. He banned Jews from the city, being allowed to enter only once a year to mourn at the Wailing Wall.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Culture**

### **In General**

In basic ways, Jewish culture was similar to most ancient cultures. Ancient societies had class systems. The aristocrats were 2% of the population or less and lived in great luxury. They typically owned very large estates farmed by slaves or hired hands. Another 8% or less made “comfortable” livings working for the aristocrats as skilled workers or as merchants. The remaining 90% lived in poverty, owning small farms, shops, or doing manual labor. Most people made just enough to survive.

The typical day’s wage for a laborer was one denarius, which was worth about \$2.25—see the section *Additional Information—Ancient Money* for more information. Laborers made around \$700 per year, which in today’s world is a typical income for perhaps 25% of people around the world. Slaves were often better off than laborers, as their owners would view them as assets and provide for them, where laborers had no guarantees at all.

However, the vast working class didn’t consider themselves to be “poor.” True poverty was confined to those unable to work at all, such as widows, orphans, and the lame. Frequently, they were reduced to begging.

The father’s class determined a person’s class. Young men fortunate enough to have fathers in a trade learned their fathers’ trades.

Young women hoped that their parents would arrange suitable marriages for them. Women found their value primarily in bearing and raising children; women unable to bear children, even if the fault lay with their husbands, were at risk of divorce and a life of poverty.

Ancient cultures were “honor societies,” where one’s honor was more important than personal virtue. People showed others respect, and they expected others to show them respect in return, each according to their rank. They considered that allowing someone else to show disrespect was a sign of weakness; disrespect demanded a strong and immediate response. People also considered admitting fault a weakness.

People gained respect by gaining higher rank, which was typically achieved through wealth and accomplishment. Pursuing and maintaining one’s rank was very important, even among the working class.

In Jewish society, like most others, men dominated and women had almost no rights. For example, a man could divorce his wife, but a wife couldn’t divorce her husband; she belonged to him. In addition, a man could have multiple wives, and some aristocrats maintained two households, one in Jerusalem and one on their rural estates in Galilee. Women, however, could “belong” only to one man.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Language**

We might expect the Jews to have spoken Hebrew. However, for some 600 years, the Jews had been subject to foreign powers, except for a brief period from around 150 to 62 BCE. Because of this, they had adopted the languages of the powers that ruled them, first Aramaic and then Greek. When the Romans came to power, their aristocrats spoke Greek, so they continued to use Greek when dealing with Greek-speaking territories.

Aramaic was similar to Hebrew; however, most Jews could no longer read or speak Hebrew, and only scholars could read the original Old Testament. Fortunately, Greek kings in Egypt had encouraged Jewish scholars to translate the Old Testament into Greek, resulting in the Septuagint, and most Jews used the Septuagint.<sup>1</sup> Jesus and the Jews living around him were bilingual, speaking Aramaic at home and Greek with non-Jews. However, the vast majority of Jews lived outside of Judea and Galilee, and many of them spoke Greek and didn't know Aramaic.

Apart from *Matthew*, Old Testament references in the New Testament tend to follow the Septuagint. The New Testament itself was written entirely in Greek.<sup>2</sup>

## **Jewish Identify**

As the Jews adopted the languages of their rulers, we might expect that they would also adopt their rulers' customs and, eventually, their religions as well. In fact, some Jews, especially the wealthy who had political ties to foreign rulers, did just that. However, many held tightly to their Jewish identity and rejected outside influences.

This happened because of three aspects of Jewish religion. First, God, from the time he called Abraham, made clear that he had chosen Abraham and his descendants as a unique people for his own possession. The Jews and the Jews only were God's Chosen People.

Second, God had taught the Jews that not only was he *their* only god, he was *the* only god. All the other gods of the nations were no gods at all.<sup>3</sup> Jews who held to this belief had no common ground with non-Jews, who easily acknowledged the gods of others even if they didn't worship them.

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1 This is an exaggeration. There were several Greek translations, and rabbis in the synagogues also made Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Old Testament called targumim. However, tradition required that the paraphrases not be exact translations and that they not be written down. The "not written down" rule changed shortly after Jesus' time.

2 Claims persist that the New Testament authors wrote in Aramaic and that others then translated it into Greek. All the evidence points to all the New Testament authors writing in Greek.

3 Greeks and Romans called this view atheism, and they considered it one of the worst crimes. Fortunately, the Romans tolerated this Jewish belief because of the alliance they had formed with the Jews almost 200 years earlier.

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Third, the Law of Moses, with its many rules, had rules about remaining “clean.” A person or thing touching anything “unclean” became unclean until that person took specific actions to cleanse themselves. From a practical perspective, these rules made sense for two million people living close to each other, to help them avoid disease. The Law required individuals to be clean only when they gathered for festivals in Jerusalem.

In addition, the Law had rules about what foods were clean or unclean; these rules were not optional. Practically, this kept people from getting sick from what they ate. However, intentionally breaking these rules was a serious offense. Another rule said that something clean, if touched by something unclean, became unclean. This made it impossible for Jews to eat with non-Jews, as even clean food became unclean if non-Jews touched it.

Taken together, these things led the Jews to stay at arm’s length from non-Jews and to have an attitude of superiority. Jews referred to non-Jews as the Tribes or Nations; in modern English, we use the Latin word *Gentiles*, which has the same meaning. However, for Jews, *Gentiles* was a term filled with contempt, similar to the Greek word barbarian.

Jews living in foreign countries lived by two standards. They lived together and treated each other with honesty and respect. They would lend money to each other and charge no interest, as commanded by the Law of Moses, and a Jew wouldn’t cheat another Jew. However, Gentiles viewed Jews as shrewd and exacting, and Jews happily lent to Gentiles and charged interest. While Jews allowed Gentiles to join them in their synagogues, Jews had nothing to do with athletic games and festivals, which the Greeks considered worship and displays of patriotism.

While some Gentiles respected Jewish piety and their relationships with each other, many resented their relative prosperity and their aloof attitudes, and they considered Jews to be atheists because they rejected the Greek and Roman gods.

## **Jewish Day and Calendar**

The Jewish day ended at sundown, so the Jewish day started at sundown also. This made sense for farmers who worked from dawn to dusk. The Egyptians measured time from when the sun was highest in the sky, that is, noon. This led them to end one day and start another at midnight, which is the modern standard.

Using the Jewish approach, special days, such as the weekly Sabbath, started at sundown and ended at sundown the next day.

The Jewish year typically had twelve months; each month started on the new moon and was either 29 or 30 days long. This caused the Jewish year to be around 11 days short of an astronomical year, so they added a “leap month” every two or three years to keep the months tied to the seasons. This causes the Jewish calendar to “move around” from year to year.

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Easter is tied to the Jewish Passover Feast, which is why Easter moves between March and April.

According to the Law, the first month of the year was tied to the barley harvest; it started in March or April. However, kings David and Solomon moved the start of the new year to the seventh month, in September or October. This new calendar is called the Jewish Civil Calendar.

## **Jewish Beliefs**

The Law of Moses laid out the forms of worship in great detail. The priests were to make specific offerings on a specific schedule, including the morning, 9 AM, and afternoon, 3 PM, sacrifices.

Individuals could make offerings for sin or to express gratitude, but a priest had to make these offerings at the altar; in Jesus' time, the altar was in the Temple in Jerusalem, in front of the sanctuary.

The Law declared the seventh day of each week to be a day of rest, called the Sabbath, from the Hebrew for *He rested*. The day commemorated how, in *Genesis 2:1–3*, God completed the creation in six days and rested on the seventh. The rules for the Sabbath were strict, they allowed no work of any kind, including cooking or cleaning, and no travel beyond about two thirds of a mile past the city wall. The penalty for violating the Sabbath was death, see *Exodus 31:12ff*. In addition to the weekly Sabbath, the Law designated specific days to be special Sabbaths; these could fall on any day of the week.

The day before a Sabbath was a "preparation day." Workers made plans to be home before sunset, and housekeepers prepared meals to be eaten the next day.

The Law also required all Jewish men to participate in several designated festivals; the main festivals occurred at the Temple in Jerusalem. Practically speaking, Jews living in foreign lands attempted to attend at least one of these festivals at least once in their lifetimes. These festivals occurred in three groups.

## ***Major Festivals***

### **Passover and Unleavened Bread**

The tenth plague on the Egyptians was the death of the firstborn, where an angel put to death all the firstborn sons during the night. However, God caused the angel to "pass over" the homes of the Israelites because each family had sacrificed a lamb and painted the door frames of their houses with its blood. The family then roasted their lamb and ate a solemn meal together. This plague occurred on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month.

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The Passover Feast remembered the plague on the firstborn sons in Egypt and how the destroying angel passed over the houses of the Israelites. At 2 PM on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the first month, priests slaughtered tens of thousands of lambs for participating families in the Temple. At sundown, when the 14<sup>th</sup> started, families ate their Passover lamb at a solemn feast. The Passover could fall on any day of the week.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the 15<sup>th</sup> at sundown, the day after the Passover, where the Jews would eat bread without leaven for a week. See *Additional Information—Leaven* for a description of leaven. This celebration remembered how the Israelites rushed to leave Egypt after the plague of the firstborn so that they didn't take leaven for making bread. The first and last days of the feast were special Sabbath days, which could fall on any day of the week.

The Passover day was also a preparation day because the Feast of Unleavened Bread began with a special Sabbath day; the focus was on removing all leaven from the home.

## **Pentecost**

The priests counted seven weeks from the first regular Sabbath after the Passover. Pentecost—from the Greek for fifty-days—started the following day, on the first day of the week. The festival celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest.

## **Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Tabernacles**

The Festival of Trumpets was a special Sabbath day when trumpets were blown; it fell on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the seventh month.

The Day of Atonement occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the first month. It was a solemn day of fasting, on which the Chief Priest entered the Most Holy Place to atone for the sins of the Jewish people.

The Festival of Tabernacles, or Booths, occurred on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the first month. All Jewish men built tabernacles, or temporary huts, and lived in them for a week. It was a remembrance of how the Israelites lived for 40 years in the wilderness.

## ***The Christ***

*Christ*—Hebrew, *Messiah*—comes from the Greek word meaning *Anointed One*. *Anointing* is a special appointment, in particular for kings, <sup>1</sup> made by pouring olive oil on a person's head.

During Jesus' time, the Jews had various ideas about the Christ. One religious group, the Essenes, actually believed in two Christs, one a king descended from David, and the other a priest. Together, these two Christs would establish God's kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> See *1 Samuel* 16:1–13, especially 12–13.

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While the Jews had many conflicting opinions about the Christ, they generally agreed on a few points.

- He would be a descendant of King David
- He would be born in Bethlehem, a small town outside Jerusalem where David was born
- He would establish God's kingdom
- He would reign forever
- Before the Christ came, God would send Elijah, or a prophet like him, to judge the Jews and purge the wicked from among them

Many Jews thought that the Christ would come as warrior-king of the Jews and have superpowers; he would overthrow the Romans and establish the Jews as rulers of the world. No one thought that the Christ would suffer, die, and rise from the dead, thus establishing a spiritual kingdom.

## ***The Last Days***

The “last days” is a very controversial topic, with many doctrinal systems built around it. The idea started among the Jews and flowed into the early Church, and it has continued up until today. This has produced a good deal of confusion and dissension. See the section *Additional Information—Resurrection, Judgment, Jesus' Coming, End of the Age* for an in-depth discussion; note that this section will make more sense after reading *Matthew*.

By the first century, the Jews had developed a number of ideas about the “last days.” Ideas about what would happen varied widely, but the general thought was that God would cleanse his people through a time of tribulation and then establish his kingdom over all the nations. This kingdom would be ruled by a descendant of King David, the Christ. Various Old Testament prophets provided hints of this, including *Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Malachi*. In addition, a number of “apocalyptic” works, from the Greek word for *revelation*, claimed to predict what would happen.

## **Old Testament Prophecies**

The following are five of the many prophecies the Old Testament prophets made about the coming of the Christ and the last days. These five are particularly important to understanding the Jew's thinking and Jesus' teaching.

Isaiah was a great prophet whose long ministry covered the period 740–685 BCE, from before the kingdom of Israel fell until after the reign of Hezekiah, the great king of Judah. He was among the earliest prophets whom God called to prepare his people for the coming of the Christ.



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<sup>2:2</sup> **It shall come to pass in the [last]<sup>1</sup> days**  
that **the mountain of the house of the Lord**  
**shall be established as the highest of the mountains,**  
and shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and **all the nations shall flow to it,**

<sup>3</sup> and many peoples shall come, and say:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,[a]  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> **He shall judge between the nations,**  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
**nation shall not lift up sword against nation,**  
**neither shall they learn war anymore.** (*Isaiah 2:2–4, ESV*)

This prophecy broadly predicted that, in the “last days,” the Jewish nation would be restored and made greatest among the nations, and the other nations would look to it for guidance in seeking God. God would resolve disputes among the nations, bringing about universal peace.

The expression “last days” implies the end of some age. Here, it refers to the end of the oppression of God’s people, which began during Isaiah’s ministry. Later prophets would provide insight into what would happen in these “last days.”

Daniel was a youth in a wealthy family when, around 605 BCE, the Babylonians took him hostage and trained him to become an administrator for the king. God blessed Daniel, and he became well known to the Babylonian king and, later on, the top administrator among the Persians. He was extremely faithful, and God used him to provide several predictions about the future, leading up to the end times. Two passages in *Daniel* are particularly significant.

<sup>7:13</sup> “I saw in the night visions,  
and behold, with the clouds of heaven  
there came one like a **son of man,**  
and he came to the Ancient of Days  
and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup> **And to him was given dominion**

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1 The ESV has *latter*, with the meaning *near or toward the end*. The Hebrew word has different meanings, but most modern translations prefer *last* or *end*.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

**and glory and a kingdom,**  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and **his kingdom one**  
**that shall not be destroyed.** (*Daniel* 7:13–14, ESV)

God used the expression *son of man* to refer to the prophet Ezekiel a number of times. However, the *Daniel* passage turned it into a title for the Christ and described how God would establish his everlasting kingdom. Jesus called himself the “Son of Man” during his ministry as a way to claim his special status without openly calling himself the Christ.

The second is this.

<sup>9:24</sup>“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. <sup>25</sup>Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. <sup>26</sup>And after the sixty-two weeks, **an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing.** And **the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.** Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. <sup>27</sup>And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And **on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate,** until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.” (*Daniel* 9:24–27, ESV)

Broadly, this prophecy looks forward to the death of the Christ—an anointed—and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. However, God would punish the destroying prince in the end. Historically, the destroying prince was the Roman general Titus, who destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem in 70. Titus became emperor in 79, but he died of a sudden illness two years later.

Malachi was the last prophet whose writings were included in the Old Testament; he ministered about 430 BCE. Two passages from *Malachi* are especially relevant to understanding Jewish thinking about the end times.

<sup>3:1</sup>“Behold, **I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.** And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>2</sup>**But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?** For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. <sup>3</sup>He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver,

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and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. <sup>4</sup>Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

**“Then I will draw near to you for judgment.** I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and don't fear me, says the Lord of hosts. *Malachi 3:1–5 (ESV)*

This passage describes the coming of a messenger, or a prophet, who would come and prepare the Jews before God came to them. When God did come, he would cleanse the priests and the Levites and restore the Temple worship to its proper condition. Then God would come and judge his people.

<sup>4:1</sup>“For behold, **the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.** The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. <sup>2</sup>**But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.** You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. <sup>3</sup>And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

<sup>4</sup>“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

<sup>5</sup>“Behold, **I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.** <sup>6</sup>And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” *Malachi 4:1–6 (ESV)*

These verses contain God's final words in the Old Testament. God again warned that he would come to judge the wicked, but he would bless the godly. They also reinforce the idea that God would send a prophet, Elijah or a prophet like him, to call the Jews to repentance.

Thus, the Jews were waiting for the appearance of an Elijah for the first time in over 400 years.

## **The Synagogue**

The synagogue, from the Greek word “to gather,” was the Jewish equivalent of a modern church. Ten Jewish men could start a synagogue, although most synagogues were much larger. Jews would gather on the Sabbath for worship in the synagogue.

The synagogue also functioned as a community center, and membership in the synagogue was equivalent to membership in the community. Community courts could administer discipline, including lashing an individual up to 40 times, a limit laid out in the Law. However, tradition limited lashing to 39 times, to ensure that no one was accidentally lashed more than 40 times because of a counting error. The worst discipline was expulsion from the synagogue, which would lead to the community treating the individual like a Gentile.

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## **Politics and Religious Leaders**

For Jews living in Judea and Galilee, the two main religious factions held the political power. The following describes both the political players and the religious factions.

### ***Romans***

The Romans dominated the lands of the Jews but avoided making them part of their Empire. Instead, they preferred to establish local rulers who functioned as kings. However, Rome could, and did, replace these kings if they didn't perform well. Rome expected these kings to be loyal, to keep the peace, and to pay taxes. The Romans allowed the kings to raise their own armies.

The district of Judah, which included Samaria, became a problem, so the Romans set their own officials over the district from 6 until 41 and then from 44 until the Jewish revolt in 66.

### ***Herod the Great***

The Romans took control over Judea and the territories held by the Jews in 63 BCE. In 40 BCE, they appointed Herod as king, he gained control over his kingdom in 37 BCE. This Herod, who became known as Herod the Great, was a violent and despotic ruler. At the same time, he was a great builder. Around 20 BCE, he began rebuilding the Temple, turning it into an enormous and magnificent structure. The work on the sanctuary was finished in 17 BCE, and work continued until the Jewish Revolt in 66. He also built the city of Caesarea on the coast, and the fortresses of Machaerus to the east of the Dead Sea and Masada to the southwest, along with other projects.

Herod died early in 1 BCE.<sup>1</sup>

After Herod the Great's death, the Romans divided his kingdom between three of his sons. To Archelaus, the Romans gave Judea, which included Samaria and Idumea; to Herod Antipas they gave Galilee and Perea; to Philip they gave Iturea and Trachonitis in the north.

Archelaus failed as a ruler, and because the Jews and Samaritans were troublesome, the emperor sent prefects<sup>2</sup> to govern the district of Judea. These prefects had soldiers recruited from Syria at their disposal, but they generally delegated peacekeeping to the local nobility and held them accountable if problems arose. The prefects resided in Caesarea on the coast; they would come to Jerusalem during the major festivals in order to keep an eye on the huge crowds that gathered in the Temple.

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1 See the section *Additional Information—Dating Herod's Death*, for additional details.

2 After the death of Herod Agrippa in 44, the emperor began to appoint procurators rather than prefects. Procurators seemed to be lower ranking; Felix, who governed from 52 to 59, was a freedman and not part of the Roman nobility.

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## ***Herod Antipas***

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled over Galilee and Perea from around 1 to 39. Technically, the Romans established him as a Tetrarch, or Ruler of a Fourth, but he was effectively a king. He lived and held court in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. Antipas had his own army and his own court officials; *Matthew* refers to these officials as Herodians.

While Antipas went through the motions of being a Jew, he lived as a Roman. However, he ruled moderately and generally had the support of his subjects.

One significant situation started when Antipas divorced his wife, the daughter of the king of Nabatea, and married the wife of one of his brothers, Philip—this was another Philip who lived in Rome. This enraged the king of Nabatea and caused a scandal among the Jews. Years later, in 36, the king of Nabatea attacked Antipas, defeated his army, and caused a great deal of destruction.

## ***Pontius Pilate***

Pontius Pilate was the Roman prefect of Judea from 26 to 36. Pilate appears to have been a reasonably competent administrator, but, at times, he could be vain, cruel, and impetuous. Facing angry subjects, he became stubborn and brutal, but he backed down if he feared political backlash from Rome. The Roman proconsul of Syria dismissed Pilate after he ordered his troops to attack a large gathering of Samaritans and then executed some prisoners.

## ***Chief Priests, Sadducees, Elders of the People***

The chief priests consisted of a small number of priestly families descended from the Maccabees. They owned large estates in Galilee that provided them with great wealth. Their wealth, their control over the Temple, and their close relationship with the Romans gave them great political power.

By the time of Jesus' ministry, the Romans had been appointing the Chief Priest for some time, but always from among the chief priests. Ananias was the last legitimate Chief Priest before the Romans started appointing them, and most Jews regarded him as the true Chief Priest. Later, the Romans had appointed Caiaphas as Chief Priest. The second highest ranking priest was the Temple Warden, and he had a security force of Levites at his disposal.

These chief priests, along with some other very wealthy Jews, formed the party of the Sadducees. Religiously, they were conservative; they accepted only the Books of the Law, written by Moses, and they completely rejected speculation about the existence of angels, any kind of resurrection, or judgment. They viewed their wealth and power as proof of God's favor, and they despised the common people. In turn, the common people generally despised the Sadducees.

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Some wealthy aristocrats remained independent of the Sadducees, although they were generally sympathetic with the Sadducees' political views. Matthew calls them the *elders of the people*.

## ***Pharisees***

The Pharisees were a religious order bonded by a single commitment, which was to remain "clean," as defined by the Law, as much of the time as possible. This led them to go to extreme lengths to avoid becoming unclean, and if they became unclean, to become clean again as quickly as possible.

Under the Law, a person who had become unclean for some reason typically had to immerse themselves in water and then wait until the end of the day, at sundown, to become clean again. The Pharisees invented a tradition that allowed them to be "provisionally clean" as soon as they immersed<sup>1</sup> themselves. Pharisees assumed that they had become unclean any time they went out in public; therefore, upon returning home, they would immediately immerse themselves to become clean again. The Pharisees had about 6,000 members during Jesus' day.

In order to maintain their "always clean" lifestyles, the Pharisees had to live in or near Jerusalem, where they had a support network. The Pharisees Jesus encountered in Galilee had traveled there from Jerusalem.

## **Old Testament and the Traditions**

The Pharisees were liberal scholars, studying the Law and the Traditions. The Pharisees accepted the whole Old Testament, and they were open to ideas that were introduced during the exile in Babylon, such as angels, a resurrection, and judgment; Jesus accepted and refined these ideas. However, the Pharisees didn't have specific doctrines about the resurrection and judgment; some thought that only the godly would be raised and that only the truly wicked would suffer eternal condemnation.

The Traditions consisted of all the rulings that previous generations of scholars had made about the Law. The Pharisees viewed the Traditions as a "fence" around the Law; they claimed that the Traditions clarified the meaning of the Law and ensured that observant Jews didn't violate it by accident. They considered the Traditions to be as ancient as the Law itself and equally binding. In the United States, the same principle applies to the Constitution and the rulings of the Supreme Court. The difference was that God had given the Law, but he hadn't authorized anyone to add to it.

While the Pharisees valued the Law and the Traditions equally, the Traditions had a vast number of rulings and occupied most of the Pharisees' attention.

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1 Some misunderstand what the Pharisees did as simply washing, but Jewish sources indicate that the Pharisees fully immersed themselves for this ritual purpose.

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## **Guardians of the Common Jew**

The Pharisees considered themselves to be the guardians of the common people, whom the Sadducees despised. They represented the interests of the common people against the chief priests and aristocrats; this led the common people to respect and support them, which in turn empowered the Pharisees politically. The Pharisees also sought to ensure that the common people worshiped acceptably and generally followed the Law and the Traditions. This included protecting the people from false teachers who could lead them astray.

## **Two Social Classes**

The Pharisees were split along social and economic lines, although their common commitment to remaining clean maintained their unity. Most Pharisees were of the working class, shopkeepers or some similar occupation. They tended to be tolerant, curious, and gentle.

A minority of Pharisees were wealthy, and they could afford to be judgmental and confrontational. These Pharisees took their role as the teachers and defenders of the common people seriously. In *Matthew*, Jesus was almost always interacting with these wealthy, confrontational Pharisees.

## ***Scribes***

Scribes were professional experts in the Law of Moses; some, but not all, were Pharisees. Scribes drafted legal documents and performed other similar functions, like modern lawyers. They also provided legal opinions.

## ***Sanhedrin***

A *sanhedrin* was a Jewish court of law. Each town could have a sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish High Court that met in Jerusalem. It had 71 members and was led by the Chief Priest. The members were mostly Sadducees and wealthy Pharisee scribes, plus some wealthy elders and scribes not aligned with either party. In the past, the Sanhedrin had the right to execute those who committed serious crimes, but the Romans had revoked that right and required the Sanhedrin to submit requests for the death penalty to the governor.

The Sanhedrin met in the Hall of Hewn Stones, which was built into the Temple's north wall. The hall had doors that led both into the Temple and out to the city. Meetings were supposed to be solemn and orderly. One rule was that criminal cases involving the death penalty must be tried during the day.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin despised each other; they only worked together when events caused both sides to want the same thing, even if for different reasons.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Judea, Galilee, Zealots***

Jerusalem, with its roughly 75,000 inhabitants, the Temple, the aristocratic Sadducees, and some 6,000 Pharisees, dominated Judea. The city was a commercial and religious center that made it cosmopolitan. This affected the common people of Judea, who tended to be relatively sophisticated and peaceful. The Pharisees created demand for food and products produced in accordance with the Law, and this led to farmers and others to carefully follow the dictates of the Law and the Pharisee's Traditions.

Galilee, separated from Jerusalem by Samaria, was indirectly dominated by aristocrats living in Jerusalem who owned large estates on the best land. Many Galileans labored on these estates, and those who owned their own land weren't prosperous. The Sea of Galilee provided opportunities for fishermen, and building projects in nearby cities provided opportunities for skilled workers, such as stone masons, to escape poverty.

Galileans tended to be rough and blunt. They viewed the courteous speech of Jerusalem as hypocritical, while Judeans viewed Galileans as coarse and rude.

While almost all Jews in Judea and Galilee detested the Romans, conditions in Galilee gave rise to extremists called the Zealots, who took their desire for independence to the point of violence. During Jesus' time, the Zealots started occasional revolts. Later, the Sicarii, or Knife Men, began terrorizing Jerusalem, murdering their targets in the crowded streets and slipping away unnoticed. In 66, the Zealots helped start uprisings that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70.

The Romans hated these rebels and punished them severely when they caught them. The great fear of the Romans and the Jewish aristocrats was that a Zealot leader would rise up and start a rebellion in Jerusalem during one of the festivals.

## ***Essenes***

The Essenes were an extreme religious group who rejected the Chief Priest as an imposter and the Temple worship as corrupt. They had a settlement at Qumran by the Dead Sea, although a few thousand lived among the towns of Judea. They practiced strict piety and expected the Day of the Lord would soon happen, when God would bring judgment and establish his kingdom.

## **The Author, His Audience, the Circumstances**

As the name suggests, the Apostle Matthew wrote this Gospel. Unfortunately, the early Church didn't keep written records, and Church tradition provides little information about



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Matthew or when and why he wrote. I based the following on clues pulled from the four Gospels, *Acts*, and fragments from Church history.

## **The Apostle Matthew**

The Gospels tell us little about Matthew. *Luke* and *Mark* call him Levi, and *Mark* says that his father's name was Alphaeus. Another Apostle, James, had a father named Alphaeus; perhaps they were brothers. At the time Jesus called him, he was a tax collector.<sup>1</sup> Matthew had money and a number of friends, tax collectors and other disreputable people.

From *Matthew* itself, we can pick up a few more pieces of information. Matthew had trained as a Jewish scholar; he read Hebrew and knew the principles of Jewish interpretation, which allowed the interpreter to combine Old Testament passages with a common theme into one.

On the other hand, Matthew despised the Jewish religious establishment; his attitude is on display even in Jesus' genealogy in chapter one. His writing shows that he was extremely organized and careful, and that he had the mindset of a teacher. Finally, Matthew didn't share the contempt most Jews showed toward Gentiles; instead, he realized that God's promises to Abraham included blessing all the nations.

Pulling all this together, we may speculate that Matthew was born into a Levite family with enough means to allow him to train as a scribe, that is, an expert in the Law. At some point in this training, Matthew rejected everything, including his status as a Jew, and took a job as a tax collector. Tax collectors worked for the Romans, and Jews viewed them as traitors and sinners. Shunned by his fellow Jews, Matthew built a circle of friends who were also outsiders, and this included some Gentiles. In spite of this, Matthew never lost his commitment to God or the Law. When Jesus called Matthew to follow, Matthew gladly quit his job, held a banquet in Jesus' honor for his friends, and then left his old life behind.

## **The Audience**

Matthew wrote to Jewish Christians living in Judea and Galilee. In their view, Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, not to replace them. They continued to live according to the Law, although they probably didn't feel the need to make sacrifices, as they understood that Jesus had sacrificed himself for their sins.

Life, which was already hard, became even more difficult as they became Christians. Persecutions, such as that led by Saul in *Acts* 8 and 9, mostly targeted leaders. However, the Pharisees condemned Jesus and his teachings and had great influence over local

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew probably worked collecting commercial tolls; Jesus found him in a toll booth. This was a different job from what we think of as a tax collector; they collected taxes from individuals and had a reputation for being corrupt. Still, Matthew worked for the Roman authorities, and the Jews, especially Galileans, would have hated him for it.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

synagogues. Christians faced opposition and risked expulsion, which would lead their neighbors to shun them. Many Christians found themselves mistreated by their neighbors and shut out from justice. This forced them to form their own communities for mutual support, and these communities then had to police themselves against false teachers and those who misbehaved.

At the same time, the Church itself was becoming increasingly diverse. Initially, all Christians were Jews, with many of them living in Judea and Galilee. However, some of them lived abroad and had journeyed to Jerusalem for one of the festivals; they became Christians and then had stayed for a time. They then returned home and formed small churches among the local Jews.

Within a few years, Church leaders encouraged Samaritans to become Christians, a shock to Jews who grew up hating them. However, many Samaritans believed in God, followed the Law, and were circumcised. Thus, the inclusion of Samaritans did not involve a major change in the beliefs of the Church.

After that, the Apostle Peter, led by the Spirit, allowed Gentiles to become Christians without becoming Jews first. The first, very painful, step in becoming a Jew was circumcision, and Peter excused the Gentiles from that commitment. In spite of Peter's status as the leader of the Church, this decision was very controversial, in that observing the Law became optional.

## **The Circumstances**

Starting in 38, the Roman emperor Caligula became annoyed with the Jews. This led him to begin plans that would defile the Temple. Jews throughout Judea and Galilee made plans to defend the Temple to the death. Fortunately for the Jews, Caligula's imperial guard assassinated him, and his successor, Claudius, appointed his friend Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, as king over Judea and Galilee. In early 41, Agrippa rushed from Rome to Jerusalem in order to calm the Jews.

The Jewish leaders used this an opportunity to attack the Church. Agrippa, in order to please the Jews, put the Apostle James, a key leader along with the Apostle Peter, to death; he then arrested Peter, planning to do the same. God rescued Peter from jail, which greatly angered Agrippa. This forced all the Apostles to leave Judea and Galilee until Agrippa's death in early 44.

Up to this point, the Apostles had provided verbal teaching about Jesus' ministry and teachings and had answered questions. As they fled, this left a need in the Church. As much as the Church avoided written accounts, preferring verbal teaching, this forced the Apostles to create an authoritative written account. They chose Matthew, the former scholar among them. Matthew likely finished his Gospel account in late 41.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Purpose**

Matthew wanted to provide a broad overview of Jesus' ministry and teachings; however, he faced a restriction in this task. Creating a scroll was expensive, and Matthew had to fit his account onto one very long scroll. As a result, his Gospel was terse and focused. Since he was writing to Jews who lived in Judea and Galilee, he made no effort to explain geography or politics, and he assumed that his audience was well-acquainted with the Law and Jewish culture.

In addition, Matthew wasn't trying to define the Gospel message once and for all. Instead, he wanted to lay down the basics in a way that left room for others, especially the other Apostles, to expand on what he said.

## **Notes**

### **Interpreting *Matthew***

Generally, interpreting *Matthew* is straightforward, as long as we remember that Matthew was a first century Jew writing to Jews. However, there are things to avoid.

We must be careful not to assume much based on what Matthew *didn't* say. For example, we can't say that Peter and Andrew didn't know Jesus when Jesus called them to leave their nets and follow him. In fact, *John* 1:35–42 says that Andrew met Jesus the day after John baptized Jesus. This also applies to assuming things like Jesus didn't minister in Jerusalem or Judea because Matthew didn't mention it. Again, *John* talks about this. Matthew assumed that his audience, especially teachers using his Gospel, know a great deal beyond what he recorded.

We must be careful about taking Jesus' teachings too literally; this can cause us to miss the point or worse, go to extremes. Jesus never intended for anyone to gouge out their eye. Jesus was a preacher, and preachers use hyperbole, or exaggeration, to make points. See the section *Additional Information—Symbolism and Hyperbole* for more discussion.

## **The Translation**

This commentary includes the text of *Matthew*, which I translated. I have worked hard to provide a very formal, or literal, translation of the Greek text; this is *not* a paraphrase.

I did this for several reasons.

- To avoid copyright issues
- To preserve aspects of Matthew's writing style that the major translations tend to smooth over
- To avoid nitpicking and "clarifying" someone else's translation

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

- To allow me to translate “transliterated” Greek words, such as *angel* and *baptize*, with their actual meanings—see below

My translation is in no way “better” than, for instance, the ESV or the NIV; it’s just better suited to my purpose here.

## ***Note on Slavery***

As I’m doing my final edits in June 2020, protests continue over the oppression of Black people in the United States that started with slavery and has continued since the Civil War. I’m very sensitive to terms like *slave* and *boy*, which many rightfully find highly offensive, and I normally avoid them.

Unfortunately, slavery and racism were very common during the first century, and *Matthew* reflects that reality. Modern translations often avoid using racially charged words; however, doing so changes a translation into a paraphrase. It also hinders us from understanding the—often cruel—realities of first century life.

Therefore, I use the terms *slave*, *boy*, and *girl* when that’s what the Greek text says.

## ***Transliterated Words***

“Transliterate” is a fancy term for creating English words directly from Greek words. An example is *baptize*; the Greek word *baptízō* means *immerse*.

I have taken the opportunity to translate certain Greek words that are traditionally transliterated. For example, I used *immerse* instead of *baptize*. I did this to make my translation sound to us the way the Greek text would have sounded to a first century Greek reader, without the traditional associations that have accumulated over 2,000 years.

This makes my translation sound odd, and that is intentional. My goal was to force the modern reader to stop and think about what these word actually meant.

However, in my comments, I will use the traditional transliterated words.

Here is a list.

- *angel*—messenger
- *Apostle*—Emissary

Jesus gave twelve of his disciples the title of *Apostle*, which is from the Greek word for emissary. In ancient times, a king would send an emissary to another king. The emissary spoke with the full authority of his king. A king who received an emissary treated him with the same courtesy and respect he would show to the king who sent him. Today, nations have ambassadors, but ambassadors have less authority and are shown less courtesy.

- *baptize*, *baptism*, *Baptist*—*immerse*, *immersion*, *Immerser*

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

- christ, the Christ—anointed, the Anointed  
The Greek word *christos* and the Hebrew word *messiah* come from a word meaning to pour oil on something or someone to appoint them to a special purpose; that is, *anoint*. In the OT, those anointed were typically priests or kings. See *Exodus* 30:22ff, where God gave Moses a recipe for the anointing oil and instructed Moses to anoint Aaron and his sons as priests. See *1 Samuel* 10:1, where Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel, and 16:13, where he anointed David as Saul's replacement. *The Anointed* referred to the coming Son of David who would redeem Israel.
- church—assembly  
The Greek word looks like *called out*, but this misses the point. The word meant *assembly* or *congregation*; specifically, the assembly of the citizens of a Greek city to conduct its affairs. Greek citizenship was hereditary and extremely valuable, and membership in the assembly was a great privilege.
- Devil—Slanderer  
English gets *diabolical* from the Greek word. It meant *to slander* or *to cause divisions*, as in breaking up relationships.
- Gentiles—Tribes  
*Gentile* is from a Latin word that meant *clan*, *tribe*, or *nation*. The Greek word, from which we get *ethnic*, had the same meaning. Modern translations translate it as either *nations* or *Gentiles*, depending on the context. However, among the Jews, *nations* was a negative and contemptuous term when applied to non-Jews. I used *tribes* because it better captures this sense. It's capitalized because it was typically used as a proper name for all non-Jews.
- hypocrite—grifter<sup>1</sup>  
*Hypocrite* was originally the Greek word for an actor. By Jesus' time, *hypocrisy* had two very different meanings. To the Greeks, it was a virtue used in public speaking, the ability to move the audience emotionally while maintaining one's self-control. Today, this is still practiced by good public speakers, including preachers. Talking to a large audience in a normal tone of voice comes across as weak and boring. To the Jews, it was a person pretending to be religious in order to deceive and to defraud others. The Jews, especially those in Galilee, valued direct speech. Smooth talk was an indication of someone with evil intentions trying to trick people. Calling someone a hypocrite was more than saying that they didn't live up to their claims; it was an accusation of evil intent.
- James—Jacob  
John Wycliffe, who made the first English translation of the Bible in the fourteenth century, switched the name *Jacob* to *James* in the New Testament while using *Jacob* in the Old Testament. He did this because of changes in the Latin pronunciation.

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1 *Grifter* means a person who defrauds others by gaining their confidence and then cheating them, a con artist.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

- Peter—Rock  
Jesus nicknamed the Apostle Simon as *Peter*, which is the Greek word for *rock*, a stone large enough for a man to throw, or perhaps a boulder. This nickname sounded as unusual back then as it does today in English.
- righteous—godly, just  
In the past, righteous was an appropriate translation of the Greek word that essentially means acting in a manner that is right in God's sight. However, in the twenty-first century, *righteous* has taken on the meaning of self-righteous or judgmental. The focus has changed from God as judge to the individual as judge. *Godly* puts the focus back on God, where it belongs; *just* has the idea that God judges the person's behavior as acceptable.
- Satan—Adversary  
*Satan* comes from a Hebrew word that was carried into Greek and then English. It means *adversary*; specifically, it refers to a person who forces another to appear before a court and then brings accusations against them. In the New Testament, it's always a name for the Devil.
- Sanhedrin—court, High Court  
Just as the United States has a number of courts and the Supreme Court, the Jews had a number of local sanhedrins and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.
- Sea of Galilee—Lake of Galilee  
The Greek word usually means *sea*, but it can mean *lake*. The Sea of Galilee is actually a freshwater lake, which is how the Jews and others would have viewed it.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Matthew***

### **Themes**

*Matthew's* core theme is that Jesus is the Christ, the son of King David, predicted by the Old Testament, the king who will reign eternally, not just over Israel but over all the nations. As such, Jesus, even with his human limitations, exercised authority over the creation and the spiritual realms; he demonstrated this by the countless, varied miracles he performed. Even those who had some control over him, the Devil when he tempted Jesus, the Jewish leaders and the Romans when they put him to death, and death itself, had power over him only because Jesus allowed it.

As the king, Jesus had the right to spell out his expectations and demand that people obey; he would judge those who rejected him. Rejection could take the form of open rebellion, but ignoring him or simply failing to respond would be treated in the same way.

An important aspect of Jesus' expectations was that believers treat others, especially other believers, well. Religious observance and upright behavior have their place, but actively showing mercy, forgiveness, and kindness to others is essential.

Jesus earned the right to become King because of his own submission and obedience to God. At the start of his ministry, led by the Spirit, Jesus fasted for 40 days and then allowed the Devil to tempt him. During his ministry, he gave constantly while enduring the faithlessness of those around him. In the end, he prayed earnestly for resolve as his followers wavered. He then allowed himself to be scourged and crucified; by doing so, he became the ultimate sacrifice for humankind's sin.

Jesus didn't come to restore the old kingdom of Israel, established by God's covenant in the Law of Moses. The remains of that kingdom and the Law itself were fading and would soon be swept away. Instead, Jesus would reign over a new kingdom under a new covenant sealed with his blood. The Law of Moses would stand until Jesus instituted his new law, a law based on obedience from the heart and complete faith in him.

Entry into the new kingdom would ensure eternal life in the age to come. However, its citizens would experience persecution and suffering at the hands of those who rejected Jesus and rebelled against him. Therefore, Jesus demanded commitment and endurance, even to the point of death. Those who gave up their current lives for the sake of the kingdom would receive eternal rewards.

Those who failed to enter the kingdom would face eternal punishment. This punishment involved rejection, being expelled from Jesus' presence to face darkness, fire, mourning, and remorse.

The Pharisees opposed Christians because they had opposed Jesus himself. They were blind, even to the miracles Jesus did before their eyes. Regardless of what the Pharisees claimed and their outward religious observances, they had gone astray from God, and they led others astray as well. Christians should view opposition from the Pharisees as an indication that they were doing right in

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

God's sight. While this applied to Jewish believers in Judea and Galilee, every generation of believers could expect to have its own Pharisees and opposition from them.

## **Structure**

Matthew gave his Gospel a clear structure. He separated six narrative sections with five teaching sections. Each teaching section ends with a statement along the lines of, "When Jesus had finished saying these things." Just as Moses wrote the five books of the Law, Matthew used these five sections to signify that Jesus' teachings were the "New Law." Each teaching section had a theme that connected the teachings in it.

Each narrative section describes events that occurred during a phase of Jesus' ministry. The main trend is that opposition to Jesus increased as the miracles he performed made it increasingly apparent that God had sent him. However, Jesus managed the opposition; he avoided it as it increased until he was ready, and then he forced those who opposed him into action at precisely the time he chose.

## **Timeline of Jesus' Ministry**

The way that Matthew structures his Gospel makes creating a detailed timeline of Jesus' ministry impossible. The narrative sections provide a broad timeline, but the events contained in each them, especially the early and middle periods, are arranged according to Matthew's purposes and not in chronological order. For example, Jesus calls Matthew in chapter 9, but Matthew was most likely called early on in Jesus' ministry so that he witnessed the events he records in the earlier chapters.

Moreover, Matthew arranged the teaching sections to separate the narrative sections. The first teaching section, where Jesus addresses only his disciples, likely occurred in the middle of his ministry, after he had appointed the twelve Apostles. The third teaching section, where Jesus addressed the crowds in parables, probably reflects Jesus' teachings throughout his ministry, although the Apostles asking questions indicates that the event Matthew describes happened early on.

Given that neither Luke nor Mark were witnesses of Jesus' ministry and that they used *Matthew* as a source, they were not likely to record events in chronological order either. We should be content not knowing the exact order of the events in Jesus' ministry, as it wasn't important to the Gospel writers.

## **Dates of Key Events**

Unfortunately, we can't say for sure in what year any of the major events of Jesus' life occurred. As discussed in the background, the year in which Herod the Great died is uncertain,



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

which makes the date of Jesus' birth uncertain. *Luke* 3:1 tells us that John the Baptist appeared in the fifteenth year of the Roman emperor Tiberius, but even that date is uncertain because Tiberius became co-emperor with Augustus for two years before Augustus died.

Having said all this, the following are the dates I used in this commentary; I think they best fit the evidence. I will indicate if the date I used has mainstream support and the mainstream date. Note that scholars still debate whether the "mainstream" dates are correct.

- 2 BCE Jesus born (typically 6 BCE)
- 1 BCE Herod the Great died (typically 4 BCE)
- 27 John the Baptist starts his ministry (or 26, 28, 29)
- 30 Jesus died and resurrected (or 31, 33)

See the section *Additional Information—The Day of Jesus' Death* for a discussion on whether Jesus died on a Thursday or a Friday.

## **Chapters 1–4: Jesus' Early Life and Beginning Ministry**

This narrative section describes specific incidents in Jesus' early life and the start of his ministry.

### **Jesus' Genealogy (1:1)**

- 1** <sup>1</sup>The record of the family line of Jesus the Anointed, the son of David, the Son of Abraham.  
<sup>2</sup>Abraham fathered <sup>1</sup> Isaac,  
Isaac fathered Jacob,  
Jacob fathered Judah and his brothers,  
<sup>3</sup>Judah fathered Perez and Zerah by Tamar,  
Perez fathered Hezron,  
Hezron fathered Ram,  
<sup>4</sup>Ram fathered Amminadab,  
Amminadab fathered Nahshon,  
Nahshon fathered Salmon,  
<sup>5</sup>Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab,  
Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth,  
Obed fathered Jesse,  
<sup>6</sup>Jesse fathered David the king.

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1 The term *fathered* indicates a forefather relationship; that is, the author may choose to omit some generations according to his or her purposes.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

David fathered Solomon by the woman <sup>2</sup> of Uriah,  
Solomon fathered Rehoboam,  
Rehoboam fathered Abijah,  
Abijah fathered Asa,  
<sup>8</sup>Asa fathered Jehoshaphat,  
Jehoshaphat fathered Joram,  
Joram fathered Uzziah,  
<sup>9</sup>Uzziah fathered Jotham,  
Jotham fathered Ahaz,  
Ahaz fathered Hezekiah,  
<sup>10</sup>Hezekiah fathered Manasseh,  
Manasseh fathered Amon,  
Amon fathered Josiah,  
<sup>11</sup>Josiah fathered Jeconiah and his brothers, up to the Babylonian deportation.

<sup>12</sup>After the Babylonian deportation, Jeconiah fathered Shealtiel,  
Shealtiel fathered Zerubbabel,  
<sup>13</sup>Zerubbabel fathered Abiud,  
Abiud fathered Eliakim,  
Eliakim fathered Azor,  
<sup>14</sup>Azor fathered Zadok,  
Zadok fathered Akim,  
Akim fathered Eliud,  
<sup>15</sup>Eliud fathered Eleazar,  
Eleazar fathered Matthan,  
Matthan fathered Jacob,  
<sup>16</sup>Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary;  
by her was born Jesus, who is called the Anointed.

<sup>17</sup>Thus, all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the Babylonian deportation were fourteen generations, and from the Babylonian deportation to the Anointed were fourteen generations.

Matthew starts his Gospel by demonstrating that Jesus was a direct descendant of King David. To the Jews, this issue was of the greatest importance, as it fulfilled God's promise to David as recorded in *2 Samuel* 7:12–16.

We must note a few issues here. First, this is the genealogy of Joseph. As we will see, Joseph was actually Jesus' stepfather. Second, this is probably Joseph's legal genealogy;

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<sup>2</sup> Or, *wife*; Greek has no specific words for *husband* or *wife*. Marriage had the idea of a man owning the woman.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

that is, it takes into account places where a man died and his brother married the widow and produced children with her. Legally, the man who died was the father of the first son born in this manner; see *Deuteronomy* 25:5–6. To the Jews, this was Jesus' true ancestry; they weren't concerned with his biological genealogy.

Not only are these David's descendants, the forefathers listed were the kings of Judah from David down to Jeconiah; Joseph was a descendant of all the kings of Judah.

Matthew goes to great pains to point out that the genealogy is broken into three groups of fourteen. Matthew accomplishes this by leaving out certain individuals; the Jews considered this a valid practice. For example, Matthew leaves out Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah between Joram and Uzziah.

Fourteen is two times seven; so, using Jewish symbolism, the genealogy is 7—full, complete 2—witness to 3—the divinity<sup>1</sup> of Jesus. Finally, the third group contains only thirteen names. Matthew leaves a spot open for God, the true father of Jesus. All this is an example of how carefully Matthew crafts his account.

Matthew breaks Jewish tradition by including the names of four women in the genealogy; Jewish readers would immediately recognize all four of them. All of them were foreigners or married to a foreigner, and all four had some tie to sexual sin.<sup>2</sup> Matthew reminds his Jewish audience that even David, and therefore the Christ, had skeletons in their closets.

## **Jesus' Conception and Birth (1:18)**

<sup>18</sup>The birth of Jesus the Anointed happened as follows. His mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Joseph, her man, was upright, and not wanting to disgrace her, he planned to divorce her secretly. <sup>20</sup>While he was considering this, behold!<sup>3</sup> A messenger of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your woman; what has happened in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus, <sup>4</sup> for he will save his people from their sins."

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1 Some complain that the word *Trinity* isn't found in the New Testament. While that's true, the number three symbolized divinity to Matthew and his audience. See verse 28:19, where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share one name.

2 Tamar (*Genesis* 38:6ff) and Rahab (*Joshua* 2:1ff) were both involved in prostitution. Ruth, while she was personally upright, was from Moab; God had banned the Moabites because of a situation that occurred during the 40 years in the wilderness (*Numbers* 22–25, *Deuteronomy* 23:2–3, *Ruth* 1:1–4.) Bathsheba was probably an Israelite, but she was married to a Hittite before David forced her into adultery.

3 Matthew uses this word 62 times; it's an exclamation to focus the audience's attention. It imitates an expression used in the Hebrew Old Testament used over 1,000 times. *Behold* sounds awkward in modern English, but its use was also unusual in Greek.

4 The Greek name *Jesus* comes from the Greek *Yahweh Saves* and parallels the Hebrew name *Joshua*.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>22</sup>This whole thing happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through his prophet would be fulfilled that says,

<sup>23</sup>“Behold! The virgin will be pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Emmanuel.”  
—this is translated, God With Us. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Joseph woke up and did as the messenger directed him, taking Mary as his woman. <sup>25</sup>He didn't have sex with her until she gave birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

The Jews of Jesus' time were male-oriented, so Matthew describes Jesus' virgin conception from Joseph's point of view. Note that Matthew assumes that his audience accepted the virgin conception as a known fact, and he simply records it. The real question for the audience was, “Why did Joseph go through with the marriage?”

A legally binding engagement period of about a year typically preceded Jewish marriages. Joseph and Mary were engaged when he discovered that she was pregnant, and Joseph assumed that Mary had committed adultery. Under the Law of Moses, Mary should have been stoned, but that extreme punishment was no longer practiced. Joseph had to divorce her or forever bear the disgrace of her sin. The appearance of an angel caused Joseph to change his mind and go ahead with the wedding.

Matthew portrays Joseph not as a derelict who married an adulteress; instead, he was a courageous man who chose to obey God at the expense of his own reputation.

### **The Magi and King Herod (2:1)**

2 <sup>1</sup>So, Jesus having been born in Bethlehem of Judah in the days of King Herod, <sup>2</sup> behold! Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>saying, “Where is the one born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and came to bow down <sup>3</sup> to him.”

<sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Having gathered all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them, “Where will the Anointed be born?”  
<sup>5</sup>They said to him, “In Bethlehem, of Judah. For thus was written by the prophet,

‘And you Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah. For out of you will come a ruler, one that will shepherd my people Israel.’” <sup>4</sup>

Then Herod, having secretly called the Magi, questioned them regarding what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and inquire carefully about the child, and

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1 *Isaiah* 7:14

2 This was Herod the Great.

3 Traditionally, *worship*. In Middle Eastern cultures, it was common for people to fall to their knees with their faces to the ground to show respect to superiors. When done before gods and kings, who were considered lesser gods, this could be called worship. However, it was also done simply to show respect.

4 *Micah* 5:2

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

when you find him, report back to me, so that I too might come and bow down to him.”<sup>9</sup>The Magi, having listened to the king, went, and behold! The star that they saw in the east was going before them until it came and stood above the place where the child was.<sup>10</sup>Having seen the star, they rejoiced exceedingly,<sup>11</sup>and having come to the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother. They fell and bowed down to him, and having opened their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>12</sup>Then, having received a divine warning in a dream to not return to Herod, they departed by another route to their own land.

Matthew mentions in passing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the town where King David was born. However, the place of Jesus’ birth was of great importance, as the Old Testament prophesied that it would be Bethlehem.

The date of Jesus birth is uncertain; we only know that it happened before the death of Herod the Great. If Herod died in 1 BCE, this points to Jesus’ birth happening in 2 BCE. Some unverified astronomical data concerning Venus and Jupiter, in connection with the “star” seen by the Magi, support this date.

Matthew then discusses the main topic, which is how the Jews responded to news of the birth of the Christ. To be fair, while all Jerusalem was stirred up, the chief priests and scribes probably didn’t believe the report; such announcements happened from time to time and usually preceded a rebellion.

The Magi were priests of the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism. They believed in one God and an evil counterpart, similar to Satan. They were also astronomers and carefully tracked the motion of the Moon and the planets. Jewish scholars and the Magi had been in close contact since the time of the exile five centuries before.

These Magi had seen an astronomical event, perhaps Venus and Jupiter appearing at the same point in the sky. For unknown reasons, they had associated this with the birth of the Christ. In response, they had brought expensive gifts with them in order to worship the child. Frankincense and myrrh were both very expensive fragrant oils made from the sap of certain trees.

Meanwhile, Herod the Great showed great interest in the news. Herod, old and in poor health, was brutally jealous of his power, and an angel warned the Magi not to reveal the identity of the child.

Matthew’s Jewish audience certainly noticed that God had chosen foreigners and their pagan religion as the heroes of the story, not some pious, wealthy Jews. Somehow, God had alerted the Magi to associate what they saw with the birth of the Christ; this wasn’t a coincidence. Matthew implies that God couldn’t find any worthy Jews, so he turned to the Magi instead.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>13</sup>When they had departed, behold! A messenger of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt! Remain there until I tell you. For Herod is about to search for the child in order to kill him.” <sup>14</sup>Joseph got up and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. <sup>15</sup>He lived there until Herod’s death, in order to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet that says,

“Out of Egypt I called my Son.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>16</sup>When Herod saw that he had been fooled by the Magi, he became very angry. He sent and did away with all the male children in Bethlehem and all its neighboring areas who were two years old and younger, according to the time he had determined from the Magi. <sup>17</sup>Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled that says,

<sup>18</sup>“A voice was heard in Ramah,  
weeping and much mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
and not wanting to be comforted,  
for they are not.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>19</sup>When Herod died, behold! A messenger of the Lord appeared to Joseph in Egypt in a dream, <sup>20</sup>saying, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel. Those who sought the life of the child have died.” <sup>21</sup>Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and came into Israel. <sup>22</sup>When he heard that Archelaus ruled Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid and withdrew to the parts around Galilee. <sup>23</sup>He came and settled in a town called Nazareth, in order to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets that

“He will be called a Nazarene.”<sup>3</sup>

An angel warned Joseph to flee from Herod; Egypt was a safe place. Alexandria was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, and Jews occupied a quarter of the city. Joseph was able to afford to take his family on this journey and live in Egypt because of the gifts the Magi had given to him.

Herod’s brutal response to the threat posed by Jesus’ birth was in keeping with his other actions, especially as he grew old. Herod demonstrated his cruelty by ordering the deaths of all the boys two years old and under; this assured him that the young Anointed wouldn’t be overlooked. History doesn’t record this event, but this isn’t the sort of thing ancient historians wrote about. It certainly left an impression on Jews living in Judea.

The family probably lived in Egypt for over a year before Herod died. Again, an angel appeared to Joseph, telling him to return home. Herod’s son Archelaus was little better than his father, and Joseph wisely chose to avoid Judea; instead, he went to live in Nazareth in Galilee,

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1 *Hosea 11:1*

2 *Jeremiah 31:15*

3 This isn’t a direct reference to the Old Testament.

# The Gospel According To Matthew

which was ruled by Herod Antipas. See the section *Additional Information/Jesus' Birth and Connection to Nazareth* for more discussion on this topic.

Matthew thus explains how Jesus of Nazareth came to be born in Bethlehem. Nazareth had a poor reputation even among the towns of Galilee—see *John* 1:44–46. Over time, the Christians came to be known among Jews as the “sect of the Nazarenes”—see *Acts* 24:5, ESV.

Note that Matthew claims that the prophets (plural) said that Jesus would be called a Nazarene, but there is no specific Old Testament passage that says this. Matthew uses literary license to point out that the Christ would be despised—see *Isaiah* 53:3. This was an important lesson for Jewish Christians, who were despised and even persecuted by their neighbors.

## John the Baptist (3:1)

**3** <sup>1</sup>In those days, John the Immerser appeared, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup>saying, “Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near.” <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup>This man is the one spoken of by Isaiah the prophet, saying,

“A voice calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord!  
Make his paths straight!’” <sup>2</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Now John himself had clothing made of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>At that time, Jerusalem began going out to him, and all Judea and the regions along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were being immersed by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.

<sup>7</sup>Many Pharisees and Sadducees, <sup>3</sup> when they saw this, came upon his immersion. <sup>4</sup> John said to them, “Vipers’ spawn! Who instructed you to flee from the imminent wrath? <sup>8</sup>So then, produce fruit worthy of repentance! <sup>9</sup>And don’t think to say among yourselves, ‘We have our father Abraham.’ For I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones. <sup>10</sup>Already the ax lies against the root of the tree; every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!

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1 Whether *has drawn near* means *it has arrived and is nearby* or *it’s about to arrive* is ambiguous. No conclusions should be drawn from the wording.

2 *Isaiah* 40:3

3 The Greek grammar indicates that they came as a group.

4 The meaning of “upon” in the original Greek is ambiguous. The religious leaders, seeing that crowds were going out to John, also went out. In Greek, the apparent meaning of “upon” is that they came *for* John’s baptism; that is, in order to be baptized themselves, but this is highly unlikely. “Upon” could also mean *against*, which most likely reflected their hostile attitude. John sarcastically acted like they asked to be baptized and then blasted them.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>11</sup>“I immerse you in water for repentance, but the one coming after me is stronger than I; I’m not worthy to remove his sandals. He will immerse you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. <sup>12</sup>The pitchfork is in his hand. He will clean off his threshing floor and gather his grain in the storehouse, but he will incinerate the chaff in unquenchable fire.”

In 27, a man named John appeared in the wilderness region along the Jordan River. John wore an outer garment made of woven hair secured by a leather belt, similar to the prophet Elijah, and he lived a rugged lifestyle. He quickly gained the nickname Immerser, or Baptist, because he immersed, or baptized, those who responded to his message, and many Jews had responded.

Along with fulfilling the prophecy mentioned from *Isaiah*, John also fulfilled the prophecies of *Malachi* regarding the coming of Elijah and judgment. The Jews recognized this, and excited crowds came out to him from all over Judea and Galilee.

John’s preaching was intense and uncompromising. God’s kingdom was at hand; the only acceptable response was repentance and renewed commitment to God. Those who failed to repent faced imminent judgment.

John showed no fear at all when a delegation of religious leaders from the Sanhedrin itself came out to investigate him. The fact that both Sadducees and Pharisees worked together showed the depth of their concern. They all feared that John would use his popularity to start a rebellion, and the Pharisees worried that John was teaching false doctrines to the common people.

Immersion meant two things to the Jews. First, under the Law of Moses, it was a common means of removing “uncleanness” caused by a number of things; Pharisees immersed themselves almost daily. Second, when a Gentile chose to become a Jew, they were immersed, which signified that they were cleansed of their past impurity and admitted into God’s people. John called the Jews to repent of their lack of commitment to God; his baptism signified a cleansing and preparation for entry into the coming kingdom, much like a Gentile becoming a Jew.

## **Jesus Baptized (3:13)**

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan in order to be immersed by John. <sup>14</sup>However, John tried to prevent him, saying, “I need to be immersed by you, and you come to me?” <sup>15</sup>Jesus replied to him, “Allow it for now; it’s proper for us to fulfill all justice.” Then John allowed him. <sup>16</sup>When Jesus was immersed, he came up from the water directly <sup>1</sup>, and, behold! The heavens opened up to him, and

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1 The Greek word means *straight*, but Matthew uses it in a few places to going straight from one thing to the next, without a sense of hurry. Another Greek word derived from this one, used more often, means *immediately*.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. <sup>17</sup>And, behold! A voice from the heavens saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I delight.”

Jesus came down from Nazareth and asked John to baptize him. An angel or the Holy Spirit apparently had told John of Jesus’ true identity, and John was confused. Why would the Christ need to be baptized? Jesus simply said that it was the right thing to do. We can speculate that Jesus was leading by example, and that he wanted to identify himself with John’s message without declaring his true identity.

As soon as Jesus came up from the water, the Holy Spirit came upon him in visible form. Then God spoke about Jesus to the people watching, telling them that Jesus was his son, and that he delighted in him.

The people in the crowd didn’t understand these signs. Surely they heard the words well enough; they just weren’t able to comprehend them. This helps us to understand why God doesn’t communicate with the world through signs and messages.

## **Jesus Tested by the Devil (4:1)**

**4** <sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tested by the Slanderer. <sup>2</sup>Having fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

Jesus started his ministry as the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness so the Devil could tempt him. God knew that Jesus’ ministry would be hard, and that the last day would test him to his limits. Jesus needed preparation for what was to come; for those who have served in the military, this would be a familiar boot camp experience.

The hardship started with forty days and nights of fasting. This is possible, and extremely fit people do it for fitness reasons. However, Jesus was exhausted and weak by the end.

## **Turn Stones into Bread (4:3)**

<sup>3</sup>Then the Tempter approached him and said, “If you are a son <sup>1</sup> of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread!” <sup>4</sup>But Jesus replied, “It has been written,

‘A man won’t live on bread alone, but on every word coming from the mouth of God.’”<sup>2</sup>

Having waited until Jesus was weakened, the Devil approached him and ordered him to turn stones into bread. The order started with a challenge, “Are you really God’s son?” that dared Jesus to prove himself. The challenge itself was designed to start Jesus down the road of using his powers for personal gain, creating a tiny weakness that could grow over time. Jesus quietly declined, quoting from the Old Testament to justify his refusal.

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1 The Devil did not show Jesus the respect of calling him *the Son*.

2 *Deuteronomy 8:3*

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Jump off of the Temple (4:5)***

<sup>5</sup>Then the Slanderer took him to the holy city and placed him on the wing <sup>1</sup> of the Temple, <sup>6</sup>and the Slanderer said to him, “If you are a son of God, throw yourself down! For it has been written,

‘He will command his messengers regarding you,  
and they will lift you up on their hands,  
lest you should strike your foot on a stone.’” <sup>2</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it has been written,  
‘You won't test the Lord your God.’” <sup>3</sup>

Next, the Devil took Jesus to the southeast corner of Temple wall, with its vertical drop of hundreds of feet to the Kidron Valley below. Again, the Devil gave Jesus an order that began by questioning Jesus' status as God's Son, but this time he backed it up by quoting the Old Testament; apparently, even the Devil knew the Scriptures. This time, the Devil directed the challenge at any doubt or pride that Jesus might have regarding God's protection; the Devil called Jesus to prove it. Again, Jesus quietly declined while quoting from the Old Testament.

## ***Bow Down to the Devil (4:8)***

<sup>8</sup>Again the Slanderer took him to the top of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup>The Slanderer said to him, “I will give you all this, if you fall and bow down me.” <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Leave, Adversary! For it has been written,

‘You will bow down to the Lord your God and serve him only.’” <sup>4</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Then the Slanderer left him, and behold! Messengers came and ministered to him.

The Devil then showed Jesus all the kingdoms and their splendor. The Devil offered them all to Jesus, at a price; Jesus needed only to worship him. Jesus knew that God had offered all this and more, but God's price was steeper. Jesus would have to suffer and then die on a cross, bearing all humankind's sin. The Devil offered a shortcut. Jesus ordered the Devil to leave, once again quoting from the Old Testament. The Devil left and waited for another opportunity.

Jesus was in no condition to travel or to find food for himself, so God sent angels to restore his strength.

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1 *Wing* here has the idea of the far end, probably the southeast corner of the Temple wall overlooking the Kidron Valley.

2 *Psalms* 91:11–12

3 *Deuteronomy* 6:16

4 *Deuteronomy* 6:13 (Jesus' quote is a paraphrase.)

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Jesus Starts His Ministry (4:12)**

<sup>12</sup>Having heard that John had been arrested, Jesus departed to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>Leaving Nazareth, he went and settled in Capernaum, which is by the lake in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, in order to fulfill what was spoken by Isaiah the prophet that says,

<sup>15</sup>“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
way of the lake, across the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Tribes,

<sup>16</sup>The people living in darkness  
saw a great light,  
and to those sitting in the land and shadow of death  
a light dawned for them.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>17</sup>From that time, Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near.”

Matthew leaves a substantial time gap here; he didn't describe any of Jesus' early ministry while he conducted a parallel ministry with John—see *John* 3:22–24.

Matthew notes in passing that John had been arrested; he will provide details of John's arrest and death in chapter 14. Jesus had been staying near the Jordan River; with John now out of the public eye, Jesus began his ministry in earnest. He returned to Galilee, but he left the village of Nazareth for the larger town of Capernaum, which was located along the Sea of Galilee.

Matthew refers to Galilee by naming two of the tribes of Israel who had inherited land there; he did this to tie in the quote from *Isaiah*. In the minds of the scribes in Jerusalem, Galilee was a rural backwater and not a suitable place for the Christ to start his ministry, but Matthew quotes *Isaiah* to show that God had long intended this.

Jesus began to preach using the exact words of John the Baptist. John had created a great deal of excitement among the Jews, and Jesus built on it. However, Jesus would quickly establish his own message that went beyond John's message of repentance in the face of coming judgment.

<sup>18</sup>As he was walking beside the Lake of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Rock<sup>2</sup> and Andrew his brother, throwing their casting-nets into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishermen of men!” <sup>20</sup>At once, they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup>Going on from there, he saw another two brothers, Jacob<sup>3</sup> the son of Zebedee and John

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1 *Isaiah* 9:1–2

2 Traditionally, *Peter*. The Greek *Pétros* means Rock.

3 Traditionally, *James*.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

his brother in the boat with Zebedee their father tending their nets. Jesus called them,<sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father, and they followed him.

Although Matthew doesn't say so, Jesus was well-known and had previously met a number of prospective disciples—see *John* 1:35ff. Now that he had officially started his ministry, he began assembling a group of men whom he would train. Jesus boldly walked up to two brothers and called them to follow him. This meant that they would have to give up their fishing business, but Jesus told them that he would give them new careers fishing for men. Simon, whom Jesus nicknamed Rock, and Andrew dropped their nets and followed him. Jesus went to the next boat and called James and his brother John. They left their father and their business at once. Peter, James, and John would become the core of Jesus' ministry team, and Andrew would also become an important member.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus began to travel about the whole of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every illness and ailment among the people. <sup>24</sup>The report about him went out into the whole of Syria, and they brought to him all those having troubles—various illnesses, severe pain, demon-possession, epilepsy, paralysis—and he healed them all. <sup>25</sup>Large crowds followed him, from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region across the Jordan.<sup>1</sup>

Once Jesus had begun to assemble his team, he began to travel throughout Galilee. He BCed up his message by miraculously healing the crowds of people who came to him. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus healed *all* that came to him; he never ran out of power or came up against a case too tough for him to handle.

In response to the miracles, crowds gathered around him, not only from Judea and Galilee, but also from neighboring Gentile areas, and they followed him as he traveled about. In chapter 14, Matthew said that one crowd had 5,000 men, apart from women and children, and that was in a remote area. We can imagine the chaos around Jesus caused by these crowds and the enormous pressure on Jesus to meet their requests.

## **Chapters 5–7: Jesus Teaches About Godliness**

This is the first of the five teaching sections; Jesus preaches about godliness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

**5** <sup>1</sup>When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up onto the hill. <sup>2</sup> He sat down, and his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying,

Jesus had attracted crowds that kept him from working with his committed followers. As we will see in chapter 13, Jesus was careful to only use parables when speaking to the crowds. At

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1 That is, Perea.

2 Traditionally, *mountain*, but the Greek word can mean *hill* as well.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

this point, Jesus wanted to teach plainly, but only to those who were ready to accept what he had to say. Therefore, he climbed up from along the Sea of Galilee to a hill; this thinned the crowds and allowed him to address only those committed enough to make the climb. Jewish teachers sat as they taught, as a sign of authority.

Traditionally, the hill is identified as Mount Eremos, which is one mile west of Capernaum and is about 650 feet above the lake. Because Jesus went up on a “mount,” this teaching section is called “The Sermon on the Mount.”

## **Godliness and Persecution (5:2)**

<sup>3</sup>“Fortunate <sup>1</sup> are the spiritually impoverished, <sup>2</sup> for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Fortunate are the mournful, for they will be encouraged.

<sup>5</sup>“Fortunate are the humble, <sup>3</sup> for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Fortunate are the hungry and thirsty for godliness, for they will be fed.

<sup>7</sup>“Fortunate are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup>“Fortunate are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Fortunate are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Fortunate are the persecuted because of godliness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus started his sermon with eight statements of blessing; they are called the Beatitudes from the Latin word for *blessing*.

At first glance, they seem disconnected, but Jesus wouldn't have included them if he didn't see them as very important. The first seven are the steps we must take to get from worldly to godly, and the eighth step tells us what to expect when we arrive.

Imagine a staircase with seven steps; with the middle step being a landing. The ground floor is the world, where we start, the upper floor is godliness, where God has completed his work in us. Here are the seven steps and the surprising result in arriving at godliness.

1. Admit that we are spiritually bankrupt. By itself, this is hardly a blessing, but we must see ourselves clearly if we intend to change.
2. Mourn over our condition. Too often, people see where they're at and immediately give up; others even boast about it. Mourning reflects that we take our condition seriously.

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1 Traditionally, *blessed*. The Greek word originally referred to the peaceful happiness enjoyed by the gods. Later, it came to refer to the security and contentment of the wealthy, in contrast to the insecurity and frequent distress of most people. Good fortune could come from the gods, thus the idea of blessing.

2 Most translations use *poor in spirit* to refer to a personal quality, similar to *pure in [the] heart* in verse 8. Using *impoverished in the Spirit*, referring to the Holy Spirit, makes more sense of what Matthew wrote. However, the grammar strongly points to treating *the Spirit* as an adjective, *spiritually*.

3 The Greek word has a range of meanings. When referring to a ruler, it means *restrained*. Here, it means *willing to submit*. The traditional word *meek*, in its modern sense of *timid*, isn't what Jesus had in mind.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

3. Humble ourselves before God. We can't fix ourselves; we need God's guidance and power to change.
4. Fully commit to change. This is the landing on the staircase, and we will spend a lot of time here. This isn't where we make some superficial changes that we see are necessary; this where we allow God to reveal our failings and use our circumstances as opportunities designed to lead us to grow as we persevere.

A cycle revealing and growing typically repeats many times.

- We see ourselves more clearly
- We work hard to make changes
- We make progress
- <repeat>

This is where *hungering and thirsting* come in. We get hungry and thirsty daily, and we need to renew our commitment to godliness daily. Over time, we realize that this is a lifelong effort.

5. Show mercy to others. This is a direct result of pursuing change when we truly let God work in us. After extended efforts to grow, we will reach a point where we truly understand how spiritually bankrupt we are, even after all the effort. Any sense of superiority toward others evaporates and leaves only compassion.
6. Become pure in heart. Showing mercy and compassion is the soap that scrubs our hearts clean.
7. Make peace between enemies. This starts with making peace between ourselves and those around us. Godliness heals us of the hatred, anger, pride, and dissension in our daily lives. However, Jesus meant that we will make peace between God and the world. Godliness, when it's fully developed, leads us to help those who are under God's judgment find forgiveness.

The result of peacemaking is to suffer persecution. Peacemaking requires exposing the truth, and people hate to be exposed. Even doing nothing more than living a godly life convicts the ungodly and results in opposition.

<sup>11</sup>“You are fortunate when, because of me, people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say every evil thing about you. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and exult, for much is your reward in Heaven! For in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt becomes tasteless, how will it be made salty? As a result, it remains capable of nothing except, having been thrown out, to be trampled by people.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city placed on a hill can't be hidden, <sup>15</sup>nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket. <sup>16</sup>Therefore, let your light shine before people, so that they might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven!

Jesus adds additional observations about godliness and persecution. We don't like to be criticized or shunned, but Jesus told us to expect it. If the Israelites of the Old Testament mistreated the prophets that God sent to them, then we should expect the same.

## ***Note on Ancient Salt***

We're used to pure salt; if we allow it to get damp, it dissolves, and we're left with nothing. Ancient salt wasn't pure, it was mixed with other useless material. If the owner allowed it to get damp, then the salt would dissolve, leaving only the useless material. The owner would know that this had happened because the “salt” would no longer taste salty.

We must not, having achieved a degree of godliness, lose heart because of opposition. Jesus used the analogy of ancient salt, which was very expensive; mishandling it was a costly mistake. Jesus warned that those who began to pursue godliness and then returned to their old ways became useless and would be cast out.

Jesus also warned against trying to conceal godliness to avoid persecution. No one could conceal the lights of a city, and putting a lamp under a basket would only start a fire. He said to live godly a life and to let others see it, no matter how they respond.

## **Significance of the Law of Moses (5:17)**

<sup>17</sup>“Don't think that I came to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I came not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup>Amen, <sup>1</sup> I say to you, until the heavens and the earth pass away, surely not one letter or one mark <sup>2</sup> will pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, anyone who nullifies the least one of these commands and teaches people this, he will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who practices and teach this, <sup>3</sup> he will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus addressed a matter of great importance to his followers during his ministry on earth. What was his position on the Law of Moses? Practically, speaking, did his followers need to continue to practice it?

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1 *Amen* was a Hebrew word that was brought into Greek and then into English. It meant *truth, truly, so be it*. However, it was used as a general affirmation, as it is in modern Christianity.

2 Jesus' remarks about letters and marks do not make sense in the written Greek of the time, which used all capital letters. Matthew tries to capture the imagery of Jesus' words that he most likely spoke in Aramaic. In Aramaic and Hebrew writing, certain letters were small.

3 That is, to honor the Law.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus taught that he had come to fulfill the Law and everything else said in the Old Testament. He was and continued to be an observant Jew, and he expected his followers to be as well. Note that for Matthew, this probably required some changes.

However, Jesus inserted a loophole into what he said. The Law would remain *until all is accomplished*. With the benefit of hindsight and *Galatians* and *Romans*, Jesus meant that the Law remained in force only until after his death, resurrection, and the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven. At that point, the new covenant would be established, and the old would pass away. For us today, the Law is long past.

## **Godliness from the Heart (5:20)**

<sup>20</sup>“For I tell you that if your godliness doesn't far exceed that of the Pharisees and Sadducees, you surely won't enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus introduced the theme for the next portion of his sermon. Jesus warned that the godliness shown by the religious leaders of the day was completely lacking. His followers shouldn't use them as a measure of God's expectations. Those who wanted to enter the Kingdom needed to do *much* better.

## **Murder and Name Calling (5:21)**

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to the ancients, <sup>1</sup> ‘You shall not murder,’ <sup>2</sup> and ‘If anyone murders, they will be subject to the judges.’ <sup>3</sup> <sup>22</sup>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother is subject to the court. Also, anyone who says to his brother, ‘You dummy!’ is subject to the court, <sup>4</sup> and anyone says, ‘You derelict!’ <sup>5</sup> is subject to the fiery Valley of Hinnom.

The Law condemned murder, but Jesus condemned despising others in our hearts, even of calling them names. Jesus spoke of the Valley of Hinnom metaphorically as the Jewish equivalent of modern Christian Hell.

## **Make Things Right with Those You Offend**

<sup>23</sup>“So if you are presenting your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift before the altar. Go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come to present your gift. <sup>25</sup>Become well-thought-of by your accuser quickly, while he is with you on

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1 That is, to those living during Moses' time over 1,500 years earlier.

2 *Exodus* 20:13

3 The base meaning of this word is *judgment*. However, the usage here indicates a secondary meaning, a group of judges.

4 Or, *sanhedrin*. Jesus probably meant a local court, not the High Court in Jerusalem.

5 Traditionally, *fool*. The Greek word has the idea of low morals, rather than just silly or unintelligent.



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the road, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the bailiff, and you will be thrown into jail. <sup>26</sup>Amen, I tell you, you surely won't get out of there until you pay the last penny!

In ancient times, failing to pay a debt was extremely serious. A court could force the debtor to remain in prison until he paid the debt, which made paying the debt almost impossible. An alternative was to sell one's children or oneself into slavery to satisfy the debt.

Jesus used this to illustrate the importance of a believer seeking reconciliation with someone whom they had offended; the offense could lead the other to become angry and bitter. God was the judge, and he would have no patience with those who tempted others to violate Jesus' teaching about hatred.

For men living in an honor culture, where the normal response to an accusation was to make an angry denial, this was a difficult teaching. Jesus called believers to lay aside their "honor," to admit their offense, and to make amends.

### ***Adultery and Lust (5:27)***

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>1</sup> <sup>28</sup>However, I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman to lust after her already has committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>So, if your right eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away from you. <sup>30</sup>Also, if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away from you. For it's better for you to lose one of your limbs than for your whole body to depart into the Valley of Hinnom.

#### ***Note on “Causing to Stumble”***

From the Greek word *skandalízō* we get *scandal* and *scandalize*. The meaning of the word evolved over time. An early idea is that of a foot snare that causes someone to stumble and fall; the fall can lead to the victim's ruin. A later idea is someone or something that causes offense.

In the New Testament, stumbling or causing to stumble is serious; it can destroy a person's faith and lead to their eternal destruction.

The Law condemned adultery, but Jesus said that lust is committing adultery in one's heart. Some complain that Jesus set an impossible standard, but that simply exposes our spiritual bankruptcy and our need for forgiveness. The fact that we may never arrive at perfection doesn't mean we shouldn't get as far as we can.

Jesus then used hyperbole to express how seriously believers should take sin. *Leviticus* 19:28 commanded against cutting or tattooing, so tearing out an eye or cutting off a hand wasn't only horrifying but forbidden. Jesus' point was that we may need to cut activities out of

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1 *Exodus* 20:14

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our lives in order to avoid things that lead us into sin. More practically, we may need use unpleasant training aids like confession and accountability to make our efforts effective.

## Divorce (5:31)

<sup>31</sup>“It was said, ‘If anyone divorces his woman, he must give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>1</sup>  
<sup>32</sup>However, I tell you that anyone who divorces his woman, except by reason of fornication, <sup>2</sup> makes her an adulterer, and if a man marries a divorced woman, he commits adultery.

Jesus clearly condemned divorce, especially in the context of Jewish society, where only men could divorce, and over even trivial issues. However, his wording was clearly biased against women, and this requires explanation. See the section *Additional Information—Divorce, Women’s Rights, Sexual Sin* for in-depth discussion.

## Oaths (5:33)

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to the ancients, ‘Don’t break your oaths,’ <sup>3</sup> but fulfill your oaths to the Lord.’ <sup>4</sup> <sup>34</sup>However, I tell you, don’t swear an oath at all, not by Heaven, since it’s God’s throne, <sup>35</sup> nor by the earth, since it’s the footstool of his feet, nor by Jerusalem, since it’s the city of the great King, <sup>36</sup> nor should you swear an oath on your head, since you aren’t able to make one hair white or black. Your word must be, ‘Yes, yes,’ ‘No, no.’ <sup>37</sup>Everything beyond this is of the Wicked One.

An oath was a vow made by invoking a higher power; the Law commanded that the Israelites make their oaths in God’s name. Ancient people used oaths because they often did not see lying as a sin; in Ancient Greece, the ability to lie fluently was considered a virtue. Violating an oath amounted to blasphemy; an oath provided assurance that a person would do what they said, including speaking truthfully.

However, in Jesus’ time, the Pharisees’ Traditions had made taking oaths complicated, which in turn made it easy for the deceitful to make powerless oaths that they could later go back on. Jesus will address this issue in 23.16ff.

Jesus condemned taking oaths. In his mind, every statement a believer made was binding; therefore, there was no need for swearing oaths. Jesus taught that believers should mean what they say; lying, and all deceitfulness, is of the Devil.

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1 *Deuteronomy 24:1*

2 The Greek word is *porneía*, from which we get *pornography*. It refers to any sex outside of marriage, although it commonly referred to prostitution.

3 Or, *commit perjury*. In this context, the larger idea of keeping an oath is intended.

4 See *Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 23:21–23*.

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## ***Revenge (5:38)***

<sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for an eye and for a tooth.’<sup>1</sup> <sup>39</sup>However, I tell you not to oppose the wicked; instead, whoever slaps you on the right cheek, also turn the other to them! <sup>40</sup>To the one wanting to sue you to take your shirt, also give up your coat to him! <sup>41</sup>Anyone impressing you for one mile, go two with him! <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who asks! Don't turn away the one asking to borrow from you!

The Law set forth the concept of “eye for an eye” in order to ensure that courts ordered just compensation for injuries; it didn't authorize revenge. However, standing up for oneself and getting even were common among ancient cultures, where people felt obligated to protect their reputations by responding strongly to any offense. Jesus commanded believers not to do this; instead, they must not resist the wicked. To the Jews, this was a truly radical teaching.

Jesus gave three examples; going a second mile needs some explanation. Under Roman law, a soldier could require a non-citizen to carry a burden for one mile. Jesus said to do more than the soldier could demand. In addition, Jesus said to lend money freely if asked.

For everyday situations, Jesus' teaching is straightforward. We must not return insult for insult, and we must not attempt to police the petty misbehavior of others. We should strive to please God and not worry about appearing weak. This teaching makes sense if we truly trust God to protect us in day-to-day situations, and it takes a huge burden off us.

There are some limits to this teaching; the most apparent has to do with lending and giving. Lending and giving beyond our means can easily turn into putting God to the test. Jesus didn't jump off the Temple wall, and we need to balance generosity with good stewardship of what God provides to us.

## ***Love Your Enemy (5:43)***

<sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’<sup>2</sup> <sup>44</sup>However, I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you become sons of your Father in Heaven! He causes his sun to rise upon the wicked and the good, and he sends rain upon the just and the unjust. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>Also, if you only greet your brothers, what remarkable thing have you done? Don't the Tribes do the same? <sup>48</sup>So then, be complete<sup>3</sup> as your Heavenly Father is complete.”

Jesus deliberately misquoted the Law in order to expose a common attitude. Loving one's friends while acting hatefully toward others is easy, and the ungodly do that. Jesus

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1 *Exodus* 21:23–25

2 See *Leviticus* 19:18, but note that it says nothing about hating one's enemies.

3 Or, *perfect*. However, the Greek concept of perfect isn't absolute, as is the modern concept, but has the idea of fully developed, mature.

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commanded that believers love their enemies as well as their friends, just as God shows kindness to the wicked as well as the good.

Jesus wasn't calling believers to have warm feelings toward their enemies; instead, he called them to show genuine concern for their welfare. One of the primary ways to do this is to pray for them. When we remember that God will judge all unbelievers for their sins, praying that God would lead our enemies to repent and turn to Christ is appropriate.

## **Seek to Impress God, Not People**

### ***Giving (6:1)***

6 <sup>1</sup>“Take care not to practice your godliness before people, in order to be seen by them; otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in Heaven. <sup>2</sup>So, when you give charity, don't blow a trumpet before you, just as the grifters do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they are praised by people. Amen, I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup>However, as you are giving charity, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your charity is private. <sup>1</sup> Then your Father, who sees what is private, will reward you.

Perhaps Jesus exaggerated when he talked about sounding trumpets, but making a display while giving or praying wasn't limited to first century Jews.

Jesus' point was simple. If our motivation is to seek attention from others, then we have no reward from God. The easiest way to keep our motivations pure is to keep our actions private. If others don't know what we are doing, then their praise can't affect us.

### ***Prayer (6:5)***

<sup>5</sup>“When you pray, you shall not be <sup>2</sup> like the grifters, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they are visible to people. Amen, I tell you, they have received their reward in full! <sup>6</sup>On the contrary, when you pray, go into an inner room and close the door; pray to your Father who is in private, and your Father, who sees in private, will reward you.

Jesus applied the same idea to prayer, that it shouldn't be done for show. Note that Jesus' concern is about our motivations; the privacy concept shouldn't be used as an excuse not to disclose our giving when appropriate, nor to refuse to pray with others or in public worship.

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1 Literally, *in the hidden place or in the secret place*.

2 Jesus used the future tense here in place of a command; this imitates the practice of the Hebrew Old Testament.

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## **A Side Note On Prayer (6:7)**

<sup>7</sup>“While you are praying, don't babble <sup>1</sup> like the Tribes, for they think that in their long-windedness they will be heard. <sup>8</sup>So don't be like them! For your Father knows your needs before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup>“Therefore, this is how you should pray.

Our Father in Heaven,  
Consecrated be your name!

<sup>10</sup>Let your kingdom come,  
let your will be done,  
as it is in Heaven, also on earth!

<sup>11</sup>Today, please <sup>2</sup> give us the bread we need for today!

<sup>12</sup>Please forgive us our debts,  
just as we forgive our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>Please don't lead us into temptation;  
instead, rescue us from the Wicked One!

Jesus made a short detour to talk about prayer. First, he warned against meaningless repetition in an effort to use quantity in place of quality. However, this should be balanced against praying for our daily needs. If we have the same cares day by day, we may continue to pray about them day by day.

He then made an important point. God already knows our needs before we pray about them. This raises the question, “Why pray?” Prayer does several things.

It brings us into personal contact with God.

It gives us an opportunity to praise and thank God for what he has already done for us.

It allows us to express our concerns to God, so that we can be at peace.

When we bring specific concerns to God, then when God moves to address them, we will recognize that he is moving for our sake.

Starting in verse 9, Jesus offered a model prayer, known as the Lord's Prayer. It offers several ideas that should guide us.

- Address God as “Father”—the Jews avoided even saying God's name; Jesus encouraged the use of a familiar and intimate term
- Approach God with reverence
- Hope for God's will to be done on earth
- Ask each day that God meet our needs for the day

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1 That is, repeat the same words over and over or go on and on.

2 In Greek, a command can be used to make a polite request, as opposed to demanding something.

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- Ask for forgiveness, and express forgiveness for others—Jesus spoke of sins as debts that must be repaid
- Ask that God guide us away from temptation and protect us from the Devil

## **A Side Note on Forgiveness (6:14)**

<sup>14</sup>“For if you forgive people’s misdemeanors, <sup>1</sup> your Heavenly Father will forgive yours, <sup>15</sup>but if you don’t forgive people’s, neither will your Father forgive your misdemeanors.

Jesus then detoured onto the topic of forgiveness. God is willing to forgive us, if we forgive others. Jesus used a little-used word for sin that emphasized that the wrongs others do to us are minor compared to the sins we commit against God. If we refuse to forgive others for little things, we shouldn’t expect God to forgive us.

## **Fasting (6:16)**

<sup>16</sup>“When you fast, don’t be like the gloomy grifters, for they disfigure their faces in order to show people that they are fasting! Amen, I tell you, they have fully received their reward. <sup>17</sup>On the contrary, when you are fasting, anoint your heads <sup>2</sup> and wash your faces, <sup>18</sup>so that it doesn’t appear to people that you are fasting, but to your Father, who is in private. Then your Father, who sees in private, will reward you.

Jesus returned to the topic of motivation in a discussion of fasting. The Law commanded only one day of fasting each year, on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees, however, routinely fasted every Monday and Thursday. Some of those fasting somehow showed others that they were doing so. Jesus didn’t command fasting, but he said that those who did fast should avoid letting others know that they were.

## **Store Up Treasure in Heaven (6:19)**

<sup>19</sup>“Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and corrosion <sup>3</sup> ruin and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>Instead, store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor corrosion ruin and where thieves neither break in nor steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus told believers to focus on storing up treasures in Heaven rather than on earth. This reflects the idea that God rewards us when we focus on pleasing God. Jesus wasn’t saying that good deeds lead to salvation; he was saying that God sees the heart and credits the effort to those who are saved.

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1 The Greek word has the idea of a less serious sin.

2 Jesus was referring to an aspect of grooming; we might think of brushing our hair.

3 Literally, *eating*. Here, corrosion eats away at metal.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus also said that our hearts follow our treasures. If we value the things of the world, then the inclinations of our hearts will be worldly; if we value pleasing God, then the inclinations of our hearts will be godly.

## **Our Viewpoints Affects Our Hearts (6:22)**

<sup>22</sup>“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is sincere,<sup>1</sup> then all your body is radiant, <sup>23</sup>but if the light in your eye is darkness, then how great is the darkness!

Jesus spoke metaphorically, saying that the way we view things affects our hearts. If we view things from a godly perspective, that will cause our hearts to be godly. If we view things as the world does, then our hearts will become filled with worldliness.

## **Single-minded Devotion to God (6:24)**

<sup>24</sup>“No one can serve<sup>2</sup> two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will devote himself to the one and despise the other. You aren't able to serve God and Wealth.<sup>3</sup>

*Mammon* was a Syrian god of wealth, named after the Aramaic word for *wealth, riches*. The Jews brought the name into Greek, where it had a negative meaning; Wealth as an idolatrous god.

To Jews listening to Jesus heard him give them a choice between God and and an idol. Jesus didn't bother to say that God is the right choice.

## **Don't Worry, Trust God (6:25)**

<sup>25</sup>“Because of this, I tell you, don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, nor about your body, what you will wear! Life is much more than its food and the body than its clothing, aren't they?  
<sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the sky! They neither sow nor reap nor gather into storehouses, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. You are more valuable than they, aren't you?

Speaking of wealth, Jesus recognized that believers still need to earn a living. However, he commanded us not to worry about such things. Worry is thinking about something when there is nothing more we can do about it; this leads to anxiety. Birds are quite busy searching for food, yet they don't display anxiety or attempt to store provisions. At the same time, God feeds them, and we are much more valuable than birds.

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1 The Greek word means *simple* in the sense of straight-forward, without deceit.

2 Literally, *be a slave to*. The service given comes from complete submission and obedience.

3 Greek, *Mamōnás* or *Mammōnás*. It was a proper name for the Syrian god of wealth.

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## Futility of Worry (6:27)

<sup>27</sup>“Who among you by worrying is able to add one cubit<sup>1</sup> to his height?<sup>2</sup> <sup>28</sup>Also, why do you worry about clothing? Learn from the wildflowers of the field, how they grow! They neither labor nor spin. <sup>29</sup>However, I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor<sup>3</sup> was clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>So if the grass of the field, which God dresses in this manner, exists today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will he* not much more *clothe* you, little-faiths?<sup>4</sup>

Jesus continued with more examples. He demonstrated the pointlessness of worry, saying that it accomplishes nothing. Worrying can't cause a person to grow 18 inches taller, nor can it add 10 years to one's life.

God gives the wildflowers in a meadow great beauty, yet a farmer mows and burns them. If God clothes something insignificant with splendor, how much more will he clothe us? To emphasize his point, Jesus threw in a nickname that emphasizes how small our faith really is.

## Seek God First (6:33)

<sup>31</sup>“So, don't worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ <sup>32</sup>for the Tribes strive after all these things. Certainly your Heavenly Father knows that you need all these. <sup>33</sup>So then, seek first God's kingdom and his godliness, and all these things will be provided<sup>5</sup> for you. <sup>34</sup>Therefore, don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. The day has enough trouble of its own.”

Jesus again commanded that believers not worry about worldly needs. The Gentiles—who were ignorant of God—ran after them, but God knows what we need. Instead, we should focus on God's kingdom and godliness, trusting God to provide for our physical needs.

Jesus then acknowledged that life is often hard; this was especially true for the typical Jew who was poor and at risk of poverty. Believers should focus on today, which has enough problems, and leave tomorrow to deal with itself.

## Concluding Remarks

Jesus wrapped up his sermon with a medley of topics.

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1 One cubit is about 18 inches.

2 The Greek word typically means *lifespan*; *height* is a secondary meaning.

3 See *1 Kings 4:14–25*.

4 *Little-faiths* is nickname that Jesus used four times in *Matthew*. It's commonly translated, *you of little faith*, which loses the meaning.

5 The primary meaning of this word is *add*; in this context the secondary meaning of *provide* captures the sense.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Don't Judge (7:1)***

7 <sup>1</sup>“Don't judge, so that you aren't judged! <sup>2</sup>For by the judgment you judge, you will be judged, and by the measure you measure, you will be measured. <sup>3</sup>So, why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but you don't notice the plank in your eye? <sup>4</sup>Or, how will you say, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye,’ yet behold! A plank is in your eye. <sup>5</sup>Grifter! First remove the plank from your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Jesus commanded believers not to judge others, warning that God would judge us using the standard by which we judge others.

He then used an example to emphasize how unworthy we are to judge someone else. We need to address our own issues first, and then we can humbly assist others with theirs.

## ***Be Careful with How You Share Your Faith (7:6)***

<sup>6</sup>“Don't give sacred things to dogs nor throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them with their feet and then turn and tear you to pieces.

In ancient times, people kept dogs as pets, but many ran wild in packs and scavenged. Pearls were of enormous value, and Jews considered pigs to be unclean and dangerous.

Jesus gave some practical advice about sharing our faith. Believers should share their faith. However, unbelievers can dismiss what we say and then turn and attack us; Jesus calls us to use wisdom about how and what we share with different people.

## ***Ask and It Will Be Given (7:7)***

<sup>7</sup>“Keep asking, <sup>1</sup> and it will be given to you! Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you! <sup>8</sup>For those who ask, receive, and to those who knock, it will be opened. <sup>9</sup>What kind of man among you, whose son asks for bread—he won't give him a stone, will he? <sup>2</sup> <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, he won't give him a snake, will he? <sup>11</sup>Therefore, if you, being wicked, know to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good to those who ask him?

Jesus told believers to persevere in asking God to meet their needs and to assist them in pursuing the kingdom. Parents, when asked by their children, give them good things. If people, who are by nature wicked, do good for their children, then certainly God will much more do good for his people.

Jesus implies that God may not answer immediately, but not because he doesn't care. God sees both our wants and our needs, and sometimes those things conflict with each other. Like a good parent, God puts our good over our desires.

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1 Traditionally, *ask*. The Greek grammar implies some persistence, not just ask once and you're done.

2 Jesus used this awkward construction to emphasize that no one does this.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***How to Treat Others (7:12)***

<sup>12</sup>“All, therefore, as much as ever you might want that people should do for you, in this way you also do for them! <sup>1</sup> For this is the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus stated that the entire Old Testament could be summed up in one command. Jesus deliberately exaggerated the wording to emphasize that obedience to it must overflow from the heart.

In every way, we must do for others what we would want them to do for us. This command is unconditional. We don't do well by others if they do well by us and treat them poorly if they treat us poorly. Jesus calls us to *always* do well by others in *everything*.

## ***Enter Through the Narrow Gate (7:13)***

<sup>13</sup>“Enter through the narrow gate! For broad is the gate and spacious is the road that lead away to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. <sup>14</sup>How narrow the gate and cramped the road that leads away to life! Few are those who find it.

Cities, like Jerusalem, were surrounded by walls, and people could only enter the city through one of its gates. Typically, the main gate was easy to access, and most people used it. Jesus described two roads leading to two gates, but these gates opened into two very different places. He warned that following the crowd and taking the easy path led to eternal destruction. Those who wanted eternal life had to follow a difficult path that few traveled. A life that is comfortable and easy is a red flag that we are on the wrong road.

## ***Beware of False Prophets (7:15)***

<sup>15</sup>“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup>You will recognize them by their fruit. No one gathers grapes from thorns bushes or figs from thistles, do they? <sup>17</sup>Thus, every good tree produces good fruit, but a rotten tree produces bad <sup>2</sup> fruit. <sup>18</sup>A good tree isn't able to produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree not producing good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>So, by their deeds you will recognize them.

Jesus warned believers against false prophets, or, in more modern terms, false teachers. Outwardly, they seem trustworthy, but inwardly, they care only about themselves, and they harm those who listen to them. Jesus said they could be recognized by the overflow of their lives and ministry. Good teachers lead godly lives and benefit those they teach.

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1 This is a completely literal translation of this verse; it's also wordy in the Greek.

2 Or, *wicked*, when referring to people and their actions.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Not All Will Enter (7:21)***

<sup>21</sup>“Not all who say to me, ‘Lord, lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven; instead, it will be those doing the will of my Father in Heaven. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, lord! Didn’t we prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, ‘I never acknowledged <sup>1</sup> you! Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness!’

Jesus warned that many would call him lord and even do miracles in his name, but they wouldn't enter the kingdom because they didn't seek to live godly lives. Jesus didn't care about loud affirmations or great deeds; he called believers to live day-to-day in accordance with God's will.

## ***Practice What Jesus Said (7:24)***

<sup>24</sup>“Therefore, all who hear these teachings of mine and practice them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock. <sup>25</sup>The rain fell, the river came, the wind blew and beat against that house, yet it didn't fall, for it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup>All those hear these words and do not practice them are like a derelict man who build his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, the river came, the wind blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and its fall was great.”

Jesus finished his message with a call to practice what he taught. He acknowledged that godliness required more effort than worldliness, just as carving a foundation out of bedrock required more effort than building on a dry stream bed. Those who heard and merely acknowledged might last through the good times, but only those heard and practiced would be left standing after hardship.

## ***Conclusion (7:28)***

<sup>28</sup>When Jesus had finished these instructions, the crowds were astonished <sup>2</sup> by his teaching, <sup>29</sup>for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not like their scribes.

Matthew closes the teaching section with his standard “when Jesus had finished” formula. He notes in passing that many had followed Jesus up the hill to hear him. They were deeply impacted not only by what Jesus said but by how he said it. The scribes would say, “Rabbi So-and-so said,” to justify their teachings. Jesus spoke as one empowered by God.

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1 The Greek word's base meaning is *know*. Here, it has the additional idea of acceptance.

2 The Greek word has the sense of being struck senseless, overwhelmed.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Chapters 8–9: Early Ministry**

This narrative section contains a series of snapshots of the early part of Jesus' ministry. Matthew ties them together in a loose narrative, but he does that for readability. We shouldn't assume that these events happened one after the other.

### **Cleansing a Leper (8:1)**

8 <sup>1</sup>After he came down from the hill, large crowds followed him. <sup>2</sup>Then, behold! A leper <sup>1</sup> came and bowed down to him, saying, “Lord, if you are willing, you are able to cleanse me.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing, be clean.” At once the leper was cleansed. <sup>4</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “See to it that you tell no one; instead, go show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

The first snapshot describes Jesus healing a man with an infectious skin disease. *Leviticus* 13–14 discusses this condition at length. It could afflict people or items of clothing made of linen, wool, or leather, and it referred to any skin or surface condition that spread and could be contagious. Clothing that a priest determined was infected had to be burned. If the priest determined that a person had an infectious skin disease, they were unclean. The Law commanded,

“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (*Leviticus* 13:45–46, ESV)

Essentially, as long as a person had a skin condition, the Law required them to live away from everyone else, and it was their duty to avoid others by shouting warnings.

Ancient people thought that skin diseases were incurable; Jews considered healing a leper to be as difficult as raising a dead person.

The leper had complete faith in Jesus' ability to heal him, but he questioned Jesus' willingness. God's Law cast him out; would Jesus accept him? Jesus responded by first reaching out and touching the man as an expression of compassion and acceptance. Doing this not only made Jesus unclean, it also exposed him to the risk of infection. Jesus then confirmed that he was willing, and he cleansed the man.

*Leviticus* 14:1–32 commanded an elaborate process to restore a person who had been healed of a skin disease to society. The ritual required eight days, two immersions, and guilt, sin, and other offerings. Jesus told the man to go to the priest and begin the process immediately, without talking to anyone along the way. Jesus had already cleansed the man, so

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1 This referred to infectious skin diseases in general, not just modern leprosy or Hansen's Disease.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

this raises the question, “Why the ritual?” Jesus made clear that he viewed his own authority as greater than that of the Law, but he wanted to uphold the Law until he fulfilled it and established his kingdom. Therefore, he called the man to fulfill the requirements of the Law.

## **A Centurion’s Faith (8:5)**

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus returned to Capernaum, a chief of one hundred<sup>1</sup> came and implored him, <sup>7</sup>saying, “Lord, my boy<sup>2</sup> has been bedridden<sup>3</sup> in my house, paralyzed; he is suffering terribly.” Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.” <sup>8</sup>Then the chief of one hundred replied, “Lord, I’m not worthy for you to come in under my roof. Instead, say the word, and my boy will be healed. <sup>9</sup>For I’m also a man under authority, having soldiers under me. I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does.” <sup>10</sup>When Jesus heard this he marveled, and he said to the chief of one hundred, “Amen, I tell you, I have not found so much faith in Israel!”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>11</sup>I tell you<sup>5</sup> that many will come from the east and the west, and they will recline<sup>6</sup> with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, <sup>12</sup>but the sons of the kingdom will be thrown out into the darkness outside. In that place there will be wailing and grinding of teeth!”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Then Jesus said to the chief of one hundred, “Go! As you believed, it has happened for you.” And his boy was healed at that hour.<sup>8</sup>

A Roman centurion came to Jesus asking for help. The Romans maintained auxiliary units in the region that were composed of soldiers recruited from the local population in Syria. A centurion commanded a century, or 100 soldiers, although centuries were typically undermanned. In Rome, becoming a centurion was a means for a common citizen to achieve wealth and status. This centurion was a Gentile, and he was wealthy enough to own slaves.

He came to Jesus because his slave had become paralyzed and was suffering. When Jesus offered to come and heal the slave, the centurion declined. Although he was a man of status and used to being shown respect, he knew that, as a Gentile, a Jew would want not to enter his house. Moreover, he understood authority and realized that Jesus did not need to be present to heal his slave.

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1 That is, a Roman centurion. Centurions commanded a group of 100 soldiers, and their rank came from the Latin word for one hundred.

2 The centurion very likely referred to a slave, not his son.

3 Literally, *thrown*, but also meaning sick in bed.

4 Jesus referred to the Jews collectively by their original name; Israel wasn't a place at that time.

5 *You* here is plural; Jesus is now addressing his disciples.

6 Meals were eaten lying on one's left side, propped up by pillows.

7 That is, people will be grinding their teeth to express their helpless anger and frustration.

8 In the first century, an hour was the shortest unit of time; in modern terms, we might say, “at that moment.”

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus was pleasantly surprised at the centurion's expression of humility, trust, and comprehension of Jesus' status. Crowds of Jews had come to him for healing, but none of them had demonstrated this much faith.

Jesus then turned and addressed his disciples. His statement was somewhat cryptic, but what he meant was that Gentiles from all over the earth would gain admission to the kingdom by faith. However, the Jews, whom God had destined for inclusion, would be rejected because of unbelief; they would cast out into darkness, mourning and angry. The disciples were no doubt shocked at this pronouncement.

Jesus turned back to the centurion and told him to return home; what he believed had already happened. When the centurion arrived at his house, he found that his slave had been healed, just as Jesus said.

## **Jesus Heals Peter's Mother (8:14)**

<sup>14</sup>Jesus went into Rock's house and saw that Rock's mother-in-law was bedridden and feverish. <sup>15</sup>He touched her hand, and the fever left her. Then she got up and began to wait <sup>1</sup> on him.

<sup>16</sup>When evening came, they brought to Jesus many demon-possessed people, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed many with ailments, <sup>17</sup>so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah would be fulfilled that says,

“He took away our weaknesses and bore away illnesses.” <sup>2</sup>

When Jesus saw that Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever, he healed her without a word. Matthew notes that she got up and served him, indicating that she was fully recovered.

The fact that the crowds waited until evening indicates that Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath. As the Sabbath ended, the crowds descended on Jesus, and he cast out demons and healed people into the night. Matthew saw this as a fulfillment of a prophecy in *Isaiah* 53 that describes the Christ as God's suffering servant. The full verse is,

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” (*Isaiah* 53:4, ESV)

In spite of everything that Jesus did for others, they would ultimately reject him. We can only wonder at how Jesus carried on while knowing this.

## **Jesus Avoids the Crowds (8:18)**

<sup>18</sup>When Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to depart to the other side. <sup>3</sup>

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1 That is, she served Jesus in some way, possibly bringing him food.

2 *Isaiah* 53:4

3 That is, to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus, still in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee, saw a crowd surrounding him and gave orders to prepare to cross over to the other side of the lake, which was in the Gentile region of the Decapolis.

Matthew offered no explanation for why Jesus chose to do this, but Jesus would be unknown in the region to which he was heading, and there would be no crowds.

### **The Cost of Discipleship (8:19)**

<sup>19</sup>Then a scribe came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” <sup>20</sup>Jesus said to him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky nests, but the Son of Man doesn’t have anywhere to lay his head.”

A scribe came to Jesus and offered to become his disciple. Jesus responded with a warning. He had given up everything for his ministry, and the scribe would be called to do the same.

This is the first time Jesus referred to himself as the “Son of Man.” Jesus knew the scribe would recognize the title as a possible reference to the Christ in *Daniel 7*.

### **Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead (8:21)**

<sup>21</sup>Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first, please allow me to leave and to bury my father.” <sup>22</sup>But Jesus said to him, “Follow me! And leave the dead to bury their own dead!”

Another follower asked to be excused, claiming that he needed to bury his father. Jesus’ reply seems harsh, which indicates that the man’s father hadn’t just died. There are two possible reasons the man said this. One is that his father had been buried, and the man was waiting to rebury his father’s remains. This took place one year after the initial burial; however, the man still could have followed Jesus and then returned for the reburial.

The other is that the man’s father wasn’t yet dead; he wanted to stay near his father until he died. Either way, the man was making an excuse for delaying. Jesus told him to leave his worldly concerns to the world and to follow him.

We often find excuses for putting off a spiritual decision, and then excuses follow excuses, until we forget that we needed to make a decision. Jesus calls us to make our decisions now, no excuses.

### **Jesus Calms a Storm (8:23)**

<sup>23</sup>Jesus boarded the boat, and his disciples followed him. <sup>24</sup>Then, behold! A great storm came upon the lake, so that the boat was covered by the waves, but Jesus was sleeping. <sup>25</sup>They approached him and woke him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” <sup>26</sup>He said to them, “What is this cowardice,

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

little-faiths?” Then he arose and rebuked the wind and the lake, and a great calm happened. <sup>27</sup>But the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even the wind and the lake obey him?”

Jesus boarded a fishing boat, probably one owned by Peter and Andrew or James and John, along with a small group of his disciples. As they headed across the lake, a storm blew up. This was, and still is, a common occurrence on the lake. Winds coming from the west fall down from the hills onto the lake, gaining speed as they go. As the waves began to break over the boat, Jesus was asleep. The experienced fishermen among them realized that the boat wouldn't survive, and, in a panic, they woke Jesus.

The fact that Jesus remained asleep in a storm shows us that he was physically exhausted. This points to why he wanted to cross over to the Gentile side of the lake; possibly, he simply wanted a break from the constant demands of the crowds.

Jesus was unimpressed by the storm and even less impressed with his disciples fear. He stood up and rebuked the storm. That the wind dropped suddenly wasn't impossible, but the waves ceased as well, and the water became smooth. The disciples were amazed; in spite of the many miracles, they still hadn't come to understand who Jesus was.

### **Two Demon-possessed Men (8:28)**

<sup>28</sup>When Jesus came to the other side, in the district of Gadara, two demon-possessed men met him, having come out from among the tombs. They were very dangerous, so that no one was strong enough to travel along that road. <sup>29</sup>Then, behold! They cried out, saying, “What have we to do with you, <sup>1</sup> Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”

<sup>30</sup>Now, in the distance, there was a herd of many pigs grazing. <sup>31</sup>The demons began to plead with him, saying, “If you cast us out, please send us into the herd of pigs!” <sup>32</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Go!” The demons went into the pigs, and behold! The entire herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. <sup>33</sup>The herdsmen fled and went into the town. They reported everything about the demon-possessed men. <sup>34</sup>Then, behold! All the town went out for a meeting with Jesus. When they saw him, they implored him to depart from their district. <sup>9:1</sup>Then Jesus boarded the boat and came to his own town.

Jesus arrived on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, and at once two demon-possessed men came out to meet him. They lived in a graveyard and prevented anyone from passing by on the road; at first, they intended to drive these intruders away. However, as they drew near, the demons recognized Jesus for who he was and cried out in dismay. They assumed that Jesus had sought them out to torment them, and they protested that the appointed time for their punishment hadn't yet come.

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1 Literally, *What to us and to you?* This was a standard way of challenging one's enemies, see *2 Kings 3:13*.



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Note that the demons immediately recognized the Son of God even though he had become a man, while many people never did, even after hearing Jesus speak and seeing him do miracles.

The demons pleaded to be sent into a large herd pigs grazing in the distance. Jesus agreed. The demons apparently were unable to control the pigs, and the herd ran down into the lake and drowned. This reflects the vast number of demons that were in the men, and Jesus' complete authority over them. This is the main point Matthew makes in this account.

The herd was worth a fortune and probably belonged to a wealthy landowner; the herdsmen were either hired hands or slaves. When the townspeople came out and saw the dead pigs in the lake, they most likely took Jesus for a sorcerer and urgently requested that he leave. Jesus agreed and returned to Capernaum.

Jesus likely had come to this place to rest, but circumstances had prevented that, first the storm, then the demons, and finally the townspeople. Instead, Jesus ended up right back where he had come from, only a day later. Perhaps this was all a coincidence, or perhaps God moved to send Jesus back to work. Regardless, this is a reminder of the unceasing pressure Jesus faced in his ministry.

### **Forgiving Sins (9:2)**

9 <sup>2</sup>Now, behold! They brought to him a paralyzed man lying on a stretcher. <sup>1</sup> Now, behold! Jesus saw his faith and said to the paralyzed man, "Take heart, child! Your sins are forgiven." <sup>3</sup>Now, behold! Some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man blasphemes!" <sup>4</sup>Jesus, having seen their pondering, <sup>2</sup> said, "For what reason are you pondering wickedly in your hearts? <sup>5</sup>For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk!' <sup>6</sup>But, so that you might know that the Son of Man has authority upon the earth to forgive sins..." Then he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up! Pick up your stretcher and go to your house!" <sup>7</sup>The man got up and went out to his house. <sup>8</sup>Seeing this, the crowds were frightened and glorified God, who had given such authority to people.

Jesus looked at the paralyzed man and saw that he had faith; however, Jesus didn't immediately heal him. Jesus did this for two reasons. First, the Jews typically believed that God sent illnesses and other afflictions to punish sin. Jesus wanted to take away the man's guilt, as well as his ailment.

Second, some scribes were present. They had traveled from Jerusalem to look in on Jesus' activities. This is the first indication the Jesus' ministry was drawing negative attention. Jesus intended to confront their reservations toward him head-on.

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1 Typically, this word means a couch or a bed.

2 The Greek word is a noun for the internal deliberations that go on when one thinks deeply about something, possibly about something irritating.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

So, Jesus told the man that his sins were forgiven. The Jews believed that only God could forgive sins, and claiming the authority to do so was flagrant blasphemy. Jesus could see the scribes' thinking about this from the scowls on their faces, and he confronted them.

The Jews also believed that only God could heal, or those to whom God had given that authority. If God had given Jesus authority to heal, then he could also have given Jesus authority to forgive. Jesus said that he would prove he had authority to forgive by healing.

He further pressed the scribes by using the Son of Man title. The scribes knew that Jesus was referring to *Daniel 7:13*, a prediction about the Christ. In their minds, this was further blasphemy, but God also called Ezekiel by that name. Additionally, Jesus didn't come out and claim to be the Son of Man, and so they couldn't bring charges. All this gives us an idea of how hard Jesus was pushing the religious leaders, and also of how careful he wasn't to give them an excuse to arrest him.

Jesus then healed the man, who promptly stood up and walked out. Matthew doesn't say how the scribes reacted, but the crowds were filled with reverent fear and praised God.

## **Matthew Called (9:9)**

<sup>9</sup>As Jesus moved on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the toll booth, and he said to him, "Follow me!" Matthew stood up and followed him. <sup>10</sup>It happened that Jesus was dining in the house, and behold! Many tax collectors and sinners came in and reclined with Jesus and his disciples.

<sup>11</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they began saying to Jesus' disciples, "Why is your teacher eating with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>12</sup>Then Jesus, having heard this, said, "The healthy have no need of a doctor, but those with ailments do. <sup>13</sup>Go and learn what this means,

'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'

For I didn't come to call the righteous but sinners."

Note that this snapshot is probably out of sequence with what comes before it. Most likely, Matthew was present for the Sermon on the Mount and the other early events in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus called Matthew to follow him, and Matthew, who was collecting tolls, stood up and followed. Apparently, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to a banquet, and Matthew also invited many of his fellow tax collectors and other "sinners" as well. Most Jews wouldn't eat with such people, but Jesus didn't object.

Some Pharisees, however, did object. They, too, had traveled from Jerusalem, and not just to listen to Jesus teachings. They were watching to see what he did in private. They didn't go to

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1 *Hosea 6:6*

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus himself but questioned his disciples instead. Jesus overheard them and confronted them.

Just as doctors tend to the sick, Jesus had come to call sinners to godliness. He also challenged them to apply the teachings of the Old Testament prophets to themselves, noting that God himself had said that he wanted merciful behavior over ritual observance.

We should ask ourselves what “tax collectors and sinners” would look like today; perhaps “progressives and LGBT.” We don’t have to approve of their values or lifestyles, but we should treat them with kindness and respect, just as Jesus did, with the goal of displaying God’s kindness to them.

## **John’s Disciples Question Jesus (9:14)**

<sup>14</sup>Then John’s disciples of came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees often fast, but your disciples don't fast?” <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to them, “The sons of the wedding hall <sup>1</sup> can’t mourn as long as the groom is with them, can they? They days are coming when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast.

<sup>16</sup>“Now, no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. For it will take up its fullness from <sup>2</sup> the cloak, and a worse tear will occur. <sup>17</sup>Neither do people store new wine in old wineskins. Otherwise, the wineskins burst, the wine pours out, and the wineskins are destroyed. Instead, they store new wine in new skins, and both are preserved.”

Some disciples of John the Baptist came to question Jesus. The Pharisees fasted twice a week, and John had taught his disciples a similar practice. If Jesus was taking up John’s ministry, why wasn’t he training his disciples to follow John’s practices?

Jesus responded using a metaphor in which he was the groom and his disciples were the groomsmen. Fasting was associated with mourning and self-denial; fasting during a wedding celebration was inappropriate. Jesus then referred to his upcoming death, resurrection, and return to Heaven; when that happened, and he was gone, then his disciples would fast.

Jesus then addressed the deeper issue. John came to prepare the way for Jesus, and John’s followers ought to have followed Jesus by this point. However, they thought that Jesus should restore the old ways, not introduce new ones.

Jesus gave two illustrations to show them the problem with their thinking. Unfortunately, cloth no longer shrinks when washed, and we don't put wine in goatskins, so these illustrations can be difficult to understand.

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1 That is, the groomsmen.

2 That is, the unshrunk patch will shrink when washed and tear at the cloak.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

In the twenty-first century, cloth no longer shrinks when washed the first couple of times. However, in 1970, new bluejeans shrank three inches in length and two inches in the waist, and we had to buy larger sizes and let them shrink to fit. In Jesus' time, people knew that they needed to wash a piece of cloth before they cut a patch out of it. If they sewed an unshrunk patch onto a piece of old clothing, then the patch would shrink when the clothing was washed. The patch, now smaller, would pull at the fabric of the clothing, resulting in a bigger tear.

Jesus compared his teaching to a patch made of new fabric. John's disciples wanted to patch up the traditional Jewish practices by applying Jesus' teaching. Jesus told them that doing so would only make things worse.

In ancient times, wine was made by crushing grapes and letting the juice sit in open containers for a week. Yeast would eat the sugar in the juice and produce alcohol and carbon dioxide. When this process was done, the new wine, still bubbling with carbon dioxide, was poured into goatskins that were then sealed. A new wineskin would then stretch due to the pressure inside (Imagine shaking up a soda bottle.) However, an old wineskin had already been stretched. If new wine were sealed inside, it couldn't handle the pressure as it built up, and it would eventually explode.

Jesus said that his teachings required a new way of thinking. By trying to contain Jesus' teaching in the old ways, John's disciples were headed toward failure. Instead, they needed to put aside their old beliefs and start new.

### **A Dead Girl and a Woman with Bleeding (9:18)**

<sup>18</sup>As Jesus was talking with John's disciples, behold! A certain ruler <sup>1</sup> came and bowed down to Jesus, saying, "My daughter just died. Yet, please come and place your hand upon her, and she will live." <sup>19</sup>Jesus stood up and followed him, along with his disciples.

<sup>20</sup>Now, behold! A woman suffering from bleeding for twelve years approached Jesus from behind and touched the hem of his cloak. <sup>21</sup>For she said to herself, "If only I touch his cloak, I will be saved!" <sup>22</sup>Then Jesus turned around and, having seen her, said, "Take heart, daughter! Your faith has saved you." So the woman was saved from that hour.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus came to the ruler's house, and he saw flute players and a crowd making an uproar. <sup>24</sup>He said, "Go away! For the girl didn't die; instead, she's sleeping." Then they ridiculed him. <sup>25</sup>When the crowd had been sent outside, Jesus went in and took her hand, and the girl got up. <sup>26</sup>Then the news of this went out through all that land.

Matthew inserted the account of the woman with bleeding into the account of the dead girl to emphasize that Jesus was completely unaware of the woman when she sneaked up behind

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1 Or, *chief*. This man was probably the leader of the local synagogue.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

him. Her condition had rendered her unclean for a dozen years,<sup>1</sup> meaning that no one would want to touch her. In addition, social standards probably restricted her from going out in public. When she touched Jesus' clothing, she was immediately healed, without Jesus knowing in advance.

How did this happen? Possibly, Jesus was surrounded by power, and power naturally went out from him. More likely, God and the Holy Spirit were aware of the woman and her faith, and they healed her.

Regardless, Jesus was aware of the miracle, and he turned around and addressed her. The woman was probably frightened and felt guilty for "stealing" a miracle, and Jesus assured her that God had rewarded her faith.

A ruler, probably the leader of the local synagogue, came to Jesus. He bowed down, a sign of his desperation, and told Jesus that his daughter had just died. However, he was confident that Jesus could raise her to life.

When Jesus' arrived at the ruler's house, professional mourners had already arrived and were making a good deal of noise. This allowed the family to express their own grief openly. Jesus told them to leave, saying that the girl was only sleeping, not dead. The mourners and others gathered there ridiculed Jesus; she had been examined and was clearly dead.

After the house was clear, Jesus took the young woman's hand, and she got up. News of this spread rapidly; healing illnesses was one thing, but raising the dead was another.

### **Two Blind Men Healed (9:27)**

<sup>27</sup>As Jesus was leaving there, two blind men followed him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" <sup>28</sup>When he came to a house, the blind men approached him, and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I'm able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, lord." <sup>29</sup>Then he touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith it will happen for you." <sup>30</sup>Their eyes were opened, and Jesus sternly admonished <sup>2</sup> them, saying, "See to it that no one knows!" <sup>31</sup>However, they went out and told about him in all that land.

At first, this seems like an ordinary healing, but Matthew includes details that indicate that it was most unusual. First, Jesus apparently ignored the men as he went along; only after he reached a house and the men followed him inside did he speak to them. For Jesus to ignore people this way was unusual.

Next, he asked them if they thought he was able to heal them. When, they said, "Yes," Jesus told them that the result would depend on their faith. This may be the only place in the Gospels where Jesus did this.

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1 See *Leviticus* 15:25.

2 The Greek word has the idea of an angry rebuke.

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Finally, after he healed them, Jesus forcefully instructed them to tell no one about what he had done. For Jesus to speak this intensely to ordinary people was also unusual. What was different about these men that Jesus responded to them this way?

Matthew leaves us to speculate. First, beggars could be extremely demanding; these two followed Jesus down the road and into a house. This wasn't necessarily a show of faith but of shameless persistence.

Second, Jesus may have suspected that they viewed his power as coming from magic rather than from God. This would explain his question and the condition he placed on whether they would be healed. Jesus was trying to cause them to focus on faith in God. It would also explain why he didn't want them talking about him in public; Jesus suspected that they would go out and declare that Jesus was a great sorcerer.

The fact that they completely ignored Jesus' instructions to keep quiet shows that they lacked respect or gratitude. Jesus apparently expected this, but he healed them anyway.

## **A Deaf-Mute Man Healed (9:32)**

<sup>32</sup>After they left, behold! They brought to him a demon-possessed deaf-mute man.<sup>1</sup> <sup>33</sup>After the demon was cast out, the deaf-mute man spoke. The crowds marveled, saying, "Something like this has never happened<sup>2</sup> in Israel!" <sup>34</sup>However, the Pharisees said, "By the chief of the demons he casts out demons."

A deaf and mute man was brought to Jesus. We may assume that the man was born deaf and thus never learned to speak.

In ancient times, ailments were often blamed on demons; Matthew accepted this conventional wisdom. However, some healings clearly indicate that demon-possession was real. Whether that was the case here is unclear, but Jesus healed the man.

This healing is noteworthy because the man was now able to speak. Jesus hadn't only removed the ailment, but he also added a complex ability that takes years to learn. This is why the crowd was so impressed.

Matthew notes that some Pharisees had also come from Jerusalem. They acknowledged the miracle but refused to give glory to God. Instead, they claimed that Jesus was working for the Devil, and the Devil gave him power. This is the first time that Matthew recorded open opposition to Jesus.

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1 The Greek word can mean deaf, mute, or both. The fact that he later spoke indicates that he was at least mute.

2 Literally, *appeared*.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Summary (9:35)**

<sup>35</sup>So Jesus was going about all the towns<sup>1</sup> and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every ailment. <sup>36</sup>When he saw the crowds, he felt compassion<sup>2</sup> for them, because they were troubled and downcast, <sup>3</sup>like sheep not having a shepherd. <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest indeed is much, but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup>Therefore, implore the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest.”

Matthew finished this section by noting that Jesus traveled extensively, teaching, preaching, and healing every disease and infirmity. He *felt* the struggles of the people in the crowds; they needed help but didn't know where to find it.

Jesus told his disciples that there were great needs and opportunities, like fields waiting to be harvested, but there were only a few workers. He called the disciples to pray for more workers. No doubt some of his followers were concerned about their own places in the coming kingdom; Jesus told them that there would be more than enough opportunities for all of them.

## **Chapter 10: Jesus Teaches About Ministry**

This is the second of five teaching sections; Jesus prepares his twelve Apostles for their ministry.

### **Calling of the Apostles (10:1)**

**10** <sup>1</sup>So, Jesus called his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every illness and every ailment.

<sup>2</sup>Now, the names of the twelve Emissaries are these. Simon called Rock, Andrew his brother, Jacob son of Zebedee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup>Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; Jacob son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup>Simon the Zealot<sup>4</sup> and Judas Iscariot, who also handed him over.<sup>5</sup>

Matthew implies that Jesus had already selected twelve of his followers for extra training and leadership roles. Jesus gave the twelve a special title, Apostles, to set them apart from the rest

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1 Or, *cities*. There were few true cities in Galilee, and the Gospels never mention them.

2 The Greek word has the idea of *feeling* for others, sympathy, and not just wanting to help them.

3 Literally, *thrown down*, using a synonym of the word in verse 8:6.

4 The Greek word sounds similar to Canaanite, but it's actually from an Aramaic word for *zealot*. The Zealots were a band of revolutionaries seeking freedom from the Romans.

5 Most translations, *betrayed him*. While Judas certainly betrayed Jesus, the Greek word, according to respected dictionaries, falls short of that meaning. Here, the Greek word has the idea of *hand over to the authorities* or *arrest*. A very similar Greek word means *betray*; Luke used it in *Luke* 6:16.

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of his followers. The word *apostle* is from a Greek word for *one sent out*; here, it has the sense of *ambassador*.

Jesus took a big step in their training by giving them authority to perform miracles. This would supercharge their ministries, setting them apart from ordinary teachers and proving that their message came from God.

### **Basic Instructions (10:5)**

<sup>5</sup>Jesus sent out <sup>1</sup> these Twelve <sup>2</sup> after instructing them, saying, “Don’t go on the roads of the Tribes, and don’t go into the towns of the Samaritans. <sup>6</sup>Instead, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>As you go, proclaim, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near!’ <sup>8</sup>Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, cast out demons. You received freely; give freely.

<sup>9</sup>“Don’t obtain gold nor silver nor copper for your belts; <sup>10</sup>don’t take a knapsack on the road nor two shirts nor sandals nor a staff. For the worker is worthy of his food. <sup>11</sup>Whatever town or village you enter, determine who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. <sup>12</sup>As you enter a household, greet it. <sup>13</sup>If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it isn’t worthy, your peace will return to you. <sup>14</sup>Whoever doesn’t welcome you nor listen to you teachings, leave that house or town; shake off the dust from your feet. <sup>15</sup>Amen, I tell you, it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on a day of judgment <sup>3</sup> than for that town.

Jesus intended to send the Apostles out on their own so that they could gain experience. First, however, he gave them extensive instructions. The Apostles were to avoid Gentiles and Samaritans; they were to confine their ministry to Jews. They should travel light and rely on the good will of people they met to meet their needs. Jews, and people in the Middle East generally, prided themselves on showing hospitality.

As they entered a town, they should search out a person of good will and stay with them, accepting their support. If no one in a town welcomed them, then they should leave. Shaking the dust off their feet was an offensive way of expressing rejection. Jews who traveled to Gentile lands, upon returning to Jewish territory, would stop at the border and shake off the “unclean” dust of the foreign land before going on their way. Jesus told the Apostles that those who rejected them would face greater judgment than the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

#### ***Note on Sodom and Gomorrah***

The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah appear in *Genesis 18:16ff*. Abraham’s nephew Lot had parted ways with Abraham and moved to the region around

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1 This is the verb form of *apostle*.

2 Matthew uses *The Twelve* as another title for the Apostles.

3 We might expect *Judgment Day* here, but that isn’t the case.



## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

the Jordan River. After a time, Lot moved into the city of Sodom. When God announced his decision to destroy those cities, Abraham pleaded for the Lot's life. Therefore, God sent two angels to Lot, to tell him to flee to the mountains.

Lot showed hospitality to the angels, taking them into his house for the night. The men of Sodom, however, demonstrated their wickedness by demanding that Lot hand the men over so they could sexually abuse them. The Sodomites were as much guilty for violating the code of hospitality as they were for wanting to abuse them. Lot risked his life protecting his guests, which the code of hospitality demanded, showing that he was upright. The angels then made the men of Sodom blind, rescuing Lot.

The next day, after Lot and his family had fled from the city, God destroyed Sodom, Gomorrah, and the surrounding area with burning sulfur.

### **Expect Opposition (10:16)**

<sup>16</sup>“Behold! I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore, become as wise as snakes <sup>1</sup> and as innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup>Beware of people! For they will hand you over to courts, and they will flog you in their synagogues. Also, you will be brought before governors and kings because of me, as testimony to them and the Tribes. <sup>19</sup>When they hand you over, don't worry about how or what you should say! For what you should say will be given to you in that hour. <sup>20</sup>For it won't be you who are speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

<sup>21</sup>“Brother will hand over brother to death, and a father a child. Children will rebel against parents and will put them to death. <sup>22</sup>You will be hated by all because of my name, but the one who endures until the end, this one will be saved. <sup>23</sup>“When they persecute you in this town, flee to another! Amen, I tell you, you surely won't finish *with* <sup>2</sup> the towns of Israel until the Son of Man comes.

<sup>24</sup>“A disciple isn't superior to his teacher, nor is a slave superior to his lord. <sup>25</sup>It's enough for a disciple to become like his teacher and a slave like his lord. If they call the house-master Beelzebul, how much more his domestics. <sup>3</sup>

#### ***Note on Beelzebul***

*Beelzebul* was a Philistine god. His name was an Aramaic compound word. *Beel*, or *Baal* in Hebrew, meant *Lord*. *Zebul* meant *lofty house*, but *zebel* meant *dung*. The Philistine god was probably *Lord of the Lofty House*, but the Jews thought of him as *Lord of Dung*. *Baal-zebul*, used in *2 Kings* 1:2, came from a different Hebrew word meaning *Lord of Flies*, but the idea is similar.

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1 In ancient times, snakes symbolized wisdom and cunning, see *Genesis* 3:1.

2 Literally, *finish the towns*; *finish going through the towns* is another possibility.

3 Literally, *house's belongings*. This could either refer to house slaves, which fits the immediate context, or relatives.

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Among the Jews, Beelzebul was considered the king of the demons, and they also name used it to refer to Satan dismissively.

Jesus told the Apostles to expect great hostility and opposition because of their preaching at every level. Local courts had the right to discipline people with up to 40 lashes; governors and kings could impose harsher penalties, including torture or death. However, a trial before a ruler was also an opportunity to preach the Gospel to the mighty. In those cases, the Apostles weren't to plan out their defense, for the Holy Spirit would speak through them in the moment.

Their message would also lead to deep divisions between those who believed and those who did not. Family relationships were of the utmost importance, and the idea of children condemning their parents to death was unthinkable. However, even family members would turn on each other. Unbelievers would blame the Apostles and hate them, but believers who persevered until the end would be saved.

Verse 23 presents challenges in interpreting the timing of the coming of the Son of Man; one possibility is that Jesus referred to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. In this view, Jesus said that the Apostles wouldn't finish their work before that critical event. Regardless, Jesus told the Apostles to move on when persecuted, rather than to stay and be killed. Their purpose was to preach everywhere, not to play the martyr.

Jesus then told the Apostles not to fear conflict. Just as Jesus faced intense opposition, with his opponents even calling him Demon King, so his disciples would experience the same.

### **Don't Be Afraid (10:26)**

<sup>26</sup>“Therefore, you don't be afraid of them! For there is nothing having been concealed that won't be uncovered nor hidden that won't become known. <sup>27</sup>What I tell you in the darkness, tell in the light! What you hear in the ear, <sup>1</sup> proclaim from the rooftops! <sup>2</sup> <sup>28</sup>Don't be afraid of those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one able to destroy soul and body in the Valley of Hinnom!

<sup>29</sup>“Aren't two sparrows sold for a quarter? <sup>3</sup> And yet one of them doesn't fall to the ground without your Father's knowledge, <sup>30</sup>and even all the hairs of your head are numbered. <sup>31</sup>Therefore, don't be afraid! You are worth more than many sparrows.

Jesus told the Apostles not to cower or hold back in preaching the message; instead, they were to proclaim it all the more boldly. The worst the unbelievers could do was to kill their bodies, but God could kill both soul and body in Hell.

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1 This probably has the idea of something whispered.

2 Most buildings had flat roofs that were used as patios, so many hear would someone shouting from a rooftop.

3 Literally, an assarius, 1/16th of a denarius. It was the smallest Roman coin, worth about 15 cents.

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Jesus then said that God was aware of even individual sparrows. This is a powerful statement about how really *big* God is. God keeps track of birds, and each hair on his people's heads. With God's protection, there is no reason to be afraid.

## **Not Peace but a Sword (10:34)**

<sup>34</sup>“Don't think that I came to bring peace to the earth; I didn't come to bring peace but a sword. <sup>35</sup>For I came to divide

‘a man against his father and a daughter against her mother and a bride against her mother-in-law, <sup>36</sup>and a man's enemies are his own household.’<sup>1</sup>

Jesus had already told the Apostles that his message would be divisive. He also said that he *intended* to cause division and conflict. In saying this, Jesus didn't mean that he *desired* conflict, but that he saw conflict as the inevitable result of calling people to godliness. The ungodly will invariably reject the godly, even to the point of violence, and not even family bonds are strong enough to overcome this.

## **Total Commitment and Its Reward (10:37)**

<sup>37</sup>“The one who loves father or mother more than me isn't worthy of me, the one loving son or daughter more than me isn't worthy of me, <sup>38</sup>and the one who doesn't take his cross and follow behind me isn't worthy of me. <sup>39</sup>The one having found his soul will lose it, and the one having lost his soul because of me will find it.

In the face of this conflict, Jesus followers face a choice. They can either follow him and endure rejection from those closest to them, or they can turn back.

Jesus also revealed his own fate; he would die on a cross. Even the Romans considered crucifixion cruel and reserved the punishment for the worst non-citizen offenders. The first step in crucifixion required the victim to carry the crossbar in a parade while bystanders mocked and jeered. Jesus would carry his cross through the streets of Jerusalem—at least until he was unable to go on. His followers would have to follow in his footsteps.

Our eternal destinies are at stake. We can avoid suffering and death now, but we then sacrifice eternal life and face judgment.

## **The Message Entrusted to the Apostles (10:40)**

<sup>40</sup>“The one who welcomes<sup>2</sup> you welcomes me, and the one who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

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1 See *Micah* 7:6.

2 This word can also mean *receive*; See verse 41 where this word is translated both as *welcome* and *receive*.

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Jesus told the Apostles that he was entrusting his message to them. Those who accepted their message also accepted Jesus and thus God.

## **Sure Reward (10:41)**

<sup>41</sup>“The one who welcomes a prophet in a prophet’s name <sup>1</sup> will receive a prophet’s reward, the one who welcomes a godly man in a godly man’s name will receive a godly man’s reward, <sup>42</sup>and the one who, in a disciple’s name, only gives a drink from a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, amen, I tell you, he surely won’t lose his reward.”

At the end of all these grim teachings, Jesus told them that God would be careful to reward them and those who accepted their message; God would see and reward even the smallest deeds done because of Jesus.

## **Conclusion (11:1)**

<sup>11:1</sup>When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he moved on from there to teach and to proclaim in their towns.

Jesus, having instructed the Apostles and sent them out, continued his own ministry.

## **Chapters 11–12: Middle Ministry**

This narrative section describes the middle of Jesus’ ministry. In the previous narrative section, the Pharisees and scribes had begun to watch Jesus, and John the Baptist’s disciples had questioned him. Now, Jesus faces, and reacts to, open doubt and opposition.

### **John Doubts, Jesus Responds**

Matthew describes an incident involving John the Baptist’s disciples and Jesus’ reaction; this is a long section. Matthew also assumes that his audience is familiar with John the Baptist’s arrest and Jewish expectations about the Christ. In addition, we might be surprised at Jesus’ strong response to John’s doubts. The following breaks the passage into pieces in order to clarify what was happening and then summarizes the lessons that we can learn.

#### ***John’s Disciples Express John’s Doubts (11:2)***

**11** <sup>2</sup>John, having heard from prison of the Anointed’s works, sent *an inquiry* by his disciples, <sup>3</sup>saying to Jesus, “Are you the One who is coming, or should we look for someone else?” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, saying, “Go and report to John what you have heard and seen. <sup>5</sup>The blind see and the

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<sup>1</sup> Less literally, *because he is a prophet*. In the same way, *because his is a godly man, because he is a disciple*.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

lame walk; lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is proclaimed to the poor. <sup>6</sup>Fortunate is he who doesn't stumble because of me.”

Matthew assumed that his audience knew about how Herod Antipas had arrested John and put him in prison, although he summarizes these events in chapter 14:1ff. At this point, John had been in prison for perhaps a year.

John had heard about Jesus' ministry, including the numerous miracles Jesus had done. On the other hand, he had heard Jesus' teachings about tolerance <sup>1</sup> and his associating with tax collectors and other disreputable people. In John's mind, this didn't add up to what he expected. His question reveals that he seriously doubted that Jesus was the Christ and was considering looking for, and supporting, someone else.

Most Jews, including John, expected God to come in power and to rid the land of the ungodly on a day of judgment. While Jesus called for repentance, John found Jesus far too tolerant and gentle toward those who didn't respond. Even in the area of miracles, Jesus didn't demand repentance before healing people.

Contrary to John's thinking, Jesus did turn the hearts of the people to God, at least those who would listen. His miracles testified to his divine power. Additionally, the Romans devastated Galilee, Judah, and Jerusalem around 40 years later by. Thus, the predictions in *Malachi* were fulfilled, just not the way John expected.

John's doubts were, in part, the result of sitting in prison for a long time. They also resulted from John focusing on his own expectations and how Jesus wasn't living up to them. John had let his doubts grow to the point where he was about to abandon his faith. John was ignoring that he had been called to his ministry by God and that God had revealed Jesus to him as the Christ—we don't know how this happened, but clearly God did. Basically, John was putting his own thinking over what God had revealed to him.

Jesus responded bluntly. The miracles he did were the only testimony John needed. Furthermore, John needed to overcome his doubts, or his offended feelings would lead to his ruin.

### ***Jesus Praises John (11:7)***

<sup>7</sup>As John's disciples were going, Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John. “What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>Or what did you go out to look at? A man in soft<sup>2</sup> clothes? Behold! Those who wear soft clothes are in kings' houses. <sup>9</sup>Or what did you go out to

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1 Turn the other cheek, love your enemies, don't judge.

2 This word can mean *soft* or *effeminate*, as a homosexual slur. Wealthy Romans and Greeks, and possibly Herod's court, practiced homosexuality, but Jews abhorred it.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

look at? A prophet? I tell you, yes, and exceedingly more than a prophet! <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it was written,

‘Behold! I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
Who will prepare your road before you.’ <sup>1</sup>

<sup>11</sup>“Amen, I tell you, no one has been raised up among those born of women greater than John the Immerser. However, the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. <sup>12</sup>From the days of John the Immerser until now, the Kingdom of Heaven is under attack, <sup>2</sup> and violent men are seizing hold <sup>3</sup> of it. <sup>13</sup>For all the prophets and the Law have prophesied until John, <sup>14</sup>and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is destined to come. <sup>15</sup>The one who has ears, listen!

Jesus saw that the crowds had picked up on the tension in the exchange with John’s disciples. The credibility of Jesus’ ministry was founded, in part, on John’s; John’s doubts could spread like a disease.

In response, Jesus questioned why the crowds had gone after John in the first place. They hadn’t traveled into the wilderness to see a fragile reed or one of Herod’s dandies. Instead, they had gone to see a prophet; in fact, John was the messenger predicted by *Malachi* who would prepare the way for God. Note that Jesus altered the text slightly so that it could refer to the coming of Christ rather than of God himself.

In saying this, Jesus both praised John and put him in a subordinate position. John was the messenger who prepared the way, but he had prepared the way for Jesus.

Jesus then told them that John was the greatest prophet of all; however, even the least person in the God’s kingdom would be greater than John. Again, this emphasized that John was preparing the way for someone, Jesus, and something, the kingdom, much greater than he.

Verse 12 is difficult, since the meaning of the verb is ambiguous. This leads to two possible interpretations. One is that the kingdom was forcefully advancing, and forceful men seized the opportunity for salvation it offered—note that *forceful men* is stretching the meaning of the Greek word, which means *a violent or impetuous man*. This is what the Jews expected and wanted; they hoped the Christ would overthrow the Romans, and they would become the rulers of the earth.

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1 See *Malachi* 3:1 Note that Matthew modified the quote from “me” to “you;” this alters the meaning to point to the coming of the Christ, not of God himself.

2 Or, *is forcing itself forward, and violent men*. The basic meaning of the Greek verb is to force or compel. The verb can be used in a military sense to describe overpowering the enemy. The problem is that the verb is spelled the same in the middle and passive voices; that is, whether the kingdom is forcing itself or being forced isn’t clear. The corresponding noun is used to describe a violent or impetuous person.

3 Or, *steal it by force, carry it off*.

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The second is that the kingdom was under attack, and violent men seized it to subvert it to their own purposes. John's preaching on behalf of the kingdom had landed him in prison; in a short time, it would lead to his death. Jesus' own preaching would lead to his death as well. However, in God's wisdom, both his kingdom and his Christ had to suffer and to appear to have lost; in reality, sin and Satan lost their power, and God established his kingdom and his Christ forever.

Jesus contrasted what the Jews expected and God intended. The Jews were wrong about the kingdom; they were also wrong about the Christ.

Jesus then referred to *Malachi* 4:5, which says that God would send the prophet Elijah before the Day of the Lord, which was well-known among the Jews. Jesus told them that John fulfilled it, whether they believed it or not. Those with open minds should listen to what Jesus was telling them.

## ***Jesus Criticizes the Crowds (11:16)***

<sup>16</sup>“To what should I compare this generation? It's like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other, <sup>17</sup>saying,

‘We played the flute, and you didn't dance!

We mourned out loud, and you didn't beat your chests!’ <sup>1</sup>

<sup>18</sup>“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and you say, ‘He has a demon!’ <sup>19</sup>The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Behold! A man who is a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet Wisdom <sup>2</sup> is justified by her actions.”

Jesus then criticized the crowd for their lack of heartfelt response to either John or Jesus. Jesus accused them of finding John too harsh and Jesus too lax; they always found an excuse to avoid committing themselves. They thought themselves wise because they wouldn't commit; Jesus warned them that the final outcome of their choice would show otherwise.

## ***Jesus Condemns the Towns of Galilee (11:20)***

<sup>20</sup>Then Jesus began to reproach the towns in which the majority of his miracles had occurred, because they hadn't repented. <sup>21</sup>“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that happened in you had happened long ago in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>22</sup>Yet I tell you, it will be more bearable on a day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. <sup>23</sup>And you, Capernaum! You won't be lifted up to the heavens, will you? You will be brought down all the way to Hades, <sup>3</sup> because if the miracles that happened in you had happened in Sodom, it would remain

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1 Beating one's chest was a standard way of expressing grief.

2 Jesus seemed to refer to Wisdom as a person, see *Proverbs* 8:1ff.

3 Hades was the underworld of Greek mythology where the souls of the dead would go. While Greeks didn't typically consider a place of punishment, Jesus treated it as if it were.

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until today. <sup>24</sup>Yet I tell you that it will be more bearable on a day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Jesus then condemned the towns where he had done most of his miracles because they hadn't repented. Tyre and Sidon were ancient city-states of the neighboring Phoenicians, and the Old Testament prophets had condemned them. <sup>1</sup> Yet, Jesus said they would be better off than Chorazin and Bethsaida, towns near Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, when God judged them, because even those wicked cities would have repented if they had seen the miracles Jesus was doing. In the same way, even wicked Sodom would have repented and been saved from annihilation if they had seen Jesus' miracles. God's judgment was coming, and Sodom would be better off than Capernaum.

Jesus' miracles were clear signs that only God or the Christ could perform. Even the wicked cities of the Old Testament would have recognized them and repented, yet the towns of Galilee were unmoved. In God's sight, their knowing apathy was worse than ignorant wickedness.

### ***Praise for God, Rest for the Weary (11:25)***

<sup>25</sup>At that time Jesus went on, saying, “Father, lord of the heavens and earth, I praise your glory, because you hid these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. <sup>26</sup>Yes, Father, because this having happened is pleasing before you. <sup>27</sup>My Father has entrusted everything to me. No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son and the one to whom the Son is willing to reveal him.

<sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you weary and burdened, and I will give you rest! <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke <sup>2</sup> upon you and learn from me, because I'm gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>3</sup> <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is comfortable, and my burden is light.”

After these harsh pronouncements, Jesus stopped to pray. He praised God because he had concealed the great truths from the lofty and revealed them to the lowly. Furthermore, God had entrusted all these things to Jesus. Only the Father truly understood the Son, and only the Son truly understood the Father. However, the Son could reveal the Father to those whom he chose.

Jesus then turned back to the crowds, calling out to those who had worn themselves out living their lives by their own wisdom and strength; he would give them rest. However, to find rest, they would have to take Jesus' yoke on their shoulders. This meant that they would have to accept Jesus' lordship and live their lives in accordance with his teachings. However, Jesus was gentle and humble, and doing his will was far easier than living by their own strength.

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1 See *Isaiah* 23, *Ezekiel* 26–28.

2 A wooden bar fastened over the shoulders of an animal so that it can pull a load.

3 See *Jeremiah* 6:16.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Summary***

We can draw several lessons from this passage.

- Our expectations or convictions can come between us and God. God called John to his ministry and pointed out Jesus as the Christ; John clearly recognized Jesus when he first came to him. However, John let his own expectations overrule God's clear instruction, and he damaged Jesus' ministry through his doubting.

We become bitter because someone, even a minister, wrongs us, and we blame God or even question if he exists. We refuse to respond to clear evidence that our thinking is wrong, saying, "That isn't what I was taught," or "That isn't the way I see it."

Bitterness and stubborn pride are the enemies of faith.

- Jesus treated doubts as serious sin. John had God's own instruction, and he had heard of Jesus' miracles. In spite of this, he relied on his own opinion that Jesus wasn't good enough and approached Jesus disrespectfully and in public. Jesus cut straight to the heart of the matter and warned John that he was on the edge of ruin.
- Doubts are contagious, especially when aired in public. If John's disciples had approached Jesus privately and expressed that John was struggling and needed help, Jesus wouldn't have needed to respond so strongly. As it was, word of John's doubts surely spread widely, in spite of Jesus' attempts to contain it. The appropriate response to doubts is to pray and to talk about them privately, with a capable and trustworthy person.
- God hates apathy and indecision more than sins committed in ignorance. For 2,000 years, God had been preparing the Jews for the coming of his Son, who would die on a cross so that they could be saved. Jesus did a vast numbers of miracles by God's power, and the people of Galilee had no excuse to not respond.
- Jesus is the *only* way to know God, much less to be saved. God created humankind for his own purposes, and humankind cut themselves off from God through their own sin. For God to provide only one means by which people can be restored is reasonable, especially when God paid a great price to make that way available. People who complain about this ignore the fact that God owes them nothing and that their sin violates God's holiness.
- Jesus came not only to save us from judgment in the life to come but also to give us rest in this life. The key to finding rest is to take the burden of doing things Jesus' way upon ourselves. This makes sense when we accept that most of what makes life wearying and burdensome is our own foolishness and sin. Jesus' way isn't only the *right*

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way, it's the *good* way. Changing our thinking and behavior may require extra effort in the short term, but in the long term, life becomes easier.

## Lord of the Sabbath (12:1)

12 <sup>1</sup>At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbaths. <sup>1</sup> His disciples were hungry and began to pick heads of wheat and to eat them. <sup>2</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Your disciples are doing what isn’t lawful to do on the Sabbath.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus said to them, “You have read what David did when he was hungry, along those with him, haven’t you? <sup>4</sup>How he went into the house of God, and they ate that which isn’t lawful for him nor those with him to eat, but only for the priests? <sup>2</sup> <sup>5</sup>You have read in the Law that on the Sabbaths that the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless,<sup>3</sup> haven’t you? I tell you that something greater than the Sabbath is here. <sup>7</sup>If you understood what this means,

‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’<sup>4</sup>

then you wouldn’t have condemned the guiltless. <sup>8</sup>For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

As Jesus continued his ministry, he and his disciples headed to the synagogue on the Sabbath. As they followed a path that went through some grain fields, Jesus’ disciples stopped to pick some of the ripe wheat. The Law allowed the people to pick from their neighbors fields,<sup>5</sup> so this wasn’t unusual.

What was unusual was that some Pharisees were following Jesus as well, apparently spying on him. They immediately accused the disciples of doing work on the Sabbath, which was, in theory, punishable by death.<sup>6</sup> However even the Pharisees disagreed among themselves whether picking grain was a violation.

Jesus used their accusation to confront them. David, forefather of the Christ, had eaten the Bread of the Presence, and the priests did work in the sanctuary every Sabbath, yet God considered them innocent. Jesus then told the Pharisees that their ignorance of God’s will led them to condemn the innocent; *Proverbs* says,

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1 Matthew uses the plural *Sabbaths* whenever he refers to a specific Sabbath day. He uses the singular *Sabbath* when he refers to the Sabbath conceptually, as in verse 2.

2 See *1 Samuel* 21:1–6. David and his companions ate the Bread of the Presence, which was offered inside the sanctuary every Sabbath; it was then eaten by the priests the next day. David’s behavior was a serious violation.

3 The Law commanded that no work be done on the Sabbath, but it also instructed that the priests carry out their normal duties, along with some special ones on the Sabbath. Essentially, the Law gave priests certain exemptions regarding work on the Sabbath.

4 *Hosea* 6:6

5 *Deuteronomy* 23:25

6 *Exodus* 31:14

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“He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.” (*Proverbs 17:15, ESV*)

This serves as a warning to all of us who are quick to find fault in others.

Jesus then made a claim that the Pharisees considered blasphemy. He said that the Son of Man was lord of the Sabbath; such a claim made the Son of Man equal to God. However, because Jesus was vague as to whether he was the Son of Man or not, the Pharisees couldn't charge him.

## **Healing on the Sabbath (12:9)**

<sup>9</sup>Moving on from there, Jesus came to their synagogue. <sup>10</sup>And behold! A man having a withered hand. <sup>11</sup>They inquired of him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbaths?” so that they might bring charges against him. <sup>12</sup>Jesus said to them, “Which man among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbaths, won't grab hold of it and lift it out? <sup>13</sup>How much more valuable is a man than a sheep? Therefore, it's lawful to make well <sup>2</sup> on the Sabbaths.” Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” Then he stretched it and it was restored, as healthy as the other. <sup>14</sup>Then the Pharisees went out and took counsel against Jesus so that they might destroy <sup>3</sup> him. <sup>15</sup>But Jesus recognized this and withdrew from there.

As Jesus reached the synagogue, he found that the Pharisees had set a trap for him. They had placed a man with a withered hand up front and then asked Jesus whether the Law allowed healing on the Sabbath, which it clearly did not. Ironically, the Pharisees were doing work on the Sabbath by setting a trap for Jesus, and in the middle of the weekly worship service.

Most likely, none of the Pharisees present tended sheep; they were wealthy enough to leave Jerusalem and follow Jesus around Galilee. However, the people in the synagogue fully understood the importance of caring for their animals, and any of them would pull their sheep out of a pit on the Sabbath, rather than wait until the next day. Thus, Jesus set the people against the Pharisees.

Jesus then said that a person is more valuable than a sheep; therefore, it was lawful to heal, and to do good, on the Sabbath. He then proved his point by telling the man to stretch out his hand, and it was immediately healed. Matthew doesn't record the reaction of the people in the synagogue, but the Pharisees began plotting to kill Jesus.

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1 The Greek word can mean either the hand or the arm including the hand. In this case, it's possible that the part of the man's arm as well as his hand was affected.

2 Jesus was deliberately ambiguous about what he said; his words also mean *do good*.

3 The word's meanings includes putting someone to death.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus knew that his ministry would end with his death. However, he intended to die at a time of God's choosing, not the Pharisees'. He quickly left and began to keep a low profile.

## **Jesus Heals the Crowds (12:15b)**

Many crowds followed Jesus, and he healed them all, <sup>16</sup>and he sternly warned them that they not make him known. <sup>17</sup>This fulfilled what was told by Isaiah the prophet, saying,

<sup>18</sup>Behold! My child whom I have chosen,  
my beloved in whom my soul delights.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the Tribes.

<sup>19</sup>He won't quarrel or shout,  
nor will his voice be heard in the streets.

<sup>20</sup>He won't break a reed that has been damaged,  
and he won't snuff out a smoldering wick,  
until he brings justice to victory.

<sup>21</sup>The Tribes will hope in his name. <sup>1</sup>

Crowds continued to bring those needing help, and Jesus healed them all. However, he sharply admonished them to not reveal his whereabouts, as he wanted to avoid further conflicts with the Pharisees.

Matthew then linked Jesus to an important passage in *Isaiah* regarding God's Servant, whom Isaiah went on to develop as the one who will restore Israel and also the Gentiles. Looking back, we see that the Servant was the Christ, and Jesus fulfilled these predictions. *Isaiah* 53 contains a number of predictions about the Servant, many of them having to do with his being rejected, suffering, and dying even as he "bore the sins of many."

## **Further Confrontation with the Pharisees**

Although Jesus was making efforts to avoid them, the Pharisees found him, leading to another confrontation. This is a long passage; the following breaks it down into sections for the sake of clarity.

### ***Jesus Empowered by Satan? (12:22)***

<sup>22</sup>A demon-possessed man who was blind and mute <sup>2</sup> approached Jesus, and he healed him, so that the mute man was speaking and seeing. <sup>23</sup>All the crowds were staggered <sup>3</sup> and began saying, "Surely

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1 See *Isaiah* 42:1–4.

2 Literally, *dull*. The word could mean either deaf or mute or both.

3 The word has the idea of being amazed to the point of confusion.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

this man can't be the Son of David, can he?" <sup>24</sup>However, the Pharisees heard this and said, "He doesn't cast out demons except by Beelzebul, chief of the demons."

<sup>25</sup>Jesus saw their pondering<sup>1</sup> and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and every city or house divided against itself won't stand. <sup>25</sup>If the Adversary casts out the Adversary, he is divided against himself, so how will his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup>Also, if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore, they are your judges. <sup>28</sup>However, if I cast out demons by God's Spirit, then God's kingdom has come upon you.

Jesus performed a miracle of healing that astonished the crowds, who then began to wonder if Jesus was David's Son, a common way of referring to the Christ. The Pharisees, the self-appointed guardians of the people, didn't want the crowds going after Jesus. However, they couldn't deny that Jesus had done the miracle, so they claimed that Beelzebul, or Satan, empowered Jesus.

Jesus' responded by blasting their argument. A kingdom divided against itself would fall; if Satan was casting out his own demons, then his kingdom would collapse. Furthermore, followers of the Pharisees claimed to cast out demons just as Jesus did; were they also empowered by Satan?

However, if God empowered Jesus, as he clearly was, then God's kingdom had come in spite of them.

### ***Plundering a Strong Man's House (12:29)***

<sup>29</sup>"How can someone enter a strong man's house of and seize his possessions, unless he first binds the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

Jesus returned to Satan and his demons, comparing Satan to a powerful man and the world as Satan's house. No one could free those enslaved by Satan without first binding him. Thus, the miracle showed not only that God empowered Jesus, but that he had bound Satan, who was unable to stop him.

### ***With Jesus Or Against Him (12:30)***

<sup>30</sup>"He who isn't with me is against me, and he who doesn't gather, scatters.

Jesus laid out a clear choice. People could side with him and actively work for him, or they were against him. There was no gray area, no in-between, no room for indecision.

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1 That is, internal deliberations, each in his own mind.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Unforgivable Sin (12:31)***

<sup>31</sup>“Therefore, I tell you, men will be forgiven all sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit won’t be forgiven. <sup>32</sup>Even if one says a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him. However, if one speaks against the Holy Spirit, it won’t be forgiven him, not in this age or in the one to come.

Jesus stated that God would forgive people’s sins and blasphemies, even those made against Jesus himself, but not blasphemy against the Spirit. Jesus wasn’t claiming that the Pharisees had spoken against the Holy Spirit directly. Instead, they had condemned the *miracles* done through the power of the Holy Spirit, by claiming that Satan had done them instead.

Condemning the miracles was unforgivable for a combination of reasons.

- The miracles were God’s direct testimony to people
- It interfered with God’s plan to bring salvation to Israel and the Gentiles
- It revealed hearts so darkened that not light could reach them

Perhaps Jesus used hyperbole here to emphasize how serious the Pharisees’ behavior was. While they couldn’t come to true faith in God if they couldn’t even recognize God’s works, the possibility remained that they would later come to their senses, repent, and be saved.

## ***What You Say Matters (12:33)***

<sup>33</sup>“Make the tree good and its fruit will be good, or make the tree rotten, and its fruit will be rotten, for the tree is known by its fruit. <sup>34</sup>Viper’s spawn, how are you able, being wicked, to speak of what is good? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup>The good man out of the good treasure brings forth good, and the wicked man out of the wicked treasure brings forth wickedness. <sup>36</sup>I tell you that, *for every idle remark that people will make, they will give an account for it on a day of judgment.* <sup>37</sup>For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Just as a tree is known by its fruit, a person is known by what they say, for our words come from our hearts. God has a long memory, and, at the Judgment, he will require an accounting for every careless remark that came out of our mouths.

Jesus made clear that the Pharisees’ remarks revealed their inner wickedness.

## ***Request for a Sign (12:38)***

<sup>38</sup>The scribes and Pharisees responded by saying, “We want you to show us a sign.” <sup>39</sup>Jesus replied to them and said, “A wicked and adulterous generation demands a sign, and a sign won’t be given to it, except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup>For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea-monster,<sup>1</sup> in the same way, the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of

1 The Greek word refers to any very large marine animal, real or mythical. See *Jonah* 1:17, where the Hebrew has *great fish*, but the Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Old Testament, uses the same word as

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

the earth. <sup>41</sup>At the Judgment, <sup>1</sup> the men of Nineveh will be raised along with this generation, and they will condemn it, because they repented at Jonah's preaching. Behold! Something greater than Jonah is here. <sup>42</sup>At the Judgment, the Queen of the South will be raised along with this generation, and she will condemn it, because she came from the limits of the earth to hear Solomon's wisdom. <sup>2</sup> Behold! Something greater than Solomon is here.

The Pharisees ignored Jesus' rebuke and continued to press him by demanding that he show a sign that he was from God. The irony of this request reflects how deadened their hearts were, as the whole confrontation started with Jesus doing a miracle. Essentially, the Pharisees were saying that miracles of healing or driving out demons weren't good enough. They wanted something big, and they wanted it on demand.

Jesus' restraint in not granting their request by making *them* blind and mute reflects God's patience with human pride and arrogance. It also shows that God wants people to voluntarily put their trust in him. He could easily coerce our submission and obedience by openly revealing himself, but that isn't what he wants.

Jesus first called the Pharisees wicked and adulterous. This was an ongoing theme in the Old Testament; *adulterous* referred to how the Israelites would turn away from God to idols. He then told them he would give them a sign, but one of his own choosing.

## ***Note on Jonah***

God called the prophet Jonah to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and to call its people to repent. Jonah wanted God to destroy the city, and he feared that the Ninevites might actually repent. Therefore, Jonah fled on a ship. God caused a storm, and the ship's crew threw Jonah overboard so that God would relent. God then retrieved Jonah using a large fish that swallowed him whole and carried him back to shore. This journey gave Jonah three days and nights to reflect on his rebellion. Jonah went to Nineveh and preached halfheartedly, but the Ninevites repented anyway, and God spared them.

Just as Jonah spent three days and nights in the fish, Jesus would spend three days and nights in the tomb. At the time, this statement meant nothing to the Pharisees, the crowds, and his disciples. However, Jesus was predicting his death, burial, and resurrection. After the Pharisees had conspired to kill him on the cross, he would spend three days and nights in the tomb, then he would rise from the dead.

Jesus began addressing the crowds. He warned that the Ninevites would condemn the current generation at the Judgment, because the Ninevites had repented, where the current generation hadn't. In the same way, the Queen of Sheba would condemn them at the

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*Matthew.*

1 Here, Jesus seems to speak about a specific time of judgment.

2 See *1 Kings* 10:1–13. Sheba was located in what is now Yemen in the far south of the Arabian Peninsula.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Judgment, because she recognized God's power working in Solomon.<sup>3</sup> The current generation was far more accountable, because Jesus' miracles were far greater than Jonah's preaching or Solomon's wisdom.

### ***An Unclean Spirit Returns (12:43)***

<sup>43</sup>“When an unclean spirit goes out from a man, it travels through dry places seeking rest and doesn't find it. <sup>44</sup>Then it says, ‘I will return to the house from which I went out!’ Having returned, it finds it unoccupied, having been swept and made tidy. <sup>45</sup>Then it goes and brings with itself seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and settle down there. So the final condition of that man becomes worse than the first. So it will be with this wicked generation as well.”

Jesus told a parable about a man from whom a demon had departed; the man did nothing to prevent the demon from returning, so the demon returned with seven more and possessed him again. The context of Jesus' parable is that he had driven a demon out of a man, but the crowds hadn't believed, in part because of the Pharisees. The man in the parable represented the crowds and all who saw Jesus' miracles. The miracles of healing had made their lives better for a time, but they hadn't responded, so worse things would come upon them.

Jesus prediction was true on two levels. Jesus was looking forward to the Jewish Rebellion, which would start in less than 40 years; the Romans would devastate Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, and the Temple, bringing great suffering. In addition, they would be raised at the Judgment and punished for their unbelief in the face of God's testimony.

The parable has a broader application as well. If we repent of a sin and don't then fill our lives with godliness, that sin will return and bring worse sins with it.

### ***Jesus' True Family (12:46)***

<sup>46</sup>As Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, behold! His mother and brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak with him. <sup>47</sup>Someone said to him, “Behold, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak with you.” <sup>48</sup>Jesus replied to the one who said this to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? <sup>50</sup>For whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven, they are my brother and sister and mother.”

As the confrontation with the Pharisees wound down, Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Matthew doesn't say what they wanted, but Jesus wasn't pleased by their visit. The fact that they were standing outside implies that Jesus was indoors; probably, he was teaching in the synagogue or in a large house, see 13:1.

Jesus refused to come out to them; instead, he said that his true family were those who did God's will. He was practicing his teaching in 10:37 about putting God before family.

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<sup>3</sup> See 1 Kings 3:4ff, where God gave Solomon a gift of wisdom, and 10:1ff, where the queen visited.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Chapter 13: Jesus Teaches About the Kingdom**

This is the third of five teaching sections; Jesus teaches about the kingdom using parables.

Note that Jesus preached countless times, and that most of his preaching involved parables. Matthew tells about a particular day that stood out, and he chooses a set of parables, and their explanations, that he considers important. Jesus also told many other parables during his ministry, and the Apostles heard them countless times.

### **Introduction (13:1)**

**13** <sup>1</sup>That day Jesus left the house and sat down beside the sea, <sup>2</sup>and many crowds gathered around him. Therefore, he got into a boat and sat down, and all the crowd stood upon the shore, <sup>3</sup>and he spoke to them in parables.

In this teaching section, Matthew relates some of the parables that Jesus used to teach about the kingdom. Parables are simple stories that have deeper symbolic meanings. Thus, a farmer scattering seed on four different types of soil represents Jesus preaching his message to the crowds, and individuals in the crowds fall into four different types who respond to the message differently.

Parables have advantages. People generally enjoy listening to a story and drawing their own conclusions, rather than hearing someone tell them what to think. In addition, when people hear a parable, they have to think about the story to uncover the meaning. This prevents them from immediately dismissing the message, as they tend to do with “this is the way it is” statements.

This teaching section is unique in that it's the only one that records Jesus preaching in public. In the other four sections, Jesus was either preaching to a crowd of his disciples or just to the Apostles. Jesus deliberately kept his public teaching mysterious; only after he had raised from the dead and ascended into Heaven did the Apostles begin to proclaim Jesus plainly.

Note that as Jesus taught these parables, he spoke one parable after another, without offering any explanation. The crowds, and Jesus' disciples, often had no idea what the parables meant.

Later that day, his disciples approached him privately and asked him to explain. Jesus went over each of the parables whose meaning wasn't apparent, laying out the symbolism and meaning.

Matthew, in order to avoid confusing his own audience, has Jesus telling a group of one to three parables to the crowds. Matthew then jumps ahead to the explanations; he then goes back to Jesus telling the next group.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Matthew notes that the crowd grew so large that Jesus couldn't easily be seen or heard, so he got into a boat to preach.

## **The Sower and the Four Soils**

### ***The Parable (13:4)***

<sup>4</sup>“Behold! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>As he was scattering seed, some fell upon the path, and birds came and devoured it. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on a rocky place that didn't have deep soil, and it immediately sprang up because it didn't have deep soil. <sup>6</sup>However, when the sun came up it was scorched, and because it didn't have roots, it withered. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it. <sup>8</sup>Other seed fell on good ground and kept on bearing fruit, <sup>1</sup> some one hundred times, some sixty times, some thirty times. <sup>9</sup>He who has ears, listen!”

Jesus told about a farmer who went out to sow seed in his field. The farmer simply took a handful of seed, perhaps wheat, from a bag and threw it; he continued to do this until his entire field was sown. The field had a footpath going across it, where the ground was trampled hard. One part of the field had a shallow layer of soil over hard rocky ground. Another part of the field was poorly prepared, with thorns growing in it. The rest of the field was in good condition.

Seed that fell on the path sat exposed, and birds followed the farmer and ate it. Seed on the shallow soil sprouted up quickly, but the plants couldn't put down roots, and the sun soon withered them. Seed falling among the thorns sprouted up, and the plants were healthy at first. However, the thorns competed with the plants so that they didn't mature and bear fruit. Seed falling on the good soil sprouted up and grew into healthy plants. Depending on the quality of the soil, each plant produced more seeds, up to 100 per plant.

### ***Why Parables? (13:10)***

<sup>10</sup>His disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” <sup>11</sup>Jesus responded to them, saying, “Because you have been given the knowledge of the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven, but it hasn't been given to them. <sup>12</sup>For whoever has, it will be given to him, and he will have an abundance, but however doesn't have, even what he has will be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup>Because of this, I speak to them in parables, so that seeing, they don't see, and hearing, they don't hear. <sup>14</sup>In them the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah is fulfilled that says,

‘Hearing, you <sup>2</sup> will hear and surely not understand,  
and seeing, you will see and surely not perceive.

<sup>15</sup>For the heart of this people has become dull,

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1 While grain doesn't bear fruit more than once, Jesus stretched here to treat the grain harvest like that of a tree that continues to bear fruit year after year.

2 *You* is plural; Isaiah was speaking to the Israelites.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

and their ears hear faintly,  
and they have closed their eyes;  
otherwise, they might see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand in their hearts  
and turn around, and I would heal them.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>16</sup>“Fortunate are you eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. <sup>17</sup>Amen, I tell you, many prophets and godly men longed to see what you see and to hear what you hear.

The disciples had spent hours listening to parables that they didn’t understand. Later that day, they asked Jesus why he was using parables instead of teaching plainly. As he responded, Jesus wanted his disciples to see things from a big-picture perspective.

Jesus wanted people to respond with faith. He gave his disciples increasing insight into his teachings because they responded to him with faith; this produced more faith in them. However, the majority of people didn’t respond with faith, so Jesus concealed his teachings from them, and what little interest they had soon faded.

Jesus called the knowledge of the kingdom a *mystery*. In ancient times, mystery religions involved secret teachings that leaders revealed only to those initiated into the religion. Often, a member ascended through levels; the leaders revealed more secrets at each level. Jesus had initiated his disciples, and they gained greater understanding as they walked with him. Note that, at this point, they hadn’t even grasped that Jesus would die, much less that he would rise from the dead.

Jesus then quoted from the prophet Isaiah. God, at the beginning of Isaiah’s ministry, told Isaiah to rebuke the Israelites for their faithlessness, even though God knew they wouldn’t repent. However, God knew that future generations would look back at these rebukes and take them to heart. God, through Isaiah, sowed seed that lay dormant for several generations; finally, that seed grew up and bore fruit, producing repentance among the Jews.

Jesus used parables because he knew that some in the crowds weren’t yet ready. If Jesus simply told them, “This is the way it is!” then they would reject him. However, Jesus knew that people like stories and puzzles, and that they remember them. They didn’t understand the parables at the time, but some remembered them and responded later.<sup>2</sup>

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1 *Isaiah* 6:9–10

2 In fact, that was my own experience. I read a parable from the Sermon on the Mount that stayed with me for years; finally, it moved me to read the New Testament.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Explanation of the Parable (13:18)***

<sup>18</sup>“Listen to the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup>For each of those who hear the message of the kingdom and don't understand, the Wicked One comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart; this is the one sown along the path.

“<sup>20</sup>The one sown on the rocky place, he hears the message and directly receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup>However, he doesn't have roots in himself; instead, he is fickle.<sup>1</sup> When affliction or persecution comes, it causes him to stumble directly.

“<sup>22</sup>The one sown among the thorns, he hears the message, and the worries of this age and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the message, and it becomes unfruitful.

“<sup>23</sup>The one sown on the good ground, he hears the message and understands; indeed, he then bears fruit and produces one hundred times, sixty times, thirty times.”

In the parable, the sower represents Jesus and the seed represents his message. The four soils represent four types of people and their hearts. The first have a hard heart; they reject or ignore what they hear. Satan then comes along and takes the message away, so that it has no chance to work.

The second have shallow hearts. They get excited about the positive aspects of the message; however, when any hardship comes, the excitement stops and so does their faith.

The third have distracted hearts. They hear the message and begin to apply it, and they grow. However, worries and the pursuit of success distract them, and their faith fades away.

The fourth have good hearts. They receive the message and continues to apply it. As their faith grows, it produces godliness. Jesus notes that the results vary from person to person, but they are all productive.

Of course, Jesus was intentionally simplistic in putting people into categories. He is telling us to examine our hearts to see where we are hardhearted or fickle and to work on it with God's help. In addition, thorns thrive in good soil; part of living a godly life is to constantly weed out worries and distractions so that they don't hinder our faith.

## ***Wheat and Darnel, Mustard Seeds, Leaven (13:24)***

### ***Note on Darnel***

Darnel is a weed that closely resembles wheat and grows in wheat fields. It competes with the wheat plants, thus reducing a field's yield; it's also mildly poisonous. People used it, in small amounts, as an intoxicant in bread and beer; however, too much could be fatal. As it grows, it can't be distinguished from wheat until the wheat buds. It has

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1 Literally, *for a season, temporary*. A person whose interests and commitments don't last.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

long roots, so pulling it up will destroy nearby wheat plants. Typically, farmers had to separate the darnel from the wheat after harvesting.

<sup>24</sup>Jesus set another parable before them, saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good grain in his field. <sup>25</sup>While the man slept, his enemy also sowed darnel in the midst of the wheat and left. <sup>26</sup>When the grass budded and flowered, then the darnel also became apparent. <sup>27</sup>The slaves of the house-master came and said to him, ‘Lord, you planted good seed in your field, didn’t you? How then do we have darnel?’ <sup>28</sup>He told them, ‘An enemy did this.’ Then the slaves said to him, ‘So, do you want us to go out and gather it?’ <sup>29</sup>He told them, ‘No, lest you uproot the wheat as you gather the darnel. <sup>30</sup>Let them grow together until the harvest. At harvest time, I will tell the harvesters, “First gather the darnel and bind it into bundles in order to burn it, then gather the wheat into my barn.””

<sup>31</sup>Jesus set another parable before them saying, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed <sup>1</sup> that a man takes and sows in his field. <sup>32</sup>Indeed, it’s very small among all the seeds, but when it grows, it’s very great among the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup>Jesus spoke another parable to them, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven <sup>2</sup> that a woman takes and hides <sup>3</sup> in three measures <sup>4</sup> of wheat flour until the whole is leavened.”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus said all this to the crowds in parables; without parables he told them nothing, <sup>35</sup>in order that what was spoken by the prophet would be fulfilled that says,

“I will open my mouth in parables,  
proclaiming things hidden from the foundation of the world.” <sup>5</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Then he left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples came to him saying, “Explain the parable of the field of darnel to us.” <sup>37</sup>Jesus replied to them, “The sower of good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>The field is the world, and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom, but the darnel are the sons of the Wicked One. <sup>39</sup>The enemy that sows them is the Slanderer, the harvest is an end of an age, and the harvesters are messengers.

<sup>40</sup>“Therefore, just as they gather the darnel and burn it in fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup>The Son of Man will send out his messengers, and they will gather all those who cause *people to* stumble and who practice lawlessness, <sup>42</sup>and they will throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place will be wailing and grinding of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the godly will shine forth in the kingdom of their Father. The one having ears, listen!

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- 1 Probably the black mustard, which can grow up to 8 feet tall in ideal conditions. It grows very rapidly, and birds will come and eat its seeds.
  - 2 See *Additional Information—Leaven* for a description of leaven.
  - 3 Here the leaven is mixed in with the flour so that it’s no longer visible. Jesus’ point is that the leaven does its work invisibly.
  - 4 Each measure was about three gallons.
  - 5 *Psalms* 78:2

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus told a parable about a wheat field in which an enemy sowed darnel; later, he explained the symbolism of the parable to his disciples and explained that it dealt with the end-time judgment. The parable addresses an important question, “Why does God tolerate the wicked?” The answer is that uprooting the wicked would also uproot the righteous. In 7:13–14, Jesus said that few would find the narrow gate; from this perspective, most people qualify as wicked. Imagine if 90% of the people on Earth suddenly disappeared. The result would be economic and social collapse. In addition, many people don’t repent until later in life. Finally, the Flood account in *Genesis* 6–11 recounts how God attempted to start over with an upright man; the result was that humankind became just as wicked as before.

Jesus also provided a vivid description of the fate of the wicked. He said that they would be thrown in a furnace to be burned up. However, they are not consumed; instead, they mourn and grieve.

This section also contains two other parables that Jesus didn’t explain. He compared the kingdom to a mustard seed, whose seeds are smaller than those of other garden plants in Galilee. However, they sprout within a day and rapidly grow to several feet tall in a few months, with large leaves and woody stems. Jesus said that the kingdom would start with just a few committed followers but would then grow explosively. See *Acts* 2:41, 4:4.

Some complain that a mustard plant isn’t large enough for birds to live in it. Perhaps Jesus was simply observing that small birds perched in the branches. We should forgive a preacher a bit of exaggeration.

Jesus also compared the kingdom to leaven. Just as a small amount of leaven can transform a large amount of dough, the kingdom would start as a small group of individuals, but they would spread their faith among the Jews and even among the Gentiles.

## **A Hidden Treasure, a Costly Pearl (13:44)**

<sup>44</sup>“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure chest hidden in a field that a man, having found it, hid. In his joy, he went and sold all that he had and bought that field.

<sup>45</sup>“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls. <sup>46</sup>When he found a very valuable pearl, he went out and sold everything he had and bought it.

These two parables both deal with objects of great value that represent the kingdom. However, the man who found the treasure box and the merchant are very different.

The man who found the treasure box was an ordinary laborer. Fields were inexpensive, in large part because a person only bought the right to the field for so many years. The Law said that every fifty years, the ownership of fields reverted to the hereditary owner—see *Leviticus* 25. This prevented the wealthy from accumulating land over time, at least in theory. However, ordinary people had few possessions. The man had to sell everything to scrape together

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enough to buy the rights to the field with its treasure chest; he then became wealthy. This man represents each of us; Jesus calls us to hand over our possessions and our lives to him, and in return we receive the riches of his blessings in this life and then eternal life. Wealthy people balk at this exchange, but this is the deceitfulness of wealth, see verse 13:22.

In ancient times, pearls were exceedingly expensive, more so than gems. Merchants were generally wealthy, as they had to have enough resources to maintain inventory and travel, and this merchant must have been exceedingly wealthy to contemplate buying a fine pearl. Even so, he had to sell all his considerable possessions to buy this exquisite pearl. The merchant doesn't represent a person; instead, it represents God himself. However, this raises the question, "How could God sell all his possessions?" The answer is that God gave up his Son on a cross for the sake of the kingdom. The meaning of this parable must have remained hidden until after Jesus' death and resurrection.

## **The Dragnet (13:47)**

<sup>47</sup>"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a dragnet thrown into the lake, and all kinds of *fish* are gathered in. <sup>48</sup>When it's filled, they pull it to the shore, sit down, and gather the good *fish* into a basket and throw the bad outside. <sup>1</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The messengers will come and separate out the wicked from the midst of the good, <sup>50</sup>and they will throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

This parable is similar to the wheat and the darnel. It reinforces the idea of the separation of the believers from the rest. It also repeats the vivid description of the fate of the wicked, where they are thrown in a furnace to be burned up but not consumed; instead, they mourn and grieve.

## **Summary (13:51)**

<sup>51</sup>"Did you understand these things?" They said to him, "Yes." <sup>52</sup>Then he said to them, "Because of this, every scribe instructed <sup>2</sup> in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a house-master who brings out of his treasury new and old."

<sup>53</sup>When Jesus had finished these parables, he went up from there.

Jesus wrapped up his explanations by checking that his disciples had understood. He then emphasized that his teaching expanded upon, rather than replacing, that of the Old Testament and the Law.

Jesus then moved on from the place, possibly Capernaum, where he had been teaching.

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1 Jesus used this odd phrasing for emphasis.

2 This is the verb form of the noun, *disciple*.

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## **Chapters 14–17: Late Ministry**

This narrative section describes the late part of Jesus' ministry. In the middle part, Jesus faced open hostility from the Pharisees, and they began to plot to kill him. Now, as this hostility continues to grow, Jesus withdraws from Galilee and heads north to the Gentile regions of Tyre, Sidon, and Caesarea Philippi. He continues to instruct his disciples and to prepare them for his death in Jerusalem and his resurrection.

Note that this section starts at 13:54.

### **Rejected in Nazareth (13:54)**

<sup>13:54</sup>Jesus came to his hometown and taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, “Where did he get this wisdom and the miracles? <sup>55</sup>This is the son of the woodworker, <sup>1</sup> isn't he? His mother is called Mary, and his brothers are Jacob, <sup>2</sup> Joseph, Simon, and Judas, aren't they? <sup>56</sup>All his sisters are among us, aren't they? Then where did he get all this?” <sup>57</sup>So they stumbled because of him. Then Jesus said to them, “A prophet isn't dishonored except in his hometown and in his house.” <sup>58</sup>He didn't do many miracles there, because of their unbelief.

Jesus returned to Nazareth, where he had lived until he started his ministry. His fellow townspeople lived up to the saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt,” and they rejected him in spite of the miracles he performed. This raises the question, “Why did Jesus do only a few miracles there?” One possibility is that only a few people asked.

Matthew notes that Jesus had four grown brothers and at least two sisters. Two of his brothers went on to write books of the New Testament. James became the leader of the Jerusalem church and wrote *James*. Judas wrote the short book *Jude*.

### **Herod Beheads John the Baptist (14:1)**

**14** <sup>1</sup>At that time, Herod the Tetrarch <sup>3</sup> heard the reports about Jesus, <sup>2</sup>and he said to his boys, <sup>4</sup> “This is John the Immerser, who was raised from the dead! Because of this, miraculous powers are working in him!”

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1 Justin Martyr, who grew up in Samaria, said that Jesus was a woodworker making plows and yokes. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 88, written between 155 and 167.) However, some argue for the less-used, more general meaning of this word and claim that Jesus was a stoneworker.

2 In most English translations, *James*

3 This is Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. While the Jews generally considered him a king, the Romans gave him a lesser title. See *Mark* 6:14, 22, which calls Antipas a king.

4 That is, to the slaves who attended him.



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<sup>3</sup>For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him away in prison because of Herodias the woman of Philip, his brother. <sup>4</sup>For John had said to him, “It isn't lawful for you to have her.” <sup>5</sup>Wanting to kill John, he was afraid of the crowd,<sup>1</sup> for they held that John was a prophet.

<sup>6</sup>On Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter danced in their midst and pleased Herod; <sup>7</sup>therefore, he promised, with an oath, to give her whatever she asked. Urged on by her mother, she said, “Give me, here, the head of John the Immerser upon a platter.” <sup>9</sup>The king was grieved, but because of the oaths and those reclining with him, he commanded that it be granted, <sup>10</sup>and he sent and beheaded John in the prison. <sup>11</sup>His head was carried in on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. <sup>12</sup>John's disciples took the corpse and buried it, then they came and reported to Jesus.

Matthew starts his discussion of the death of John the Baptist by noting that Herod Antipas was filled with superstitious fear after the fact, especially when he heard about Jesus doing miracles. Herod even told his personal servants that Jesus was really John raised from the dead.

Matthew then goes back to the origins of John's troubles with Herod. Herod had divorced his wife to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip—this was a different Philip from Philip the Tetrarch who ruled in Caesarea Philippi. John had rebuked Herod for this, and Herod, and more so Herodias, wanted to put John to death. However, Herod feared the common people, who held that John was a prophet. Therefore, Herod kept John in prison for over a year.

While John sat in prison, Herodias nursed a grudge against him. When Herod held a banquet for his court, Herodias' daughter danced before all the guests. She pleased Herod, and he offered to give her whatever she asked; the daughter, directed by her mother, asked for John's head on a platter. Herod was grieved, but he felt compelled to make good on his offer, and he had John beheaded and his head brought in on a platter. The girl gave John's head to her mother, but John's disciples retrieved his body and buried it.

A few days later, John's disciples reported about John's death to Jesus.

### **Jesus Feeds Five Thousand Men (14:13)**

<sup>13</sup>When Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. When the crowds heard this, they followed him on foot from the cities. <sup>14</sup>When he got out *of the boat*, he saw a large crowd. He felt compassion for them and healed their sicknesses.

<sup>15</sup>Evening<sup>2</sup> having come, his disciples came to him saying, “This place is desolate, and the hour is already past. <sup>3</sup> Send away the crowd, so that they may go out to the villages and buy themselves food. <sup>16</sup>But Jesus said to them, “They don't need to go. You give them *food* to eat.” <sup>17</sup>They said to him, “We

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1 That is, the common people.

2 To the Jews, *evening* had two meanings. The evening sacrifice was offered at the ninth hour; the first evening was the period from 3:00 PM until sunset. The second evening was the period from sunset until dark.

3 The disciples referred to the evening sacrifice.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

don't have anything here except five loaves and two fish.” <sup>18</sup>He said, “Bring them here to me.” <sup>19</sup>Having ordered the crowd to recline on the grass, he took the five loaves and the two fish. Looking up to the heavens, he blessed, and having broken the bread, he gave it to the disciples, and the disciples to the crowds. <sup>20</sup>They all ate and were satisfied, and they <sup>1</sup> picked up the abundance of broken pieces, twelve baskets <sup>2</sup> full. <sup>21</sup>Those who ate were about five thousand men, apart from women and children.

Jesus wanted to grieve over John, and he sought to find some privacy. However, circumstances prevented him.

He went with his disciples in a boat and headed for an isolated spot. Most likely, they headed southwest from Capernaum across the widest part of the Sea of Galilee to a spot north of Tiberias, perhaps five miles away. The crowds were able to walk around the lake and arrive ahead of him.

Jesus responded by showing compassion to the crowd and healing those who needed it. By the time he was done, darkness was only a few hours away, and his disciples realized that the crowd would go hungry if they didn't leave immediately. Jesus, however, realized that the crowd vastly outnumbered all the people living in the surrounding villages, and all of them couldn't possibly buy enough food. Therefore, Jesus told his disciples to feed the crowd. The disciples then admitted that they didn't have enough food even for themselves.

Jesus took what little they had, prayed, broke up the loaves of bread and the fish, and then handed the pieces to the disciples. The disciples then continued handing out pieces until everyone was well-fed.

For this distribution to have happened in a timely manner, the people in the crowd must have help distribute the pieces and watched as the pieces multiplied in their own hands. Afterwards, the disciples picked up leftovers. Each of them had a basket for carrying their possessions, and each of them ended up with a basketful.

### **Jesus Walks on the Lake (14:22)**

<sup>22</sup>Jesus immediately compelled the disciples to board the boat and to go ahead of him to the other side, while he sent away the crowds. <sup>23</sup>Having sent away the crowds, he went up on a hill by himself to pray. Evening having come, <sup>3</sup> he was alone there. <sup>24</sup>Now the boat was already a mile <sup>4</sup> from land, tossed by the waves, for the wind was against it.

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1 We may assume that the crowds ate and that the Apostles picked up the pieces.

2 This was a relatively small wicker basket, similar to a knapsack.

3 This is the second evening, after sunset.

4 Literally, *many stadia*. A stade was the length of a race course, about 1/8 of a mile. Based on a straight course back to Capernaum, the boat was likely just over a mile from shore.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>25</sup>In the fourth watch<sup>1</sup> of the night, Jesus went to them, walking on the lake. <sup>26</sup>The disciples, seeing him walking on the lake, were troubled, saying, “This is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>Jesus directly spoke to them, saying, “Be courageous! It’s me, don’t be afraid!”

<sup>28</sup>Rock responded to him, saying, “Lord, if it’s you, order me to come to you upon the water.” <sup>29</sup>Jesus said, “Come!” Rock climbed down from the boat onto the water and came toward Jesus, <sup>30</sup>but when he saw the strong wind, he became frightened. Beginning to be drowned,<sup>2</sup> he cried out saying, “Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and took hold of him, and he said to Rock, “Little-faith! Why did you waver?” <sup>32</sup>When he climbed into the boat, the wind stopped. <sup>33</sup>Those in the boat bowed down to him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

<sup>34</sup>Having crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret.<sup>3</sup> <sup>35</sup>The people of that place, having recognized him, sent out into all the neighboring areas, and they brought to him all those having ailments. <sup>36</sup>They implored him that they might touch the hem of his garments, and as many as touched him were saved.

After feeding the crowd, Jesus compelled the disciples to get back in the boat and return to Capernaum; Matthew doesn’t explain why the disciples didn’t want to go.<sup>4</sup> Jesus then dismissed the crowd. He then went up on a hill and began to pray; he remained there until after 3:00 AM.

Again, Jesus had tried to get away from the crowds only to be prevented. This time, he made time for himself to pray by staying up all night, knowing that the crowds would be back the next day. This again illustrates the non-stop pressure Jesus’ ministry put on him.

Meanwhile, the disciples were struggling with a headwind and were still out on the lake, well away from shore. Jesus, intending to meet them in Capernaum, decided to take a shortcut and walked across the lake. This may be the closest that Jesus came to using his powers for his own convenience. As he went, he came across the disciples in the boat. At first, they were terrified, thinking that they saw a ghost. Jesus assured them that it was only him.

Peter then impetuously asked that Jesus allow him to walk on the lake as well. When Jesus agreed, Peter headed toward him. However, when he reached Jesus, he began to have second thoughts and sank, and he cried out for help. Jesus grabbed him, pulled him up, and then admonished him for losing faith. We should keep in mind that Peter did manage to walk out to Jesus, and he then made it back to the boat.

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1 The night was broken into four watches; the fourth was 3:00 AM to 6:00 AM.

2 Literally, *sink down*. The Greek word refers to an ancient punishment of throwing a victim into the sea to drown them.

3 This was a district along the northwest shore of the lake containing Capernaum and Bethsaida.

4 *John* 6:15, written some 50 years later, says that the crowds wanted to force Jesus to become their king.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

This is the first of several incidents where Matthew puts Peter in a bad light. At the time Matthew wrote, Peter was the chief founder and leader of the Church. Matthew—and Peter as well—didn't want Christians to focus on Peter but on Jesus, so he emphasized his weaknesses to help the believers keep perspective. If Peter faltered in walking on water, we shouldn't criticize him until we have done it successfully ourselves.

When Jesus boarded the boat, the wind, which was strong enough to hold the boat back, suddenly stopped. Amazed, the Apostles had a moment of clarity; they worshiped and confessed that Jesus was the Son of God.

Having rowed back to Capernaum—Gennesaret was the small district on the northwest corner of the lake—crowds of people with problems formed again and asked simply to touch Jesus' clothing, and all who did so were healed.

## **Jesus Rebukes the Pharisees over Their Traditions**

### ***Accusation and Counter-accusation (15:1)***

15 <sup>1</sup>Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup>“Why do your disciples break the traditions of the elders? For they don't wash their hands when they eat bread.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus replied to them, saying, “And why do you break God's commands for the sake of your traditions? <sup>4</sup>For God said,

‘Honor your father and mother,’ <sup>1</sup>

and

‘The one who speaks evil of his father or mother must die the death.’ <sup>2</sup>

<sup>5</sup>But you say, ‘Anyone who says to his father or mother, “Whatever of mine that might benefit you is a gift,” he surely shall not honor his father or mother.’ So you cancel God's command for the sake of your tradition.

A delegation of Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to formally accuse Jesus of breaking the traditions. Up to this point, Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees had followed some triggering event. This time, the Pharisees' leadership sent a formal delegation to investigate Jesus.

Other Pharisees and scribes had returned from Galilee with stories of how Jesus had shown no regard for the Traditions or the Pharisees. The Pharisees viewed themselves as the guardians of the people, and they had concluded that Jesus' teaching was leading the people astray. Their leaders decided that they must formally confront Jesus so that they could take action against him.

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1 *Exodus 20:12*

2 *Exodus 21:17*; the odd wording comes from the original Hebrew.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

The specific tradition that the Pharisees used to accuse Jesus required that Jews wash their hands in a ritualized manner before they ate. However, the Law said *nothing* about washing one's hands before eating. The Law did require the priests to wash their hands and feet while ministering around the altar and the sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees created their hand-washing tradition based on their desire to imitate the cleanliness practices of the priests; they then forced all Jews to observe it.

Jesus didn't accept this tradition, and he thought that his disciples had done nothing wrong. Rather than disputing about this, he countered with another tradition that caused people to violate God's commands. This is an outline of what Jesus said.

- The Law required that a man fulfill his oaths made to God<sup>2</sup>
- A tradition allowed a man to make an oath dedicating part of his belongings as gift to God that he would give in the future; the man must not make use of the what he had dedicated until the gift was complete
- Furthermore, a man could dedicate *some* portion of his belongings as a future gift without specifying exactly *which* portion; therefore, until the man completed the gift, *all* his belongings were dedicated
- If the man's father or mother had needs, the tradition said he *must not* give them anything, because he would violate his oath

Of course, this was a legal trick used by the wealthy to avoid financial obligations. Perhaps the Pharisees used the example of withholding aid to parents only for argument's sake, and no one actually did it. Jesus declared that this tradition contradicted the fifth commandment that requires children to honor their parents.

## ***The Rebuke (15:7)***

<sup>7</sup>“Grifters! Isaiah correctly prophesied about you saying,

<sup>8</sup>“This people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts stay far away from me.

<sup>9</sup>They show reverence to me in vain,  
teaching human teachings as commandments.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Summoning the crowd, Jesus said to them, “Hear and understand! <sup>11</sup>It isn't what enters the mouth that makes a man common; <sup>4</sup> instead, that coming out of the mouth, this makes a man common.”

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1 See *Exodus* 30:17–21. Possibly, this was to wash off the blood of the sacrifices they offered before they touched anything else.

2 *Numbers* 30:2

3 *Isaiah* 29:13

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus then laid into the Pharisees. This is the first time that he called them hypocrites, a very strong accusation. Having quoted from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus then turned to the crowd and bluntly contradicted the Pharisees' tradition. Dirty hands touching food did not defile people; instead, the things people *said* defiled them.

## ***The Disciples' Reactions (15:12)***

<sup>12</sup>Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees stumbled when they heard the message?" <sup>13</sup>In reply Jesus said, "Every plant that isn't planted by my Heavenly Father will be pulled up by its roots. <sup>14</sup>Leave them! They are blind guides of the blind. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

<sup>15</sup>Rock responded and said to him, "Please explain this parable to us." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said, "Are you <sup>1</sup> still dull-minded about this? <sup>17</sup>You know that everything that enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is expelled into the toilet, don't you? <sup>18</sup>The things that proceed from the mouth come out of the heart, and these make a man common. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come wicked thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, perjuries, slanders. <sup>20</sup>These things make a man common, but eating with unwashed hands doesn't make a man common."

The disciples were shocked that Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites and that he had openly rejected the Traditions as human-made. Most Jews thought of the Pharisees as the religious authorities, even more than the chief priests, and the disciples still thought this as well. Jesus bluntly told them to abandon the Pharisees, comparing them to blind people leading others astray.

Jesus and the Pharisees viewed each other as false teachers who led people astray. The Jews had to answer the question, "Who's right, or are they both wrong?" The Pharisees had some 150 years of history on their side; Jesus had miracles on his. The bottom line question was, "Who is God backing?" The miracles clearly testified that it was Jesus.

Peter spoke up and asked Jesus to explain his teaching about the mouth. Note that Peter asked what the others were thinking. The Law had rules about which foods were clean and which were unclean, and Jews strictly observed them. The disciples were confused because Jesus seemed to contradict the food laws. Note, however, that Jesus was talking about eating with unwashed hands, not about eating prohibited foods. Jesus responded impatiently. Sinful words come from the heart and defile, but eating with unwashed hands means nothing.

## ***Jesus Withdraws from Galilee (15:21)***

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left there and withdrew to the parts around Tyre and Sidon.

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4 Figuratively, *unclean*. Holy things were set apart to God and must be kept clean; *common* things were assumed to be unclean or even defiled.

1 *You* is plural; Jesus responded to all the disciples.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus knew that his latest confrontation with the Pharisees had pushed them to their limit. While he was in Galilee, they could go to Herod and bring accusations, and Herod could arrest him, as he had John the Baptist. Therefore, Jesus left Galilee and headed northwest into Phoenicia; Tyre and Sidon were major cities of that Roman province. This had its own risks, so Jesus planned to keep a low profile and spend time teaching his disciples while the Pharisees stewed.

## **The Faith of the Foreign Woman (15:22)**

<sup>22</sup>Behold! A Canaanite woman from the region came forward and cried out, saying, “Lord! Son of David! Please have mercy on me! My daughter is badly demon-possessed.” <sup>23</sup>But Jesus didn't answer her a word, and his disciples approached him and kept asking him, “Please send her away, because she keeps crying out behind us!” <sup>24</sup>Jesus responded and said, “I wasn't sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

<sup>25</sup>She came and bowed down to him and said, “Lord, please help me!” <sup>26</sup>But Jesus responded and said, “It isn't good to take the children's bread and to throw it to the house-dogs.” <sup>1</sup> <sup>27</sup>So she said, “Yes, lord. For even the house-dogs eat from the crumbs falling from their lord's table.” <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus responded and said to her, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish!” So her daughter was healed from that hour.

A local woman disrupted Jesus' plan to maintain a low profile when she recognized him and began begging for help. Matthew called her a Canaanite, which emphasized that she was a Phoenician. Jesus tried to ignore her and kept walking. However, the woman followed him and kept on crying out and pleading, to the point where the disciples nagged Jesus to tell her to go away. Jesus simply told them that he was sent to minister only to the Jews. <sup>2</sup>

Finally, Jesus stopped, possibly because he had arrived at his destination. The woman took advantage; she fell face down before him and pleaded for help. Jesus said that helping her would be wrong. He made an insulting comparison, where the children represented the Jews and pet dogs the Gentiles.

The woman, however, made a very humble and clever reply. She agreed that Gentiles were no better than pet dogs, and that pet dogs ate scraps falling from the table. At this, Jesus relented and praised her faith; he also told her that he had granted her request. The woman took Jesus at his word, went away, and found that her daughter was healed.

This raises the question, “Why was Jesus so rude to her?” Jesus had no intention of doing miracles in the Gentile regions; he was there to avoid drawing attention that could lead to legal troubles. He could have simply sent her away, but he had compassion on her, and he saw that,

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1 Literally, *little dogs*.

2 See the section *Additional Information—Jesus Sent Only to the Jews* for more information.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

perhaps, she would respond with faith. Therefore, he tested her, and she responded with great humility and understanding.

Matthew's audience had to notice that Jesus had praised two Gentiles for their faith, while he called his Apostles, "Little-faiths."

## **Jesus Returns to Galilee (15:29)**

<sup>29</sup>Departing from there, Jesus came to the Lake of Galilee, and going up the hill, he sat down. <sup>30</sup>Many crowds came to him, bringing with them people who were lame, blind, crippled, mute, and many others. They laid them at his feet, and he healed them, <sup>31</sup>so that the crowd marveled, seeing the mute talking, cripples healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. So they praised the God of Israel.

Jesus returned to Galilee, but he ascended into the hills west of the lake, away from the towns. Crowds brought those had needs to him, and he healed them. The crowds responded better than before, as they saw the miracles and praised God.

## **Jesus Feeds Four Thousand Men (15:32)**

<sup>32</sup>Jesus summoned his disciples and said, "I feel compassion for the crowd, because they have stayed with me for three days already, and they don't have anything to eat. I don't want to send them away hungry, lest they become exhausted on the road." <sup>33</sup>His disciples said to him, "Where will we get so much bread to satisfy such a large crowd in this wilderness?" <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven, and a few fish." <sup>35</sup>Having directed the crowd to recline on the ground, <sup>36</sup>Jesus took the seven loaves and the fish and, having given thanks, he broke *them* and began giving them to the disciples, and the disciples to the crowds. <sup>37</sup>They all ate and were satisfied, and from the abundance of pieces the disciples picked up seven large baskets <sup>1</sup> full. <sup>38</sup>Those who had eaten were four thousand men, apart from women and children.

<sup>39</sup>Having sent away the crowds, Jesus got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

Once again, Jesus and his disciples found themselves in a desolate area with a hungry crowd. Again, Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd, but this time the disciples complained. Matthew doesn't comment on this, but their lack of faith, given that they had recently fed a larger crowd, is astonishing.

Jesus then went in a boat to Magadan. The exact location isn't know, but it's probably on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee, just north of Tiberias, near where Jesus fed the 5,000.

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1 These were large baskets that could hold a person, such as the one used to lower the Apostle Paul in Acts 9:25.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Jesus Confronted by Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1)**

**16** <sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and Sadducees<sup>1</sup> approached Jesus, testing him by asking him to show them a sign from Heaven. <sup>2</sup>Jesus responded and said to them, “When evening comes, you say, ‘Good weather, for the sky is red.’ <sup>3</sup>At dawn, ‘Today will be stormy, for the sky is red and gloomy.’ <sup>2</sup> Indeed, you know how to judge the face of the sky, but are you unable *to judge* that of the times? <sup>4</sup>Wicked and adulterous generation! It seeks a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” Then he left them and went away.

Previously, a delegation of Pharisees had come from Jerusalem to confront Jesus, and Jesus had rebuked them. Now, a delegation of Pharisees and Sadducees came to him; since they were working together, this delegation must have been sent by the Sanhedrin. The implication is that the Pharisees concerns about Jesus had risen to the point where they were cooperating with the Sadducees, which was unusual, and that the delegation had been waiting in Galilee for Jesus to return. Moreover, they had tracked Jesus down in a remote area. This explains, in part, why the crowds hesitated to respond to Jesus’ message; they were afraid of the religious authorities.

The Sanhedrin wanted a sign, clear evidence of Jesus’ God-given authority to conduct his ministry. Somehow, the religious leaders found that the miracles, mostly performed for the benefit of common people, were unworthy of being treated as signs. Perhaps this reflects the disregard of aristocrats and religious elites for commoners.

Jesus rebuked them and offered only the sign of Jonah, and he then walked away. His miracles were all the testimony the religious leaders needed, and they had rejected it. God’s plan was that their rebellion would overflow when they put Jesus to death, so that Jesus could bear away humankind’s sin and then rise from the dead. All this had to happen at the coming Passover Feast.

By dismissing the delegation, Jesus fully hardened their attitudes against him. When he next came to Jerusalem, he intended to push them over the top. In all this, Jesus was fully in charge, not a victim of circumstance or forces beyond his control.

## **Beware the Leaven of the Religious Leaders (16:5)**

<sup>5</sup>Having gone to the other side *of the lake*, the disciples neglected to bring bread. <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to them, “Watch out for and be alert against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees! <sup>7</sup>The disciples began to discuss among themselves, saying, “This is because we didn’t bring bread.” <sup>8</sup>Knowing this,

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1 The Greek indicates that the Pharisees and the Sadducees approached Jesus as members of a common group.

2 This weather observation was true only in Judah and Galilee.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus said, “Little-faiths! Why are you discussing among yourselves that you don't have bread? <sup>9</sup>Do you not yet understand nor remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you picked up <sup>10</sup>nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you picked up? <sup>11</sup>How don't you understand that I'm not talking to you about bread? But be alert against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” <sup>12</sup>Then they realized that he didn't say to be alert about the leaven of bread but against the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Jesus took his disciples away from the delegation of religious leaders, possibly to the north shore of the lake, see verse 13. He had again pushed the religious leaders to their limits, and he wanted to get beyond their reach.

The disciples forgot to bring supplies for the trip. When Jesus warned them against the leaven of the religious leaders, the disciples began to discuss the lack of bread; they were probably blaming each other for the oversight. Jesus saw this and rebuked them. Time was running out, and they were still spiritually dull. The disciples needed to step up and comprehend what was happening. Twice he had miraculously provided bread, but they still failed to grasp what this meant. After Jesus repeated his admonition about leaven, they finally understood that Jesus was warning them against the teachings, and especially the mindsets, of the religious leaders.

### **Jesus Again Withdraws from Galilee (6:13)**

<sup>13</sup>Jesus came to the parts around Caesarea Philippi.

Jesus headed north outside Galilee and stopped near Caesarea Philippi in the territory of Philip the Tetrarch. Near the city was a large rock cliff with three Greek temples at its base; one temple to the emperor Augustus and the Greek god Pan was built near a stream that came out of a cave in the cliff. This cave was called the Gates of Hades, <sup>1</sup> and people believed that it was a gateway to the underworld.

Jesus stopped here with his disciples to instruct them, as they looked at the crowds of Gentile worshipers.

### **Who Is Jesus? (16:13b)**

Jesus was asking his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” <sup>14</sup>They said to him, “Some say John the Immerser, others Elijah, others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” <sup>15</sup>He said to them, “But who do you say I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Rock replied, saying, “You are the Anointed, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup>Jesus replied to him, saying, “You are fortunate, Simon Son of Jonah, <sup>2</sup> for flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you but my Father who is in Heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you that you are Rock, and

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1 The location is now called Banias, based on the Greek god Pan.

2 Literally, *bar-jonah*. *bar* is the Aramaic word for *son*, similar to the Hebrew word *ben*.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

upon this cliff<sup>1</sup> I will build my Assembly, and the gates of Hades won't prevail against it. <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind upon the earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you set loose upon the earth will be set loose in Heaven. <sup>20</sup>Then he ordered the disciples that they tell no one that he was the Anointed.

Jesus wanted his disciples to make the leap of faith that he was the Christ. The disciples had begun to realize this and even say so in moments of amazement, but he wanted them to fully acknowledge it.

He asked them a leading question, and then he asked them bluntly who he was. Peter stepped up and said that Jesus was the Christ. Jesus praised Peter and then made a wordplay on his nickname. Peter meant a rock or perhaps a boulder, but upon a rock cliff Jesus would build his Church. The Greek word for *church* is a compound word that literally means *called out*; however, it refers to the assembly of the citizens of a Greek city. Jesus meant the assembly of the citizens of his kingdom, which he was about to establish.

This raises the question, "What did Jesus mean by 'On this rock cliff'?" Here are two options.

Jesus meant that he would found his Church on Peter. The problem with this interpretation is that a *rock* or *boulder* and a *rock cliff*, such as the one they were looking at, were two different words and two different things.

Jesus meant what Peter had just said, that is, that Jesus was the Christ. This seems obvious to us, but to the disciples, this was a revelation. This option seems more likely, given the context.

The imagery of the massive rock cliff, the cave with a stream running from it, and the rampant Gentile worship must have made a strong impression on the disciples. Greek culture and religion dominated the world beyond the borders of Judea and Galilee, and the Romans dominated politically. Yet not even death would withstand the citizens of Jesus' kingdom as they proclaimed the Gospel.

Jesus then told Peter that he would give him the keys to the kingdom. The binding/loosing language was a common way of expressing authority. Jesus was telling Peter that he would be given the message that opened the way to the Kingdom. See *Acts 2:36ff* for a possible fulfillment of Jesus' words.

Jesus then ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Claiming to be the Christ would bring charges of heresy from the Jews, and the Romans might treat it as an act of rebellion. Jesus needed to fulfill the "sign of Jonah" before his disciples could openly proclaim him.

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1 The Greek word is the feminine form of rock, meaning a cliff, bedrock, or other large rock formation.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Jesus Predicts His Death and Resurrection (16:21)**

<sup>21</sup>From then on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go away to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, die, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup>Rock took him aside and started to rebuke him, saying, “Mercy to you, Lord! This surely shall not happen to you! <sup>23</sup>Jesus turned and said to Rock, “Get behind me, Adversary! You are a cause for me to stumble, for you don't set your mind on the things of God but the things of man!”

<sup>24</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to come after me, he must deny<sup>1</sup> himself, take up his cross, and follow me! <sup>25</sup>For whoever wants to save his soul will lose it, but the one who loses his soul for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup>For what does it benefit a man if he gains the entire world and loses his soul? <sup>27</sup>For the Son of Man is about to enter the glory of his Father and his messengers, and then

‘He will repay each one according to their actions.’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Amen, I tell you, some of those who are standing here surely won't taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Up to this point, Jesus had hinted at his being the Christ and that he must die on the cross, and his disciples had slowly come to understand the first part. Now that he had prodded them to say, “You are the Christ,” he wanted them to understand also what that meant for him.

The disciples listened as he told them about going to Jerusalem, the religious leaders mistreating him, but they stopped listening on “die” and didn't hear anything about “rising on the third day.” Peter told Jesus what they were all thinking, so Jesus rebuked him in the harshest terms. The only difference between Peter and the other disciples was that Peter had the courage to speak up.

Jesus then warned them about the costs of following him. First, here is what Jesus *didn't* mean. The easy interpretation is to say that *deny oneself* means to make sacrifices and that *taking up the cross* represents bearing burdens. That interpretation doesn't fit Jesus' words nor the context.

Jesus was telling his disciples that, just as he was about to deny his own emotions and desires and allow himself to be crucified, so all his followers would have to do the same. Taking up the cross was the first step of crucifixion, not simply carrying a burden around. While Jesus employed hyperbole by implying that all his followers would die this way, early Church tradition says that only John avoided a violent death. It also says that Peter was forced to watch as the Romans crucified his wife and that he then volunteered to be crucified head down. Many other Christians have also chosen a violent death, rather than deny Jesus.

Jesus then warned about the costs of not following him along that path. A person who trades their soul for everything the world has to offer makes a poor bargain. Jesus was going to die,

1 The Greek word means *reject* or *refuse to acknowledge*; it doesn't mean *do without*.

2 See *Psalms* 62:12, *Jeremiah* 32:19.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

but he also would rise after three days and then ascend to Heaven. On the day of judgment, he would then give to each one what their actions deserved.

Jesus then said that some of them would live to see him coming in his kingdom. One explanation is that all these things would soon happen, apart from the judgment. Judas Iscariot, however, would kill himself on the day Jesus died, so he wouldn't see it. What Jesus meant by, "until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom," is a complex topic, but Jesus clearly meant that his kingdom would soon be established.

## **Jesus Revealed in Glory (17:1)**

**17** <sup>1</sup>Six days later, Jesus took Rock, Jacob, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup>He was transfigured<sup>1</sup> before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothing became white as light, <sup>3</sup>and behold! Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking together with Jesus. <sup>4</sup>Rock responded and said to Jesus, "Lord! It's good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still talking, behold! A bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold! A voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I delight. Listen to him!"

<sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were very frightened. <sup>7</sup>Jesus approached and touched them, saying, "Get up, and don't be frightened!" <sup>8</sup>Lifting up their eyes they saw no one except Jesus alone. <sup>9</sup>As they went down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man rises from the dead!"

Jesus and his disciples had remained in the area around Caesarea Philippi, and a few days later he took Peter, James, and John on a side trip. The mountain Matthew refers to is probably Mount Hermon, which was just north of the city. It's over 9,000 feet tall and is the highest point in the region.

These three were Jesus' inner circle among the Apostles, and he apparently wanted to give them some special instruction. The religious leaders had demanded a sign and Jesus had refused; now, he was going to give one to his inner group.

When they reached the top, Jesus' appearance suddenly transformed to that of a Heavenly being. Next, Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus. Moses and Elijah had both met with God on Mount Horeb in the Sinai desert,<sup>2</sup> and now Jesus' three disciples were having a mountaintop experience of their own.

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1 *Transfigured* means to be transformed into a more exalted appearance.

2 See *Exodus 3, 2 Kings 19*.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

The disciples were stunned, and Peter blurted out nonsense about building huts for Jesus and the two prophets. He was likely thinking of the Feast of Tabernacles, where every Jewish man built a temporary hut and lived in it for a week.

While Peter was still talking, God spoke from a cloud that hovered over them. He reinforced the fact that Jesus was his son; moreover, the disciples needed to *listen* to him. The disciples responded by falling on the ground, terrified. When Jesus came to them and told them to get up and stop being frightened, everything was back to normal. As they walked down the mountain, Jesus told them to keep the vision to themselves until he raised from the dead. The disciples still didn't understand what that meant.

## **What About Elijah? (17:10)**

<sup>10</sup>His disciples asked him a question, saying, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”  
<sup>11</sup>Jesus responded saying, “Indeed, Elijah comes first and will restore everything, <sup>12</sup>but I tell you that Elijah already came, and they didn't recognize him; instead, they did to him what they wanted. In this way the Son of Man also is destined to suffer by them.” <sup>13</sup>Then the disciples understood that Jesus was talking to them about John the Immerser.

As the four of them walked down the mountain to rejoin the others, the disciples asked Jesus about the prophecies in *Malachi* about Elijah coming to restore godliness in the nation. Jesus had already preached about this—see 11:7ff, but the disciples were finally processing that Jesus was the Christ, and they were trying to put this in perspective with what they had been taught all their lives. In addition, they still hadn't really accepted that Jesus would soon die, and they were trying to poke holes in his claim.

Jesus told them that Elijah would come first; in fact, he had already come. However, the religious leaders hadn't recognized him and had rejected him. Furthermore, the religious leaders were about to treat Jesus the same way. The disciples then realized that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come, and that Herod had killed him. Their attempt to poke holes in Jesus' claims had backfired.

## **The Epileptic Boy (17:14)**

<sup>14</sup>When they came to the crowd, a man approached him and knelt down before him, <sup>15</sup>saying, “Lord! Please have mercy on my son, because he is moonstruck <sup>1</sup> and suffering badly! For he falls into the fire and often in the water. <sup>16</sup>I brought him to your disciples, and they weren't able to heal him.” <sup>17</sup>Jesus responded, saying, “O unbelieving and perverse generation! How long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring him here to me!” <sup>18</sup>Jesus rebuked him, <sup>2</sup> the demon came out of him, and the boy was healed from that hour.

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1 The ancient term for epilepsy. The ancients blamed the Moon for various ailments.

2 Jesus apparently addressed the youth in such a way that the demon was forced to leave.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>19</sup>Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why were we unable to cast it out?” <sup>20</sup>Jesus said to them, “Because of your little-faith. Amen, I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there!’ and it will move.” [Verse 21 was a late addition to the text and is omitted.]<sup>1</sup>

Jesus and his inner group came to a crowd. We may assume that the other disciples were among the crowd when a man approached him and knelt down. The man’s son was suffering from epilepsy; the ancients thought that the Moon’s influence caused seizures. The man then said that Jesus’ disciples had tried to heal the boy and had failed.

Jesus’ response shows how exasperated he felt; Matthew doesn’t tell us exactly why or with whom. Jesus then had the boy brought to him, and he expelled what Matthew considered to be a demon. The ancients blamed many ailments, especially ones like epilepsy, on demons, and Matthew assumed that a demon was involved. Possibly, Jesus simply healed the boy’s condition.

When the disciples asked Jesus why they had failed, Jesus told them it was because of their tiny faith. Even faith as small as a mustard seed could command Mount Hermon to move.

### **Jesus Again Predicts His Betrayal, Death, and Resurrection (17:22)**

<sup>22</sup>While they were gathered together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about <sup>2</sup> to be handed over into the hands of men, <sup>23</sup>they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.” And they were very grieved.

Jesus again returned to Galilee; it was early 30, and Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem. He again told his disciples of his impending death and resurrection. This time, the disciples responded by grieving, indicating that the message was starting to sink in.

### **Paying the Temple Tax (17:24)**

<sup>24</sup>When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the Didrachma <sup>3</sup> approached Rock and said, “Your teacher pays the Didrachma, doesn’t he?” <sup>25</sup>Rock said, “Yes.” When he came into the house, Jesus anticipated him and said, “Rock, what do you think? From whom do the kings of the earth receive duties and taxes, from their sons, or from others?” <sup>26</sup>Rock said, “From others.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free *from taxes*. <sup>27</sup>However, so that we don’t cause them to stumble, go to the

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1 In *Mark* 9:29, Jesus responded to the disciples question by saying that such healings required prayer. Later, editors added *and fasting* to that verse. Here, editors added verse 21 based on the edited verse in *Mark*.

2 Or, *is destined*.

3 The tax each Jewish man paid to maintain the Temple, it was roughly two denarii but it had to be paid with a didrachma coin. See the section *Additional Information—Ancient Money* for details.

4 Or, *strangers*. The word means *belonging to another*.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

lake and cast a fishhook. Take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater.<sup>1</sup> Take it and give it to them on behalf of me and you.”

The collectors of the Temple tax approached Peter and asked if Jesus paid the Temple tax. The Law established the Temple tax.<sup>2</sup> It required every Jewish male from 20 to 50 years old to pay what was originally half a shekel of silver for the maintenance of the Tent of Meeting and later the Temple. Jews took this obligation seriously, and every year money flowed into the Temple from all over the Roman Empire.

By the first century, the chief priests only accepted a didrachma coin that weighed about half a shekel. This was roughly equivalent to two Roman denarii and equal to two day’s wages for a laborer. Since didrachmas were somewhat rare, two men often gave a stater, which was worth two didrachmas.

That the collectors of the tax approached Peter and asked about Jesus is odd; they certainly didn’t go around Galilee and ask every Jewish man if he had paid. Most likely, they were looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus.

When Peter returned to the house, Jesus was waiting for him. Jesus made the point that kings only collected taxes from their subjects and not from their own family. By this, Jesus implied that, as God’s Son, he was exempt from the Temple tax. However, to avoid offending the authorities, he and Peter would pay.

Jesus sent Peter out to the lake and told him to catch a fish. Peter would find a stater, enough to pay both their taxes, in the fish’s mouth. Matthew leaves unsaid that the miracle occurred just as Jesus said it would.

## **Chapter 18: Jesus Teaches about Relationships in the Church**

This is the fourth of five teaching sections; Jesus teaches about different aspects of relationships in the Church.

### **Become Like Children (18:2)**

**18** <sup>1</sup>At that hour, the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who, then, is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”

<sup>2</sup>Jesus called a child and set him among them. <sup>3</sup>He said, “Amen, I tell you, unless you are changed and become like this child, you surely shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>4</sup>So, whoever humbles himself like this child, this one will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>5</sup>The one who receives this child in my name, receives me.

1 A Greek coin worth two didrachmas.

2 See *Exodus* 30:11ff.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

The Apostles approached Jesus and asked about how they would be ranked in the coming kingdom. Jesus sternly warned them about their attitudes; they wouldn't be *in* the kingdom unless they changed. Ancient societies were very concerned about rank and status, and people considered children to be very lowly. The disciples must humble themselves like children, who unquestioningly depend on their parents and aren't concerned about status. Furthermore, Jesus welcomed the lowly, even children, and the disciples should do the same.

## **Stumbling Blocks (18:6)**

<sup>6</sup>“The man who causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would benefit him that a donkey’s millstone<sup>1</sup> was hung around his neck and he was drowned<sup>2</sup> in the depths of the sea. <sup>7</sup>Woe to the world because of causes of stumbling! For it’s inevitable that causes of stumbling come, yet woe to the man through whom causes of stumbling come!

<sup>8</sup>“If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away from you! It’s better for you to go into life crippled or lame than, having two hands or two feet, to be thrown into the eternal fire. <sup>9</sup>And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away from you! It's better for you to enter life one-eyed than, having two eyes, to be thrown into the fiery Valley of Hinnom. <sup>10</sup>Look upon one of these little ones without showing contempt! For I tell you that their messengers in Heaven always see the face of my Father in Heaven.

Jesus continued to refer to the child he had placed among the disciples; the child represented all believers, who would be lowly in the eyes of the world.

Casting a criminal into the sea was a rare and exceedingly cruel punishment; the idea was that the victim’s soul would never find rest in the Underworld. Jesus said that those who tempted or offended a lowly believer would be better off suffering this punishment than facing judgment.

The teachings about self-mutilation are overflowing with hyperbole; Jesus did not authorize anyone to mutilate themselves. However, Jesus wanted his disciples to take dealing with sin as matters of eternal life or death that might require extreme measures. Extreme measures today might mean getting rid of a computer, openly confessing to a minister or counselor, or joining a twelve-step group.

Jesus said that the end-time punishment involved eternal fire; that is, that the fires of Hinnom weren't temporary. We will look at this subject in more depth in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant below.

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1 That is, a millstone too large to moved by hand.

2 The Greek word refers to an ancient form of execution.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **God Values the Individual (18:12)**

<sup>12</sup>“What do you think? If a man has one hundred sheep and one wanders away from him, he will leave the ninety-nine on the hill and go and find the one that wandered away, won’t he? <sup>13</sup>And when he finds it, amen, I tell you that he rejoices over the one more than over the ninety-nine that didn’t wander. <sup>14</sup>So, it isn’t the will of your Father in Heaven <sup>1</sup> that one of these little ones perish.

Jesus compared God to a shepherd who had a sheep wander off. Just as a shepherd leaves the flock to find the one sheep, God also seeks those who go astray. Furthermore, God doesn’t hold a grudge against the one that went astray; instead, he rejoices that he has them back.

The lesson is that Christians should take special interest in other believers who are weak or wavering in their faith, not looking down on them because of their struggles, but supporting them and rejoicing when they overcome.

## **Church Discipline (18:15)**

<sup>15</sup>“If your brother sins against you, go! Expose <sup>2</sup> him, between you and him alone! If he listens, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup>But if he won’t listen, take along with you another one or two, so that

‘By the mouths of two or three witnesses every word is established.’ <sup>3</sup>

<sup>17</sup>If he ignores them, tell the church. If he even ignores the church, he must be to you <sup>4</sup> like one of the Tribes and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Amen, I tell you, whatever you bind upon the earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you set loose on the earth will be set loose in Heaven.

<sup>19</sup>Amen, I tell you again, that if two of you agree on the earth about any matter about which you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there among them.”

Jesus provided practical directions on how a believer should address another believer who had sinned against them.

- Go! The person wronged must immediately take action. Waiting, for any reason, isn’t acceptable.
- Expose the sin privately. No third parties allowed.
- If the person who sinned repents, that is the end of it.
- Otherwise, take along one or two others. Again, waiting isn’t acceptable. Also, a whole committee of people isn’t acceptable.
- If the person who sinned repents, that is the end of it.

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1 Literally, *the will before your Father in Heaven*. In Greek, this expresses the idea in a formal and reverent manner.

2 The Greek word also means *convict, admonish*. Matthew probably had all three ideas in mind.

3 *Deuteronomy 19:15*

4 Less literally, *consider him*.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

- Otherwise, bring the person who sinned before the church. Matthew probably had in mind the house-church in which the person fellowshiped.
- If the person who sinned repents, that is the end of it.
- Otherwise, the church is to shun the person who sinned, meaning having no social interactions with the person until they repent. Jews didn't socialize with Gentiles or tax collectors.

This is hard teaching to practice. See the section *Additional Information—Approaching a Believer Who Sinned Against You* for some ideas.

Jesus used the “bind/set loose” formula to express that the church leaders have authority to enforce discipline. He went further to say that God would generally affirm the decisions made by church leaders. In context, Jesus was talking to the Apostles in private about Church discipline. He didn't intend to say that any two or three believers have unlimited authority to do as they please.

Note that, under the Law of Moses, the Israelites had various punishments they could inflict on those who sinned. In fact, many violations of the Law required the death penalty. Lesser violations, such as disorderly conduct, could involve up to forty lashes with a whip. Jesus, however, allowed church leaders only to expel those who sinned. The church was to trust God to deal with those outside the church. See *1 Corinthians* 5:9–13, especially verse 13, for the Apostle Paul's take on this.

## **Parable of the Unmerciful Slave (18:21)**

<sup>21</sup>Then Rock approached Jesus and said to him, “Lord, how many times will my brother sin against me, and I will forgive him? Up to seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “I tell you, not up to seven times but up to seventy and seven times.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>23</sup>“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves.”<sup>2</sup> As he began to settle accounts, one owing ten thousand *silver bars*<sup>3</sup> was brought to him. <sup>25</sup>Not having enough to repay, the king ordered him to be sold, along with his woman, children, and as much as he had, and to be repaid. <sup>26</sup>The slave fell and bowed down to him, saying, ‘Please be patient with me! I will repay everything to you.’ <sup>27</sup>The lord felt compassion for that slave, released him, and forgave him the loan.

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1 See *Genesis* 4:24. Whether *and* refers to multiplication or addition is unclear; that is, 77 or 490. Most likely, neither Jesus nor Lamech had any arithmetic in mind; it just meant to stop counting.

2 Ancient kings used slaves to conduct their business. These slaves could be almost as powerful as the king himself.

3 Literally, 10,000 talents' that is, 750,000 pounds of silver. See the section *Additional Information—Ancient Money* for details.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>28</sup>“That slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him one hundred denarii. <sup>4</sup> The slave seized him and choked him, saying, ‘Repay what you owe!’ <sup>29</sup>Then falling down, the fellow slave pleaded with him, saying, ‘Please be patient with me! I will repay everything to you.’ <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what happened, they were very distressed and went and explained to their lord all that happened.

<sup>32</sup>“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘Wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt after you begged me. <sup>33</sup>You also ought to forgive your fellow servant, just as I showed mercy on you, shouldn’t you?’ <sup>34</sup>In anger, his lord handed him over to the torturers until he repaid all that he owed. <sup>35</sup>In this way, my Father in Heaven also will do to you, if each of you don’t forgive your brothers from your hearts.”

In the parable, the king represents God, and the slaves represent believers. The debt that one slave owed represents sin. The amount of the debt combines the largest number, 10,000, with the largest unit of money, 75 pounds of silver—in 2020, this amounted to around \$188,000,000—to illustrate how much sin each individual commits in the lifetimes. Even to Roman aristocrats and to ancient kings, this was a substantial amount. To people who made from \$2 to \$20 a day, this represented a staggering, impossible amount. In the same way, our sin would bring upon us a staggering, impossible judgment if not for Jesus.

Having found a slave who owed him such a debt, the king decided to sell him, his family, and his possessions to cover the debt. Altogether, they might have brought one silver bar to the king. However, the slave pleaded with the king, and the king, feeling pity, forgave the debt.

Note that the slave, however, didn't beg for *forgiveness*. He asked for *patience*, so he could repay the king. The slave was completely out of touch with the reality of his situation. This explains why he immediately went after a fellow slave who owed him money; he was looking for a down-payment to the king. To the slave, 100 days wages was a lot of money, but it was a tiny amount compared to what he owed his master. The unmerciful slave, deluded and filled with pride rather than humility, made a disastrous mistake.

The king was angry with the slave. Instead of selling him, he put him in prison to be tortured until he repaid everything. Debtor's prisons were common in ancient times and left the debtor with no way of paying the debt short of selling themselves or family members. Since the man was already a slave and he owed an enormous debt, he would remain there for the rest of his life. Apart from the Jews, torture was also common; it was used to extract information or as a punishment, and it was cruelly efficient.

The clear lesson is that God won't tolerate believers, to whom he has forgiven much, who refuse to forgive other believers over relatively trivial matters. In addition, no amount of godliness on our parts will ever compensate God for our sin. We are saved by God's mercy alone, and this leaves no room for pride or a judgmental, unforgiving spirit.

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<sup>4</sup> 100 days wages, or about \$245 in 2020.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Finally, Jesus made a powerful statement about the nature of eternal punishment. Some claim that the eternal fires of judgment will consume unbelievers in a moment. Jesus denied this; in fact, taking this parable alone leads to the conclusion that unbelievers will be tormented for eternity. However, we must take into account all the Bible's teaching about judgment; for example, *Luke 12:47–48*,

That slave who knew his lord's will and did not prepare nor do his will be beaten much, but the one not knowing, having done *things* worthy of blows, will be beaten little.

and *The Revelation 20:13*,

and the sea gave up the dead in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and each one was judged according to their deeds.

These verses indicate that God will punish people to the degree that they sinned against him, which reflects God's justice. We must accept that we don't know the details of eternal punishment and content ourselves with understanding that God and his judgment are both just and greatly to be feared.

## **Conclusion (19:1)**

**19** <sup>1</sup>When Jesus finished these teachings, he departed from Galilee and came to the border<sup>1</sup> of Judea across the Jordan.

After Jesus wrapped up his teaching, he led his disciples out of Galilee to Judea. Jesus apparently crossed the Jordan River into Perea as he approached Judea at its northeast corner. He was avoiding meeting the religious leaders on their own turf. Other Jews traveling south to Jerusalem did this to avoid passing through Samaria.

## **Chapters 19–23: End Ministry**

This narrative section describes the end of Jesus' ministry. In his late ministry, Jesus had an escalating series of conflicts with the Pharisees and then with the full religious leadership of the Jews. During that time, he took refuge in the Gentile regions to the north in order to prevent the conflicts from coming to a head. Now, having returned to Judea, Jesus enters Jerusalem days before the Passover Feast and repeatedly confronts the religious leaders.

Matthew wants to make clear that God and Jesus were in control, and that Jesus wasn't swept up by events or overcome by the religious authorities. Instead, Jesus forced the religious leaders to act, knowing that they would kill him. He did this to fully expose their guilt and to fulfill God's plan for his death and resurrection to bring salvation to humankind.

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<sup>1</sup> Typically, *region*; however, the Greek word primarily means border or *boundary*. The idea of *region* comes from the area between borders. Jesus had approached Judea from Perea.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Healing Crowds (19:2)**

<sup>19:2</sup>Large crowds followed Jesus, and he healed them there.

Matthew notes that large crowds were following Jesus. The Passover Feast was near, and many Jews were traveling to Jerusalem, including some who lived in foreign countries and were making a pilgrimage. Jesus had become famous, and the crowds followed him as an enormous entourage.

## **Divorce (19:3)**

<sup>3</sup>Pharisees approached him, testing him and saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his woman for any reason?” <sup>4</sup>Jesus responded, saying, “You have read that he who created from the beginning

‘made them male and female,’ <sup>1</sup>

haven’t you? <sup>5</sup>And he said,

‘Because of this, a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his woman, and the two will become one flesh.’ <sup>2</sup>

<sup>6</sup>So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, a man must not separate!”

<sup>7</sup>The Pharisees said to him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a divorce document and to divorce her?” <sup>8</sup>Jesus said to them, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your hard-heartedness; it wasn’t this way from the beginning. <sup>9</sup>I tell you that he who divorces his woman, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery.

Some Pharisees tested Jesus by asking him about divorce, one of their favorite topics of debate. In this case, the test was more to see if he would answer intelligently. Note that these Pharisees were probably of the poor and tolerant type, rather than the wealthy and confrontational type that hounded Jesus in Galilee. Among the Pharisees, the opinions ranged from only in case of adultery to the wife burning breakfast.

Jesus responded that God joined a man and a woman, and that people must not break that bond. Basically, Jesus said God banned divorce.

The Pharisees challenged this argument, claiming that Moses commanded that a man divorcing his wife give her a divorce certificate—in reality, Moses only *acknowledged* divorce certificates as he established another rule about divorce.

Jesus said that their argument was weak. God, through Moses, only tolerated divorce because the Israelites were hard-hearted and couldn’t accept a ban on divorce. However, a

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1 *Genesis* 1:27

2 *Genesis* 2:24

3 See *Deuteronomy* 24:1.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

man who divorced his wife, apart from discovering that his bride wasn't a virgin, and later remarried, committed adultery.

While not banning divorce, Jesus said that a married person must not marry someone else. He also came close to banning men from having more than one wife.

See the section *Additional Information—Divorce, Women's Rights, Sexual Sin* for more in-depth discussion about divorce certificates and rules about virgins.

The Pharisees apparently went away, probably disagreeing with Jesus' reasoning but giving him credit for his skills.

### ***The Disciples' Response (19.10)***

<sup>10</sup>His disciples said to him, "If the relationship between a man with his woman is like this, it isn't beneficial to marry!" <sup>11</sup>Jesus said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but *only* those to whom it had been given. <sup>12</sup>For some are eunuchs<sup>1</sup> who were born this way from their mother's womb, and some are eunuchs who were made eunuchs<sup>2</sup> by people, and some are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs because of the Kingdom of Heaven. The one able to accept *it*, let him accept *it*!

Jesus' disciples, however, were deeply offended by Jesus' remarks. They openly criticized his teaching as too extreme, saying that it made marriage too much of a risk.

Jesus responded with biting sarcasm. He told them that accepting his teaching on marriage was a God-given gift, and that not everyone had it. He then said that those who didn't have the gift, and thus who couldn't accept his teaching on marriage, should castrate themselves for the sake of the kingdom. Those who discovered that they had the gift should accept the teaching and marry.

Of course, Jesus was using extreme hyperbole. Apart from the normal male reluctance to self-mutilation, the Law prohibited eunuchs from joining the assembly of the Israelites;<sup>3</sup> thus, eunuchs couldn't participate in any religious activities, including offering sacrifices. They were essentially cut off from being Jews. Most likely, the disciples suddenly found that they all had the gift of accepting this teaching about marriage.

Misunderstanding of what Jesus said, perhaps because of the sarcasm and the hyperbole, led the early Church to reverse Jesus' teaching. They began to claim that celibacy was the gift Jesus talked about and made it a virtue.

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1 From the Greek word *eunoúchos*, a male who has been castrated or otherwise lacks genitals.

2 The Greek word is *eunouchízō*, the verb form of *eunuch*.

3 *Deuteronomy* 23:1

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Little Children (19:13)**

<sup>13</sup>Then little children were brought to him so that he would lay his hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup>Jesus said, “Leave the children alone, and don’t prevent them from coming to me! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.” <sup>15</sup>Having laid hands on them, he went on from there.

Parents were bringing their children to Jesus so that he would bless them. The disciples tried to stop them; most likely, they were trying to keep people from wasting Jesus’ time. Jesus, however, told his disciples to stop; he emphasized that the kingdom belonged to the lowly, even children.

## **A Wealthy Young Man**

### ***The Incident (19:16)***

<sup>16</sup>Behold! Someone approached him, saying, “Teacher, what good thing should I do, so that I might have eternal life? <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? One is good. But, if you want to enter life, keep the commandments. <sup>18</sup>He said to Jesus, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘you shall not commit adultery,’ ‘you shall not steal,’ ‘you shall not commit perjury,’ <sup>19</sup>‘honor your father and mother,’ <sup>1</sup> and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” <sup>2</sup> <sup>20</sup>The young man said to Jesus, “I kept all of these. What do I still lack?” <sup>21</sup>Jesus declared to him, “If you want to be complete, <sup>3</sup> go! Sell your belongings, and give to the poor! And then you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come, follow me!” <sup>22</sup>When the young man heard the message, he went away distressed, <sup>4</sup> for he had many possessions.

A wealthy young man approached Jesus; most likely, he was the son of an aristocratic family in Jerusalem. He asked what good thing he should in order to secure eternal life. The way he asked indicated that he was looking for good deed that he could perform in order to gain God’s favor.

Jesus pushed back on this request, pointing out that only God was “good.” Jesus then told him to keep the Ten Commandments. The young man’s response, “Which ones?” showed how worldly his thinking was. Jesus listed off some of the commandments and added “love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man announced that he had kept these, as if it was a major accomplishment.

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1 *Exodus 20:12–16*

2 *Leviticus 19:18*

3 Or, *perfect*.

4 Or, *sad, grieving*.



## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus then spoke to the man's heart. He told him to sell his belongings and give to the poor; then he should follow him. Jesus could see that he was complacent and that he relied on his wealth; he just wanted to add a little religion to his life. The young man went away in distress; he wasn't ready to make any real changes in his life, much less his heart.

We shouldn't take this one event and create a doctrine that everyone must sell their belongings to become a Christian. At the same time, Jesus has the right to demand that we do so. In addition, this incident cautions us against the dangers of materialism.

### ***Jesus and the Disciples Respond (19:23)***

<sup>23</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I tell you that a wealthy man will hardly<sup>1</sup> enter the Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>24</sup>Again I tell you, it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God's kingdom.

<sup>25</sup>When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" <sup>26</sup>Gazing at them Jesus said, "For people, this isn't possible, but for God, all things are possible." <sup>27</sup>Then Peter responded and said to him, "Behold! We have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?" <sup>28</sup>Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you that in the renewal, when the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have followed me also will sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup>And everyone who leave houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or fields because of my name will receive one hundred times *as much*, and they will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup>But many *who are* first will be last, and *the* last, first."

As the rich young man walked away, Jesus turned to his disciples and warned them that the wealthy would find it difficult to enter the Kingdom. In fact, a camel, a very large animal, would find it easier to squeeze through the eye of a needle, a very small opening. Basically, it would take a miracle.

Two explanations have been offered to make Jesus' statement less drastic. Early on, some claimed that the word for *camel* was misspelled, and it should have been a *thick rope*. Still, a thick rope won't fit through the eye of a needle. Centuries later, some claimed that there was a gate in Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle. A camel could pass through it only if it knelt down. While this is clever, it isn't true.

Jesus was using hyperbole, but he meant what he said. Wealth makes faith nearly impossible.

In ancient times, ordinary people considered the wealthy to be superior, and the disciples looked at the young man as better than themselves. When Jesus sent the wealthy man away, the disciples thought, "If he isn't good enough, what does that mean about us?" Apparently, Jesus didn't immediately pick up on what they were thinking.

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1 The Greek word means an attempt that is difficult to accomplish and unlikely to succeed.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

The disciples exclaimed that no one could be saved. Jesus, still talking about the wealthy, pointed out that what was impossible for people was possible for God. Peter then spoke for all of them when he asked what was left for them. Ironically, Peter said that they had done the very thing that the wealthy young man had refused to do.

Jesus saw that they were genuinely confused and frightened, so he reassured them. He told them that, at the renewal, the twelve Apostles would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Furthermore, in this life, all who followed Jesus would receive back 100 times what they gave up, and then they would receive eternal life.

Jesus then finished with a warning and a promise. The high and mighty would be brought low, while the lowly would be lifted high.

Note that Jesus used the term “renewal” to describe the Judgment. He did this to use a concept more familiar to Jews than the Judgment, something we take for granted. In this view, the Christ would restore Israel and establish the Israelites as rulers over the Gentiles. Jesus described the Apostles as ruling with him over the Israelites. He did this so the Apostles, in their distress, would understand it, not because he thought the end times would literally happen that way.

## ***Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (20:1)***

20 <sup>1</sup>“For the Kingdom of Heaven is like a housemaster who at once went out early to hire workers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>Having agreed with the workers to pay them a denarius, <sup>1</sup> he sent them out into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>He went out about the third hour <sup>2</sup> and saw others standing idle in the marketplace. <sup>4</sup>He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will give you whatever is right.’ <sup>5</sup>They went. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour and did the same. <sup>6</sup>About the eleventh he went out and found others standing, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

<sup>8</sup>When evening came, the lord of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last until the first.’ <sup>9</sup>When those who started at the eleventh hour came, they each received a denarius. <sup>10</sup>When the first came, they thought that they would receive more, and they also each received a denarius.

<sup>11</sup>Having received it, they began to grumble against the housemaster, <sup>12</sup>saying, ‘Those who were last worked one hour, and you have made them the same as us, who bore the burden and the heat of the day.’ <sup>13</sup>The housemaster replied and said to one of them, ‘Comrade, <sup>3</sup> I haven’t treated you unjustly. You

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1 A Roman coin worth a day’s wages for a laborer.

2 Third hour = 9 AM, sixth hour = noon, ninth hour = 3 PM, eleventh hour = one hour before sunset

3 The Greek word is a way of addressing someone in a familiar but formal manner that does not imply closeness or equality. *Friend* implies too much closeness; *pal* is too informal and possibly disrespectful..

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

agreed on a denarius with me, didn't you? <sup>14</sup>Take what's yours and go! I want to give to this last one the same as to you. <sup>15</sup>It's alright for me to do what I want with what's mine, isn't it? Or is your eye wicked because I'm good?' <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first last."

Note that Jesus was still talking with the disciples about the rich young man; in the world, he was of higher rank than the disciples because of his wealth. Jesus drove home the point that God does not view people in that way; to God, the "lowly" are equally important as the "great."

Jesus then told a parable to illustrate how the last will be first. A man who owned a vineyard represents God. He went early in the morning to hire workers, and he agreed to give them a standard day's wage. The workers represent believers who will be rewarded on the last day. Later that morning, he found more men who hadn't been hired, and he hired them as well, but without specifying their wage. He continued doing this until the last hour of the day. The workers who worked the longest did the most, while those who were hired last did the least.

At the end of the day, when the man paid the workers, he first paid those whom he had hired last; furthermore, he paid them a full day's wage. When the workers who had worked all day complained, the man told them that he had treated them fairly, as they had agreed, and that they shouldn't be envious of how he used his own wealth. Thus, God will reward the "least" in the kingdom with the same salvation as the "greatest."

Note that Jesus also redefined "great" and "lowly." The world saw greatness in terms of wealth and power; Jesus portrayed everyone as hired hands before God. The "great" were those who worked the longest and hardest, while the "lowly" did relatively little. Wealth and rank meant nothing at all.

### **Jesus Predicts His Death and Resurrection a Third Time (20:17)**

<sup>17</sup>As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside privately, and, on the way, <sup>1</sup> he said to them, <sup>18</sup>"Behold! We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will sentence him to death. <sup>19</sup>They will hand him over to the Tribes to mock, to flog, and to crucify him. And on the third day, he will be raised."

Jesus again told his disciples that he would soon die and then be raised from the dead. This time, he offered more details, saying that the Romans would crucify him.

### **A Request for Greatness (20:20)**

<sup>20</sup>Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee, along with her sons, approached Jesus, and bowing down, asked something of him. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Please say that these two sons of mine should sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your kingdom!" <sup>22</sup>Jesus

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1 Jesus apparently spoke to his disciples privately as they walked. Large crowds were following along.

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replied and said, “You<sup>1</sup> don’t know what you’re asking. Are you able to drink from the cup from which I’m about to drink? They said to him, “We are able.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup! But to sit at my right or left, this isn't mine to grant; instead, *it's* for those whom it has been prepared by my Father.

<sup>24</sup>When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. <sup>25</sup>Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Tribes lord it over them, and the great exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup>It shall not be this way among you; instead, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant,<sup>2</sup> and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave,<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as ransom for many.

*Chutzpah* comes from a Hebrew word that is best defined by a joke. A man convicted of murdering his parents pleaded with the judge, saying, “Your honor, please give me a light sentence; I’m an orphan!” The mother of James and John brought her sons before Jesus and asked him that her sons might have the two places of honor beside Jesus’ throne; possibly, the brothers put her up to this. Matthew expresses the irony in this, as that the previous two passages talked about how there would be no rank or class in Heaven and that Jesus was heading to Jerusalem to be crucified.

Jesus listened to the request patiently and then turned to the brothers. Drinking from his cup referred to the brutal death he was about to experience. Were James and John ready to die as well? Apparently, the brothers hadn't yet understood what Jesus was telling them, and they said that they were. In more irony, it was James’ death at the hands of Herod Agrippa that had triggered the need for Matthew to write his Gospel.

Jesus then told the brothers that he wouldn't choose who sat in the places of honor; God had prepared those places for those whom he already had chosen.

The other Apostles were indignant with James and John; no doubt of some them harbored ambitions of securing a place of honor for themselves. Jesus then explained what it would take to get there. In his kingdom, the path to greatness lay in serving others, and the greatest would be the one who treated everyone else as his lords.

### **Jesus Heals Two Blind Men in Jericho (20:29)**

<sup>29</sup>As they left Jericho, a great crowd followed them,<sup>30</sup> and behold! Two blind men sitting beside the road. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, saying, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”<sup>31</sup> The crowd rebuked them so that they would be silent, but they cried out even more, saying, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!”<sup>32</sup> Jesus stopped and called out to them, saying, “What

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1 *You* is plural, Jesus responded to James and John.

2 Or, *minister*. In ancient times, a king's royal administrators and personal servants were slaves, but they held enormous power and influence. From the Greek word, we get the English word *deacon*.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

do you want me to do for you?” <sup>33</sup>They said to him, “Lord, that our eyes be opened.” <sup>34</sup>Jesus felt compassion for them, and he touched their eyes; immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

Jericho lay in the Jordan River Valley at 850 feet below sea level. Fifteen miles to the southwest lay the Mount of Olives at 2,700 feet above sea level, and Jerusalem lay a short distance further west across the Kidron Valley. The road between them was steep and treacherous, and Jesus and his disciples were about to go up when two blind men started calling out to Jesus.

Desperation made beggars shameless, and the two became even louder when they realized that people were responding to them. Jesus stopped and asked them what they wanted, apparently from a distance. Either Jesus went to them or they came to Jesus, and he touched them and healed them. They responded by following him.

### **Jesus Rides into Jerusalem (21:1)**

**21** <sup>1</sup>When Jesus drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, he then sent out two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, “Go into the village across from you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied up and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone asks you why, say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them directly. <sup>4</sup>This happened so that what was spoken by the prophet would be fulfilled, saying,

<sup>5</sup>‘Tell the daughter of Zion,  
“Behold! Your king comes to you,  
gentle and mounted upon a donkey,  
and upon a colt, the son of a draft animal.”’ <sup>1</sup>

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and, having done what Jesus told them, <sup>7</sup>brought the donkey and the colt. They laid their cloaks upon them, and Jesus sat on them. <sup>2</sup> <sup>8</sup>The vast crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds going before and following after him were crying out, saying, “Hosanna <sup>3</sup> to the Son of David!

‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ <sup>4</sup>  
Hosanna in the highest!”

<sup>10</sup>After Jesus entered Jerusalem, the entire city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup>The crowds kept saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee!”

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1 See *Zechariah* 9:9.

2 Matthew is intentionally ambiguous about which animal Jesus sat on order to fulfill the prophecy, but Jesus probably sat on the donkey.

3 A shout of praise; it came from Hebrew, meaning, *save now! or save, I pray!*

4 *Psalms* 118:26

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As Jesus reached a village on the Mount of Olives, he planned to make a grand entrance to Jerusalem. During Old Testament times, kings and rulers rode on donkeys as symbols of their status; riding horses was a new innovation and was reserved for military purposes. The prophecy Matthew quoted from *Zechariah* was well-known, and Jesus intended to fulfill it; Jesus was presenting himself as be the king of the prophecy. When the crowds traveling with him saw what he was doing, they immediately saw the significance and joined in.

Jesus rode down into the Kidron Valley and then up the steep road into Jerusalem, with an enormous cheering crowd that could be heard throughout the city. The entire city, already swollen to several times its normal population for the upcoming Passover Feast, was stirred up. The Roman soldiers would have gone to high alert, fearing a riot, and Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, would have demanded an explanation from the Chief Priest. Also, Jesus' flagrant claim to be king would have infuriated both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, especially because it caused such a commotion.

## **Jesus Clears the Temple (21:12)**

<sup>12</sup>Jesus entered the Temple and drove out all the sellers and buyers in the Temple. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those selling doves. <sup>13</sup>He said to them, "It was written,

'My house will be called a house of prayer,' <sup>1</sup>  
but you are making it a bandit's cave!" <sup>2</sup>

<sup>14</sup>The blind and crippled approached him in the Temple, and he healed them. <sup>15</sup>But the chief priests and the scribes, having seen the wonders he did and the children crying out in the Temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David," were indignant. <sup>16</sup>They said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" But Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read that,

'From the mouths of infants and nursing babies you prepared praise for yourself.?'"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>17</sup>He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and he spent the night there.

Having entered Jerusalem, Jesus went into the Temple; specifically, into the Court of Gentiles. This was the large area surrounding the inner courts and the sanctuary. Most Jews would have considered this area unclean, since Gentiles were allowed inside, and the chief priests had allowed a marketplace to be set up in one part of it. Merchants sold various animals for sacrifices; animals had to be "without blemish," so this provided convenience and insurance against a priest refusing to accept an animal for sacrifice. Money-changers sold the didrachma and stater coins that the chief priests accepted for offerings. Perhaps the vendors held a monopoly on their businesses and inflated prices, and the chief priests took a cut from this very profitable enterprise.

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1 *Isaiah* 56:7

2 See *Jeremiah* 7:11.

3 *Psalms* 8:2

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Jesus genuinely found this use of the Temple unacceptable, but he also saw this as an opportunity to provoke the chief priests. As long as he didn't start an uprising, the chief priests cared little about whatever he was teaching the people. As aristocrats, the chief priests cared about their power, which came through the Temple, and their wealth. Jesus hit both. Ordinary Jews didn't like the chief priests, and they were likely amused and impressed by Jesus' act of defiant piety. The chief priests had their own guards, but they feared the crowds packed into the Temple, so they didn't arrest Jesus.

Jesus remained in the Temple and healed people. We can imagine that the crowds, many of them from foreign countries, were amazed. Children caught up in the excitement began shouting praise to Jesus as the religious leaders watched. Unruly children pushed the leaders to finally say something to Jesus, but he answered them dismissively.

Previously, Jesus had challenged the Pharisees and the religious leaders about their knowledge of the Scriptures. Now, he openly taunted them, asking them whether they had even read them. This escalation was a calculated effort to bring their outrage to a boil.

He then walked away, left the city, and retreated to the Mount of Olives, where he spent the night.

Jesus engaged in an act of civil disobedience and treated the authorities with what bordered on contempt. This raises the question, "Should we imitate Jesus' behavior?" During the late 1960s, certain youthful Christians adopted a blunt, confrontational style, citing Jesus' interactions with the religious leaders.

The answer lies in the context of what Jesus was doing. For hundreds of years, God had forewarned that he would purify his people and reestablish his kingdom, and Jesus was at the center of God's purpose in fulfilling these warnings. Furthermore, Jesus was also doing miracles that testified to the fact that God supported him, leaving the authorities without excuse. Finally, Jesus' motivation was to bring about his own death, which was also part of God's plan to bring salvation.

Jesus was acting at a crucial, and unique, point in history, and his actions reflect his unique role in that situation. We should imitate Jesus, but from our hearts and by faith. Then our actions will properly reflect both Jesus and our circumstances.

### **Jesus Withers a Fig Tree (21:18)**

<sup>18</sup>Early in the morning, as he was returning to the city, Jesus was hungry. <sup>19</sup>Seeing a fig tree near the road, he came to it and found nothing on it but leaves only. He said to it, "May you never bear fruit to the end of the age!" The fig tree withered at once.

<sup>20</sup>When the disciples saw this, they marveled and said, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" <sup>21</sup>Jesus answered and said to them, "Amen, I tell you, if you have faith and don't doubt, not only will you do

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

this to the fig tree; moreover, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed from here and be thrown into the sea!’ it will happen. <sup>22</sup>All things that you ask for in prayer, believing, you will receive.”

Jesus saw a fig tree full of leaves, and he hoped to find his breakfast on it. Fig trees should put out immature fruit at the same time leaves appear. This early in the year, the fruit isn't ripe, but it's edible. Since the tree had leaves, it should have had immature fruit. <sup>1</sup> However, the tree had no fruit at all, indicating that it had stopped producing. Fruit trees that don't produce are worthless and hold out false hopes, and Jesus cursed it. The tree withered at once.

The disciples were amazed at how fast the tree withered, and Jesus used this as an opportunity to talk about the power of faithful prayer. Jesus did not mean to say that prayer had magical power to move mountains. Instead, he meant that God would hear the believer's prayer offered with faith, and moving a mountain was a small thing for God.

Additionally, the fig tree also served as a real-life parable. The fig tree represented Jerusalem, and the lack of fruit represented how, in spite of God's many efforts, Jerusalem had failed to produce the fruit of obedience and devotion. The Old Testament contained many warnings of judgment before the restoration of God's kingdom; the sudden withering of the tree showed how suddenly that judgment would come. <sup>2</sup>

### **Parables Against the Religious Leaders**

<sup>23</sup>Jesus entered the Temple, and while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” <sup>24</sup>Jesus responded and said to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me this, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup>The immersion of John, from where was it? From Heaven, or from people?”

They discussed among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From Heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why didn't you believe him?’ <sup>26</sup>But if we say, ‘From men,’ we're afraid of the crowd, for they all think that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup>So they answered Jesus, saying, “We don't know.” Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

The chief priests and the elders, who were members of the Sanhedrin, demanded to know by whose authority was Jesus acting; they were still angry over the incidents the previous day. Jesus agreed to tell them, if they would say whether John's baptism was from God or of human origin. Jesus had been teaching, and a large crowd was gathered around him. Trapped by their fear of the crowd, the religious leaders refused to answer, and Jesus declined to answer as well.

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1 *Mark* 11:13 notes that it wasn't the season for figs, meaning for *ripe* figs; thus, no one would have harvested the fruit.

2 *Luke* 13:1–9 contains two teachings. The first ends with, *but if you don't repent, you all will perish*. The second is a parable about a barren fruit tree that is in danger of being cut down.



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Instead, he started telling parables about them.

## **Parable of the Disobedient Brothers (21:28)**

<sup>28</sup>“What do you think? A man had two children. He approached the first saying, ‘Child, go today, work in the vineyard!’ <sup>29</sup>He answered, saying, ‘I don’t want to.’ But later, he regretted it and went out. <sup>30</sup>The man approached the other and said the same. He answered and said, ‘Lord, I *will*,’ and he didn’t go out. <sup>31</sup>Which of the two did the will of the father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Amen, I tell you that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into God’s kingdom ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you on the way of godliness, and you didn’t believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. But you, having seen, afterwards didn’t regret it to believe him.

In the parable, the man represents God, and he was two disobedient children. The first represents the outcasts of Jewish society, and the second represents the religious leaders. The Law commanded that children displaying ongoing disobedience be put to death. <sup>1</sup> The tax collectors and prostitutes had openly rebelled against God, but they had regretted their behavior when they heard John the Baptist and had repented. However, the religious leaders had lied to God, pretending to be obedient but then ignoring God’s prophet; this was hypocrisy.

## **Parable of the Workers Seizing the Vineyard (21:33)**

<sup>33</sup>Listen to another parable! A certain house-master planted a vineyard, put a wall around it, dug out a winepress, and built a watchtower. He then leased it to vinedressers and went on a journey. <sup>34</sup>When the season for fruit came near, he sent his slaves to the vinedressers to receive his fruit. <sup>35</sup>The vinedressers seized the slaves; some they beat, others they killed, others they stoned. <sup>36</sup>Again he sent other slaves, more than the first, and they did the same. <sup>37</sup>Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ <sup>38</sup>The vinedressers, having seen the son, said among themselves, ‘This is the heir! Come! We should kill him and have his inheritance.’

<sup>40</sup>“So, when the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do with those vinedressers?” <sup>41</sup>They said, “He will utterly destroy those evil men, and he will lease the vineyard to others, who will give him the fruit in its seasons.” <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures,

‘A stone the builders rejected,  
this became the cornerstone.  
This came about from the Lord,  
and it’s marvelous in our eyes.’? <sup>2</sup>

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1 *Deuteronomy* 21:18ff

2 *Psalms* 118:22–23

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>43</sup>Therefore, I tell you that God's kingdom will be taken away from you and given to a tribe producing its fruit. <sup>44</sup>He who falls upon this stone will be shattered, and he upon whom it falls will be winnowed."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>45</sup>When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parable, they knew that he was talking about them. <sup>46</sup>Wanting to seize him, they were afraid of the crowd, because they held that he was a prophet.

Most of the chief priests owned large farms in Galilee, so the parable spoke to them personally; the idea that tenant farmers would seize their farms was outrageous to them. In the parable, the landowner represents God, and the vinedressers represent Israel and especially its leaders. The owner's slaves represent the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist; the Israelites generally rejected the prophets and sometimes mistreated them, and John had been beheaded. The landowner's son represents Jesus, whom the religious leaders were about to kill.

Jesus tricked the religious leaders into condemning themselves before they understood the meaning of the parable. He then brought the lesson home, again questioning whether they had read the Scriptures. The vineyard represented God's kingdom, and it would be taken away from Israel and given to a different tribe—note the connection with Gentiles—that would produce its fruit.

The religious leaders wanted to seize Jesus and, most likely, to drag him out of the Temple and stone him. However, a large crowd was watching, and they supported Jesus.

### **Parable of the King's Wedding Celebration (22:1)**

**22** <sup>1</sup>Jesus went on, again speaking to them in parables, saying, <sup>2</sup>"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who made a wedding celebration for his son. <sup>3</sup>He sent his slaves to call those who had been called<sup>2</sup> to the wedding celebration, and they weren't wanting to come. <sup>4</sup>Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those called, 'Behold! My early meal<sup>3</sup> has been prepared. My bulls and fattened cattle have been slaughtered. Come to the wedding celebration!' <sup>5</sup>But they didn't care; they went out, some to their farms, others to their businesses. <sup>6</sup>The rest seized his slaves and contemptuously abused<sup>4</sup> them and killed them. <sup>7</sup>The king became angry and, having sent his soldiers, he destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

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- 1 Farmers winnowed wheat by tossing it into the air; the wind blew the chaff away while the wheat fell back to the ground. The idea is that those upon whom the stone falls will be like chaff blown away by the wind.
  - 2 Or, *invited, summoned*. The invitation was both an honor and mandatory.
  - 3 The celebration would start in the morning and go on, perhaps for days. This was the first meal of several. The early meal was typically taken around noon in the first century.
  - 4 From the Greek word we get *hubris*. It meant to abuse someone in a degrading manner.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

<sup>8</sup>Then he said to his slaves, ‘Indeed, the wedding celebration is prepared, but those who were invited weren't worthy. <sup>9</sup>So, go to the roads outside the gates <sup>5</sup> and, as many as you find, call them to the wedding celebration!’ <sup>10</sup>Those slaves went out to the roads and gathered all they found, wicked and good. And the wedding celebration was filled with those reclining.

<sup>11</sup>“Then the king, having come in to look at those reclining, saw a man not wearing wedding clothes. <sup>12</sup>He said to him, ‘Comrade, how is it you came in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. <sup>13</sup>Then the king said to his servants, ‘Bind this man hand and foot and throw him into the darkness outside. In that place there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.’ <sup>14</sup>For many are called, but few are chosen.”

In the parable, a king prepares a wedding celebration for his son. Typically, all the nobility would hope to be invited, but the invitation was more of a summons; this wasn't an optional event, and failing to appear was treasonous. However, the nobility despised the king's invitation and refused to come. Multiple invitations were sent, and this refusal was ongoing. Some of the nobility went as far as to abuse and even kill the king's messengers. Finally, the king became angry and destroyed the city where the nobility lived.

The king represents God and his son represents the Christ. The wedding represents the coming of God's kingdom, and the ongoing refusal to accept the king's invitation represents the Jews, especially their religious leaders; the servants represent the prophets sent to them. The city represents Jerusalem, which God would soon destroy.

To the Jews, this seemed ridiculous. They believed that God would always protect Jerusalem and especially the sanctuary. They continued in this belief right up to the point where the Romans stormed the city; the sanctuary casualty in the fighting.

The parable then takes an unexpected turn. The king refuses to cancel the wedding celebration; instead, he tells his servants to go outside the city to round up whomever they can find, bad and good. Of course, a king would never invite commoners to his son's wedding. The nobility despised the common people and viewed them as having low morals—the word *villain* comes from a French word that originally meant *peasant*. Jesus said this in part to outrage the chief priests. He also intended to get the support of the many common Jews who were listening; they knew that the chief priests despised them.

These common guests represent both common Jews, the good, and Gentiles, the wicked. God would open up his kingdom even to the Gentiles, whom all Jews despised.

What Jesus meant by “wedding clothes” is unclear. Evidence does not support speculation that the king would provide clothing for the guests; moreover, that the king would invite random commoners was already absurd. Instead, Jesus used “wedding clothes” to highlight that one of the guests did not take the invitation seriously and did not approach the celebration respectfully. In another

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<sup>5</sup> Literally, *outlets of the roads*. The citizens of the city were unworthy, so the slaves were to go to those outside.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

twist, when the king saw the ill-clad guest, he challenged him. The guest knew that he was wrong and had nothing to say. The king immediately had his servants throw the guest out into the darkness.

The “wedding clothes” represent faith, which includes humble submission to Jesus’ lordship and earnest efforts to practice Jesus’ teachings. God calls *all* to enter his kingdom, whether they are wicked or good in the eyes of the world. However, those who are not clothed in faith will be rejected; in fact, only a *few* will be admitted, see verse 7:14.

### **Trick Questions**

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and took counsel so that they might trap Jesus in his words.

The religious leaders were ready to kill Jesus, but they feared a riot; therefore, they needed an excuse to bring charges against him.

The religious leaders could have waited until the Passover day to arrest Jesus and then held him until after the Feast of Unleavened Bread before taking him to Pilate. However, Jesus had made them so angry that they were in a rush to act.

### ***Paying Taxes to Caesar (22:16)***

<sup>16</sup>The Pharisees sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, <sup>1</sup> who said, “Teacher, we know that you are truthful, that you teach the way of God in truth, and that you aren’t concerned with anyone, for you don’t look upon the face of people.” <sup>2</sup> <sup>17</sup>So tell us, is it proper to pay the tax <sup>3</sup> to Caesar or not?’ <sup>18</sup>Jesus, having perceived their wickedness, said, “Grifters! Why do you test me? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin *used to pay* the tax.” They brought him a denarius. He said to them, “Whose image is this, and whose inscription?” <sup>20</sup>They said to him, “Caesars.” <sup>21</sup>Then he said to them, “Pay Caesar with what is Caesar’s and God with what is God’s.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this they marveled, and they left him and went away.

The leaders among the Pharisees sent their followers to Jesus. They took along some of Herod’s officials; if Jesus said the wrong thing, the Herodians could accuse him of rebellion to Herod. This shows how intent the Pharisees were on condemning Jesus; as much as the Pharisees disagreed with the Sadducees, they despised the Herodians as completely worldly.

Having flattered Jesus, they sprung their trap. The Jews hated paying taxes to the Romans, and the Pharisees hoped that Jesus would teach against paying it. That way, they could portray Jesus as a rebel to Herod and the Romans. On the other hand, if Jesus taught that Jews should pay it, the Pharisees hoped to portray him as a Roman sympathizer, causing the crowds to turn against him.

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1 Officials from the court of Herod; he was in the city for the celebrations.

2 This was an expression that meant not showing favoritism or undue deference.

3 Rome required non-citizens to pay a per person tax each year. This was especially difficult for laborers.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus found the middle ground. Common Jews knew that the chief priests wouldn't accept the Roman denarius, it wasn't "God's coin." The denarius belonged to Caesar, so Jesus told the Pharisees to give them to Caesar. God, however, demanded people's hearts, minds, and souls, and those should be devoted to God.

In the minds of the crowd that watched, the Pharisees were the most godly and spiritual men of all. However, Jesus had made them look petty and dull. The Pharisees' trap only built Jesus' reputation.

### ***A Wife with Seven Husbands (22:23)***

<sup>23</sup>That day, the Sadducees, who say that there is no resurrection, approached him. They questioned him, <sup>24</sup>saying, "Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry his woman and raise up seed on behalf of his brother. <sup>1</sup> <sup>25</sup>There were seven brothers among us. The first brother married and then died. Not having seed, he left his woman to his brother. <sup>26</sup>In the same way, also the second, and the third, up to the seventh. <sup>27</sup>After all of them, the woman died. <sup>28</sup>So, in the resurrection, of which of the seven will she be the woman?"

<sup>29</sup>Jesus responded to them and said, "You are going astray, not knowing the Scriptures nor God's power. <sup>30</sup>For at the resurrection they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; instead, they are like the messengers in Heaven. <sup>31</sup>Concerning the resurrection of the dead, haven't you read God's word to you that says,

<sup>32</sup>'I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.'? <sup>2</sup>  
He isn't the God of the dead but of the living."

<sup>33</sup>When the crowd heard this, they were astonished by his teaching.

The Sadducees then came and posed a conundrum to Jesus. Matthew notes that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection, and this was most likely one of the standard questions they posed to the Pharisees.

God had divided the land of Israel among the tribes, and every Israelite had received an inheritance. Preserving each inheritance was very important, and the Law made a provision preventing a man with no children losing his inheritance after his death. His closest kin, normally his brother, was to marry his wife and raise a child on his behalf. Legally, the child would belong to the man who had died, and the child would receive the inheritance.

The Sadducees asked Jesus a hypothetical question about seven brothers, one woman, and no children. The woman had belonged to each of the brothers; so, at the resurrection, to whom would she belong?

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1 *Deuteronomy* 25:5ff

2 See *Exodus* 3:6.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus told the Sadducees that their ignorance of God was leading them astray. They assumed that everything would be the same after the resurrection, but Jesus said that people would be fundamentally transformed, and that no one would belong to anyone else. Aristocrats took for granted that slaves would take care of all their needs. They would have found the idea that their slaves would be equal to them both ridiculous and horrifying.

Jesus then silenced the Sadducees with his own conundrum. When God spoke to Moses about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they had been dead for some 400 years. If there was no resurrection and they were gone, God wouldn't use them to describe himself.

The crowd was stunned that Jesus answered this paradox, which probably stumped the Pharisees.

### ***The Greatest Commandment (22:34)***

<sup>34</sup>When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. <sup>1</sup> <sup>35</sup>One of them, a lawyer, <sup>2</sup> tested him, asking, <sup>36</sup>“Teacher, which is the greatest command in the Law?” <sup>37</sup>Jesus declared to him,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your mind.’ <sup>3</sup>

<sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and foremost command. <sup>39</sup>The second is like it,

‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>4</sup>

<sup>40</sup>All the Law and the Prophets hang on the two commands.”

This was a common question discussed among the Pharisees and not controversial. Perhaps some of the more tolerant Pharisees sent this lawyer to defuse the tension building between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Jesus first quoted two verses in *Deuteronomy* that are so well-known that they were called the Shema, which comes from the Hebrew word *hear!*

<sup>4</sup>“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>5</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5, ESV)

The Pharisees would find the Shema a rather bland response. Jesus, however, added a second command, to love your neighbor as yourself. By putting the two commands together, he made them equally important. He said that people who love God but don't love their neighbors don't uphold the Law.

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1 The meaning of this phrase is ambiguous. Either they gathered around Jesus, which makes sense in the immediate context, or they met together privately to confer.

2 This is the only place in *Matthew* where *lawyer* is used. Possibly, lawyers were scribes with additional training in public speaking so that they could argue cases before a court.

3 *Deuteronomy* 6:5, but note that Jesus substituted *mind* for *might*.

4 *Leviticus* 19:18

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***Whose Son Is the Christ? (22:41)***

<sup>41</sup>While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus questioned them, <sup>42</sup>saying, “What do you think about the Anointed? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “David’s.” <sup>43</sup>He said to them, “How then did David, in the Spirit, call him lord, saying,

<sup>44</sup>‘The Lord said to my lord,  
sit down at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies  
under your feet.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>45</sup>So, if David calls him Lord, how is he his son?”

<sup>46</sup>No one was able to answer his question, nor, from that day, did anyone dare to question him anymore.

As the crowds watched, Jesus asked the Pharisees his own question. All the Jews agreed that the Christ would be descended from King David. However, David wrote many of the Psalms, and Jesus quoted from one of them that implied that David called the Christ his lord. Among the Jews, the father had authority over his sons, so the son couldn't lord over his father.

Here are two answers to Jesus' question. First, the Christ would be greater than King David, even if this violated human rules about the relationship between a father and his sons. Second, God was Jesus actual father, and David, through Joseph, had adopted him.

The Pharisees, however, didn't dare try to answer Jesus, and the religious leaders, humiliated before the crowds, gave up trying to question him.

## **Jesus Condemns the Pharisees (23:1)**

**23** <sup>1</sup>Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; <sup>3</sup>therefore, whatever they say, you must do and keep. But you must not practice their actions!<sup>2</sup> For they talk and don’t do.

Having silenced the religious leaders, Jesus turned to the onlookers and attacked the Pharisees and their scribes. He said that they had taken over Moses' place of leadership; therefore, to the extent that the Pharisees taught and commanded the people from the Law, the people needed to do what they said. However, the people shouldn't imitate them, because they failed to practice what they preached. A practical saying is, “If the hypocrites are coming between you and God, then the hypocrites are closer to God than you are. Draw close to God, and the hypocrites won't be in the way.”

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1 *Psalms 110:1*

2 Figuratively, *don't imitate their behavior.*

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## ***The Failings of the Pharisees and a Call to be Better (23:4)***

<sup>4</sup>“They bind up heavy and oppressive burdens and place them on people’s shoulders, but they don’t want to move them with their own finger. <sup>1</sup> <sup>5</sup>They do all their deeds to be seen by people, for they make their prayer-bands large and their tassels long. <sup>2</sup> <sup>6</sup>They love the places of honor at dinners and the seat of honor in the synagogues, and greetings in the marketplace and to have people call them, ‘Rabbi.’ <sup>3</sup>

<sup>8</sup>“But you shouldn’t be called ‘rabbi,’ for your teacher <sup>4</sup> is one, and all of you are brothers. <sup>9</sup>Don’t call anyone upon the earth, ‘father,’ for your Heavenly Father is one. <sup>10</sup>Don’t be called, ‘leader,’ because your leader is one, the Anointed. <sup>11</sup>The greatest among you will be your servants. <sup>12</sup>Whoever will exalt themselves up will be humbled, and whoever will humble themselves will be exalted.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and their Traditions, saying that they made keeping the Law difficult. The Traditions added numerous detailed rules to the Law; these were intended to clarify the Law and keep people from breaking it. However, remembering all these additional rules was hard, and some of the rules, such as hand-washing before eating—see verses 15:1ff—had nothing to do with the Law and made everyday life more complicated.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for seeking attention from people rather than seeking God’s approval. Their clothing was showy, they sought honor for themselves, and they loved titles.

Jesus then told the crowds to put aside honorary titles. In the coming kingdom, everyone would have equal rank, and the path to greatness would be through service to others. Humility would be the path to honor, and self-exaltation would lead to humiliation.

## ***Seven Charges***

Jesus, having already sharply criticized the scribes and Pharisees, then went to the next level, bringing seven charges against them.

### ***One: Closing Off the Kingdom (23.13)***

<sup>13</sup>“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Grifters! You shut the Kingdom of Heaven before people, for you don’t enter, nor do you allow those to enter who are trying to enter.

The Pharisees rebelled against God by both refusing to enter the kingdom themselves and working to prevent those who would. They had gone so far as to claim, publicly, that the miracles Jesus did by the Spirit’s power actually were done by Satan.

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1 Figuratively, *but they don’t want to lift a finger to help move them.*

2 The Law commanded that the Jews wear prayer-bands, or phylacteries, on their foreheads or left arms, see *Deuteronomy 11:18*. The bands held containers with verses. In addition, Jews were also to wear tassels on the four corners of their cloaks, see *Numbers 15:37ff*.

3 The Hebrew word for *master*.

4 Teachers had great authority over their students, which explains why *rabbi* and *teacher* are equivalent here.



# The Gospel According To Matthew

[Verse 14 was a late addition to the text and is omitted.]<sup>1</sup>

## Two: Corrupting Their Disciples (23.15)

<sup>15</sup>“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Grifters! You travel about sea and desert to make one convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice the son of the Valley of Hinnom as yourselves.

The Pharisees diligently sought to spread their teaching, but that only served to make those taught by them more ungodly than they were.

## Three: Making Many Rules, Violating the Intent of the Law (23.16)

<sup>16</sup>“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone makes an oath by the sanctuary, it’s nothing; however, if anyone makes an oath by the gold of the Temple *treasury*, they are obligated to *fulfill it.*’<sup>17</sup>Derelicts and blind men! Which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that makes the gold holy? <sup>18</sup>And, ‘If anyone makes an oath by the altar, it’s nothing, but if anyone makes an oath by the offering that is on it, they are obligated to *fulfill it.*’<sup>19</sup>Blind men, which is greater, the offering or the altar that makes the offering holy? <sup>20</sup>The one making an oath by the altar makes an oath by it and all that is on it, <sup>21</sup>the one making an oath by the sanctuary makes an oath by it and the One dwelling in it, <sup>22</sup>and the one making an oath by Heaven makes an oath by the throne of God and by the One sitting upon it.

The charge Jesus leveled here only makes sense if we understand the Pharisees’ traditions about oaths. Here is what happened.

- Ancient people lied frequently, and they considered this normal; they used oaths—a declaration sworn on the name of a god—to prove that they were telling the truth or that they would do what they said
- The Law commanded people to swear their oaths sworn in God’s name; the intent was to prevent idolatry and also deception
- The Pharisees, considering God’s name too holy for such use, directed people to make oaths by other holy things
- They then made rules about what was *sufficiently* holy to be a substitute for God’s name; the reasoning used by the Pharisees is no longer known

The outcome was that people could swear empty oaths by swearing on something holy, but not *that* holy; this opened the door for deliberate deception that clearly violated the intent of the Law.

Jesus gave the following example of this tradition. The sanctuary was holy; God’s presence hovered over the ark of covenant in the inner room, and only priests could enter it. However,

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1 In *Luke* 20:47 and *Mark* 12:40, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of devouring widow’s houses and making long prayers for show, which will lead to greater condemnation. Editors added verse 14 based on *Luke* and *Mark*.

2 God’s presence hovered above the Ark of the Covenant, which was in the inner room of the sanctuary. See *Exodus* 25:10ff, especially 25:22.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

for some reason, the Traditions said that the sanctuary wasn't sufficiently holy to be a substitute for God's name. An oath sworn by the sanctuary wasn't binding. On the other hand, the Traditions considered that the gold in the Temple treasury was sufficiently holy, and an oath sworn by the gold had to be fulfilled.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, calling them blind guides, for teaching this nonsense, especially when it allowed a devious person to say, "I swear by the sanctuary!" and then go back on his oath without consequence. Thus, the Traditions allowed people to violate the clear intent of the Law in order to cheat others.

The Pharisees focused intently on learning and understanding all the rules of the Traditions, which caused them to stop trying to understand the Law. This led them to violate the Law and to teach others to do the same. This made them *feel* upright, but in God's sight, they were lawbreakers.

### **Four: Diligent with the Trivial, Neglectful of the Important (23.23)**

<sup>23</sup>“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, grifters! You tithe <sup>1</sup> mint, dill, and cumin, <sup>2</sup> and yet you neglect the more important things of the Law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. So, it's necessary to do these, and not to go on neglecting those. <sup>3</sup> <sup>24</sup>Blind guides, you strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

The Pharisees showed great diligence in studying the Traditions, keeping themselves ritually clean, and carefully observing the minor parts the Law, such as carefully giving exactly a tenth of all they had. Note that the Law said people must tithe of what they *produced*, not of what they *had*. The Pharisees' tithing went *beyond* what the Law said.

However, they spent so much time on observing rules in detail that they neglected the important teachings of the Law—treating others well and honoring God.

Jesus said that observance of the small things of the Law was important. However, this wasn't a substitute for practicing the great things of the Law, which involved relationship with God and others. The Pharisees needed to observe the Law, genuinely devote themselves to God, and seek the welfare of others.

Both gnats and camels were unclean, and the Law forbade Jews to eat either of them. A Jew who avoided swallowing a gnat did the right thing on a tiny issue, but swallowing a camel was wrong on a huge scale.

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1 Give a tenth as an offering.

2 Jesus implies that the Pharisees went through their spice containers and measured out a tenth of each as an offering. That is, they were very careful about doing trivial things.

3 Figuratively, *Keep doing the small things without neglecting the important things!* Jesus' wording was very terse.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

The result was that the Pharisees *felt* truly devoted to God and the Law, but, in God's sight, they were ungodly and rejected.

## **Five: Outwardly Godly, Inwardly Corrupt (23.25)**

<sup>25</sup>“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Grifters! You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside they are filled with greed<sup>1</sup> and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup>Pharisee! Blind man! First clean the contents of the cup! Then its outside will also be clean.

Jesus compared the Pharisees to a dinner table set with outwardly clean cups and serving dishes that were filled with repulsive contents.

The Pharisees focused entirely on appearances. Looking good made them *feel* good about themselves, but in God's sight, they were filled with sin.

## **Six: Snares to the Pious (23.27)**

<sup>27</sup>“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Grifters! You are like whitewashed tombs that outwardly appear attractive, but inwardly they are filled with the bones of the dead and every uncleanness.

Anyone touching a tomb or a grave became unclean for seven days and had to complete a complicated cleansing ritual; the sentence for failing to perform the ritual was death—see *Numbers* 19:11ff. The Jews whitewashed tombs so that people would know what they were and avoid them.

The Pharisees had a reputation as the religious authorities, and this attracted people who sought to draw closer to God. However, anyone coming into contact with them became defiled.

## **Seven: Condemning Past Rebellion and then Rebelling (23.29)**

<sup>29</sup>“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Grifters! You build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the godly, <sup>30</sup>and you say, ‘If we were living in the days of our fathers, we wouldn't have participated with them in *shedding* the blood of the prophets.’ <sup>31</sup>So then, you testify against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>32</sup>Likewise, you must fill up your fathers' measure!<sup>2</sup>

The Pharisees condemned the rebellion of the Old Testament Israelites and Jews against the prophets. They claimed that they would have responded to the prophets' messages instead of constantly ignoring God's warnings and signs. In their minds, God's past judgment against Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews to Babylon would never have happened because they would have responded.

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1 The Greek word can also mean robbery or stolen goods.

2 The Greek word means a container of a standard size, such as a gallon BCEt or a bushel basket.

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However, they were already following in their forefathers' footsteps. They had ignored John the Baptist, and they made no effort to rescue him from Herod Antipas as he sat in prison. As Jesus spoke, they already were plotting to kill him.

Jesus warned them that God's wrath against them and the Jewish nation was like a bushel basket that their ancestors had mostly filled with grain. They were continuing to fill it; when it overflowed, the consequences would be similar to what had previously happened to ancient Samaria and Jerusalem. Note that Jesus spoke of this as inevitable.

## **Summary**

### ***Note on Chiasm***

A *chiasm* is a poetic structure built of steps that go up and then back down. The idea is that the ideas expressed on each level parallel each other. With an odd number of steps, the middle step stands alone and is emphasized.

Jesus' charges form a chiasm.

- 1—Closing Off the Kingdom
- 2—Corrupting Their Disciples
- 3—Making Many Rules, Violating the Intent of the Law
- 4—Diligent with the Trivial, Neglectful of the Important**
- 5—Outwardly Godly, Inwardly Corrupt
- 6—Snares to the Pious
- 7—Condemning Past Rebellion and then Rebellious

Of the charges, the most serious was that they focused on religious observance and traditions while they neglected their relationships with God and the needs of others. They were too busy to notice their sin and that they had drifted far from God in their hearts. Their human-made Traditions had taken the place of God's word.

Note that the Pharisees started out as a grassroots movement dedicated to pursuing God according to the Scripture. Without them, the Jewish nation might have abandoned the Law. However, over time, tradition, power, and human nature slowly transformed them, as a group, into something else. Throughout Christian history, the same forces have been at work and have produced similar results. Those same forces are at work today.

*2 Corinthians 13:5–6* says,

“**Test yourselves** whether you are in the faith, **examine yourselves**. You recognize about yourselves, don't you, that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless, perhaps, you are unapproved. But I hope that you will recognize that you aren't unapproved.”

Jesus' harsh words to the Pharisees provide us for some specifics that we should look for in ourselves.

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- Going through the motions while our hearts are elsewhere
- Checking the boxes at church and then mistreating others at home or at work
- Rationalizing about why our behavior isn't really wrong
- Holding convictions that are not aligned with God's, especially regarding social justice
- Supporting the wicked because we see "good" coming from their actions

We are not saved because we keep ourselves from every sin; however, we must actively work to prevent our sin from eroding our faith and hollowing us out from the inside.

### ***Coming Judgment on the Pharisees (23:33)***

<sup>33</sup>“Snakes! Viper’s spawn! How will you escape the judgment of the Valley of Hinnom?”

<sup>34</sup>“Because of this, behold! I’m sending to you prophets, wise men, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town. <sup>35</sup>Thus, all the blood of the godly poured out upon the earth will come upon you, from the blood of godly Abel<sup>1</sup> until the blood of Zechariah the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. <sup>2</sup> <sup>36</sup>Amen, I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

Just as God had sent prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus said that he would send prophets to the current generation. In doing so, he put himself in the place of God, which was blasphemy for anyone but the Christ. He then said that the current religious leaders would follow in the footsteps of their fathers by killing and persecuting those sent to them. *Acts* tells us that the Sanhedrin flogged the Apostles, stoned Stephen, and incited Herod Agrippa to behead the Apostle James. By doing this, they would bring God’s judgment upon themselves.

Jesus then told them that the time had come. The current generation would see God’s judgment. In fact, this happened less than 40 years later.

Jesus had three reasons for denouncing the Pharisees so harshly and publicly. First, he wanted to save some of them. *Acts* 15:5 notes that some of the Pharisees had become Christians and were actively involved in the church, although some of them were causing trouble at the moment. Regardless, Jesus’ words touched the hearts of some and led them to repentance.

Second, he wanted to save the common people from the Pharisees. The Pharisees exercised great influence over ordinary Jews, and they were openly opposed to Jesus’

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1 Cain murdered his brother Abel, see *Genesis* 4:1ff.

2 *2 Chronicles* 24:17–22. Note Zechariah’s last words in verse 22. Note that *2 Chronicles* says that Zechariah’s forefather was the famous chief priest Jehoiada, while Matthew says Berechiah. This seeming contradiction is most likely a result of Jesus and Matthew having more information than we do about Zechariah. Jehoiada was 130 years old when he died, and Zechariah then became chief priest. Given Jehoiada’s great age, he most likely outlived his eldest son. Zechariah was probably Jehoiada’s grandson or even great-grandson.

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message. To follow Jesus, people had to leave the Pharisees; for this to happen, the people needed to see the Pharisees for who they were.

Third, this was a step in Jesus' plan to push the religious leaders to repentance or to murder. The Passover was close, and God's plan was for Jesus to die on that day. In their hearts, the leaders of the Pharisees had decided to murder Jesus for long ago; Jesus needed to push them into action.

Apart from being deeply offended, the Pharisees realized that Jesus had openly called upon the crowds to abandon them; in their minds, Jesus was starting a rebellion against them. He had crossed the line, and they felt justified and compelled to act.

## **Jesus Laments Over Jerusalem (23:37)**

<sup>37</sup>“Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I desired to gather together your children, in the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings! <sup>1</sup> <sup>38</sup>Behold! Your house is left to you desolate. <sup>39</sup>For I tell you, you surely won't see me from now until you say,

‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus finished speaking to the crowds in the Temple with a lament over Jerusalem. He had just pronounced its impending destruction, and he expressed his desire to rescue and shield its people. However, judgment was coming and wouldn't be stopped.

Jesus' last statement was prophetic hyperbole. The crowds would see him for a few more days, especially on the Passover, when he would be crucified. *Psalms* 118, probably written by David, praises God for rescuing the author from death and giving him victory over his enemies. In the verse Jesus quoted, David expressed his sense of blessing as he came to the Tent of Meeting to worship. However, Jesus used *coming* in its sense of God bringing judgment, and he spoke of his own return to the judge the city.

## **Chapters 24–25: Jesus Teaches about the End of the Age**

This is the last of five teachings sections; Jesus tells his disciples about the coming end of the age and their need to prepare for it. This section has parts that are confusing and controversial. The section *Additional Information—Resurrection, Judgment, Jesus' Coming, End of the Age* has in-depth discussion, but please read both chapters before looking there.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Ruth* 2:12, *Psalms* 36:7, 57:1, 63:7, 91:4.

<sup>2</sup> *Psalms* 118:26

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## **The End of the Temple (24:1)**

**24** <sup>1</sup>Jesus left the Temple and was going along, and his disciples approached him and showed him the buildings of the Temple. <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>He responded to them, saying, “You see all these things, don’t you? Amen, I tell you, surely not one stone will be left upon another that isn’t overturned.”

<sup>3</sup>While he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, his disciples approached him privately, saying, “Tell us, what will be the sign of the your coming <sup>2</sup> and the end of the age?”

Jesus left the Temple, crossed the Kidron Valley, and went up the Mount of Olives. His disciples had still not accepted that he was about to die and rise from the dead, and they no doubt were stunned by the events that had just taken place in the Temple. Perhaps they intended to prompt Jesus to confirm his warnings of coming judgment when they pointed out the architecture of the Temple. The Jews generally believed that God would defend the Temple, and that it would never be destroyed.

Jesus responded by telling them that the whole thing would be torn down, stone by stone. The disciples seemed to accept this stunning news and asked what sign would precede it.

## **Stand Fast, Many Will Stumble (24:4)**

<sup>4</sup>Jesus replied to them saying, “Watch out that no one leads you astray! <sup>5</sup>Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am the Anointed!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>6</sup>You are going to hear of wars and reports of war. Be on guard! Don’t be troubled! For these things must happen, but they aren’t yet the end. <sup>7</sup>For tribe <sup>3</sup> will rise up against tribe and king against king, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth-pains.

<sup>9</sup>“Then they will hand you over for oppression, and they will put you to death. You will be hated by all the tribes because of my name. <sup>10</sup>Then many will stumble, and they will hand each other over and will hate each other. <sup>11</sup>Many false prophets will rise up and lead many astray, <sup>12</sup>and because of the increasing lawlessness, the love of many will cool down, <sup>13</sup>but those who endure to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup>This good news of the kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited world <sup>4</sup> as a witness to all the Tribes, and then the end will come.

Asked for a sign of the end, Jesus replied that the disciples must be patient and cautious. A number of events would occur that false teachers would claim were signs, but the end was yet to come. The biggest indicator would be an increase in lawlessness, by which Jesus probably

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1 The Mount of Olives looked down at Jerusalem from across the Kidron Valley, providing a clear view of the Temple walls, the courts, and the sanctuary, all of which were magnificent.

2 From the Greek word we get *Parousia*, *Coming*.

3 Or, *nation*.

4 The Greek word would include the Roman Empire, parts of the Parthian—formerly Persian—Empire, India, and modern Ethiopia.

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meant increased oppression by the Romans and increasing anger among the Jews. This led to insurgent groups using terror tactics.

As the tensions grew, false prophets would claim to be the Christ to draw away followers. The disciples should avoid them. Many who had committed themselves to following Jesus would become offended by his call to practice godliness and become enemies to the faithful, while many others would gradually lose their faith. The Apostles themselves would face intense opposition from the Gentiles, and some of them would be put to death.

In spite of all this, some would persevere and be saved. Jesus' message would be preached everywhere; from the perspective of the Apostles, this would include all places where Jews lived. The Apostle Thomas, made notorious for doubting in *John 20:24ff*, seems to have reached India, a center for the spice trade, possibly in the 50s; tradition says that he was put to death in northeastern India. Once the Apostles had completed this initial preaching, then the end would come.

## **The Abomination of Desolation (24:15)**

<sup>15</sup>“Therefore, when you see the ‘Abomination of Desolation’ spoken of by the prophet Daniel established in the holy place”—the reader take note!

Jesus referenced an alarming phrase from the prophecy of *Daniel 9*<sup>1</sup> for emphasis. The prophecy supported Jesus' claim that he must be “cut off” and that Jerusalem would be destroyed. The prophecy itself referred to the Roman general Titus, but Jesus used the phrase simply to get the Apostles' attention. Note that waiting until the actual fall of Jerusalem would have been too late to escape.

Matthew inserts an instruction to the Reader. During the first century, scrolls were expensive, and only a few had the opportunity to read *Matthew* for themselves. Instead, churches had a Reader role, where a trained individual read aloud to the congregation. Matthew wrote to Jews living in Judea and Galilee, and he sees this verse and the ones following it as critically important to his audience; therefore, he wants Readers to emphasize them. In Matthew's mind as he writes, Jesus' words were not theological but critically practical.

## **When the Time Comes, Flee! (24:16)**

<sup>16</sup>“Then those in Jerusalem must flee to the mountains! <sup>2</sup> <sup>17</sup>Those on the rooftops must not go down to take along their household belongings, <sup>18</sup>and those in the fields must not go in *to their homes* to take along their cloaks! <sup>19</sup>Woe to those who are pregnant or nursing in those days! <sup>20</sup>Pray that your flight

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1 The phrase Jesus used actually references a different prophecy in *Daniel 11:31* that predicted the desecration of the altar by the Greek king Antiochus IV around 167. However, Jesus clearly intended for the Apostles to think of *Daniel 9:27*, which has similar wording and describes the destruction of the Jerusalem.

2 That is, head east across the Jordan River to highlands on the other side.



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doesn't happen during the winter<sup>1</sup> nor a Sabbath!<sup>21</sup>For there will be an affliction the likes of which hasn't happened from the founding of the world until now, and which surely won't happen again.<sup>22</sup>If those days weren't cut short, no flesh would be saved, but for the sake of the chosen, those days will be cut short.

Using hyperbole, Jesus gave an urgent warning that his disciples must flee from Judea and Galilee when they saw the end approaching and not delay. What would happen would be far worse than anything since the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem over 600 years earlier, see *2 Kings 25:1–21*.

The Jews rebelled against Rome in 66, so the Christians had plenty of warning before the final siege of Jerusalem in 70. Tradition says that Christians, warned by their prophets, fled to Pella, one of the cities of the Decapolis east of the Jordan River.

By the time the Romans finished, hundreds of thousands of Jews were dead, and Jerusalem was a ruin with its city walls removed.

## **Rise of the False Christs (24:21)**

<sup>23</sup>“At that time, if anyone says, ‘Behold! The Anointed is here!’ don't believe it. <sup>24</sup>For false Anointed and false prophets will rise up, and they will produce great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the chosen. <sup>25</sup>Behold! I have forewarned you. <sup>26</sup>So then, if they say, ‘Behold! He is in the wilderness,’ don't go out; ‘Behold! He is in the inner room,’ don't believe it. <sup>27</sup>For just as lightening comes from the east and appears in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup>Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.

Jesus again warned of false Christs and prophets, and that they would even do signs and wonders in order to lead people astray. Jesus used a grim analogy, comparing Judea, thrown into anarchy by the rebellion and about to be destroyed, to a dead body, and power-hungry would-be leaders to vultures seeking a meal. Fanatics would use nationalism and religious fervor to deceive frightened people into following them, even as the Romans prepared to slaughter them all.

## **The Coming of Christ (24:29)**

<sup>29</sup>“Immediately after the affliction of those days,  
‘The sun will be darkened,  
and the moon won't give its light,  
and the stars will fall from the heavens,  
and the heavenly powers will be shaken.’<sup>2</sup>

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1 Or, *during stormy weather*; the Greek word means both.

2 See *Isaiah 13:9–13, Joel 2:10–11*. Jesus didn't intend to quote a particular Old Testament passage.

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<sup>30</sup>“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens, and all the clans <sup>1</sup> of the earth will mourn, and they will see

‘The Son of Man coming on the clouds of the heavens’ <sup>2</sup>  
with power and much glory. <sup>31</sup>He will send out his messengers with great trumpet calls, and they will gather his chosen from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other end.

Again, Jesus used hyperbole similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. “Coming on the clouds” was a metaphor used in the Old Testament for God coming in judgment to punish the wicked. In the future, Jesus would take on this role of divine judge. He would also come to rescue the faithful. Note the parallel between “gather his chosen” and verse 23.37, where Jesus longed to gather the people of Jerusalem, in order to shelter them.

## **Be Ready!**

Jesus, having established that a great catastrophe was on the horizon, used several parables and metaphors to teach the disciples the correct response to this prediction. In the following, Jesus assumed that some of his disciples would all still be alive when the time came. He focused on remaining prepared to flee, rather than becoming spiritually dull or even allowing sin to take over their lives. Many years would pass; they shouldn't allow themselves to be taken by surprise.

Note that, in the following, Jesus referred to the coming affliction and his subsequent return as one event, both of which required the same watchfulness and preparation.

Jesus' words still apply to us. We don't need a national catastrophe to face afflictions that test our faith. In addition, each of us faces our own “last days.” Hopefully, they come at the end of a long and productive life; regardless, if we adopt the “I'll work on my faith later” attitude, most likely we won't be ready.

## ***Parable of the Fig Tree (24:32)***

<sup>32</sup>“Learn from the parable of the fig tree! When its branches already become tender and its leaves emerge, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup>So also with you. When you see these things, you must recognize that it's near, at the gate! <sup>34</sup>Amen, I tell you that this generation surely won't pass away until all these things happen. <sup>35</sup>The heavens and the earth will pass away, but my words surely won't pass away.

People living in the region knew that fig trees put out their leaves just before the start of summer. Jesus said that the signs of the impending destruction of Jerusalem would be equally obvious. He then said that the current generation would experience this destruction, and that what he foretold was unalterable. He wasn't talking about the distant future, about things of no

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1 Or, *tribes, nations*. However, this isn't the word normally translated as *Gentiles*.

2 *Daniel 7:13*

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practical importance to the disciples. They must take what he said to heart, and they must teach others to do so as well.

## ***The End Would Come Unexpectedly (24:36)***

<sup>36</sup>“No one knows about these the days and hours <sup>1</sup> of these things, not the messengers nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup>For just like the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>For as they were in those days before the Flood, *people* were eating and drinking, marrying and be given in marriage, up to the days when Noah entered the ark, and they didn’t realize *anything* until the flood likewise took everything away, so also will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then, two men will be in the field; one is taken, and one is left. <sup>41</sup>Two women are grinding grain at the hand-mill;<sup>2</sup> one is taken, and one is left.

The end would come suddenly and unexpectedly. Not even Jesus knew the exact time, but only God. Jesus drew an analogy to Noah and the Flood. Life went on as usual, and no one realized that God was about to destroy the earth, even as Noah went into the ark. In the same way, no one would be ready for the affliction that would take place before Jesus came.

Jesus provided two common activities where men and women worked together. Suddenly, one would be taken and one left. Jesus didn't provide any information about what “taken” and “left” meant. In the context of the Flood, “taken” would appear to mean that one would be swept away in the affliction and one left unharmed, but that is unclear. Jesus’ point was that no one could predict what was coming or stop it from affecting them.

## ***Parable of the Thief 24:42)***

<sup>42</sup>“So, remain alert! You don’t know on what day your lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>Recognize that, since if the house-owner had known which watch of the night the thief is coming, he would have remained alert and not allowed his house to be dug<sup>3</sup> into. <sup>44</sup>Therefore, you also must get ready! For the Son of Man is coming at an hour you don’t expect.

Jesus emphasized that the disciples didn't know when he would come, so they must remain alert. Otherwise, they would be like an unwary homeowner who allowed his house to be robbed because he didn't realize the thief was coming.

## ***Parable of the Prudent and the Evil Foremen (24:45)***

<sup>45</sup>“So then, who is the faithful and prudent slave, whom the lord put in charge of his household in order to give them food on schedule? <sup>46</sup>Fortunate is that slave when the lord comes and finds him doing this. <sup>47</sup>Amen, I tell you that he put him in charge of all his possessions. <sup>48</sup>But, if that evil slave says in

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1 That is, the exact time.

2 Grinding grain by hand was a two-person job.

3 That is, the thief dug through a wall to access an inner room.

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his heart, 'My lord is delaying,'<sup>49</sup> and he begins to strike his fellow slaves, and he eats and drinks with the drunks,<sup>50</sup> that slave's lord will come on a day that he doesn't expect and in an hour that he doesn't know.<sup>51</sup> His lord will cut him in two and assign his share with the grifters. In that place there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

Jesus told a parable that contrasted how a slave put in charge of feeding his fellow slaves might behave. On one hand, he could make sure that he carried out his duties every day, regardless of how long his master took to return. When his master returned, the master would be pleased and give that slave greater responsibility; note that the increased responsibility also brought a greatly improved lifestyle for the slave.

On the other hand, the slave could see that his master was gone a long time, so he could take advantage of his lack of supervision; he not only stops doing his duties, but he also mistreats his fellow slaves. When the master returned, he would punish the slave in an extreme manner and throw him out to wail and grind his teeth with the hypocrites. Note that the slave survives a fatal punishment only to be punished further represents the severity of eternal punishment.

Faith produces godly behavior. Believers who maintained their faith would continue their godly behavior, however long Jesus took to return. Believers who neglected their faith would fall back into sin, which would further damage their faith.

Note that godly slave fulfilled his duties by serving his fellow slaves. On the other hand, the faithless slave sinned in two ways. He not only engaged in outward sin, he also mistreated the others. This is a reminder that godliness involves not only upright behavior but also service to others.

### ***Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (25:1)***

25<sup>1</sup> "At that time, the Kingdom of Heaven will be compared to ten maidens<sup>1</sup> who took their own lamps and went out for the Meeting of the Bridegroom. <sup>2</sup>Five of them were derelict and five of them prudent. <sup>3</sup>For the derelict brought their lamps without bringing their own olive oil, <sup>4</sup>but the prudent brought olive oil in flasks along with their own lamps. <sup>5</sup>"As the groom delayed, they became drowsy and were sleeping.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>6</sup>In the middle of the night shouts began, 'Behold! The bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' <sup>7</sup>Then all those maidens woke up and trimmed their own lamps. <sup>8</sup>The derelict said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your olive oil, because our lamps are going out!' <sup>9</sup>But the prudent replied saying, 'Never! Surely there isn't enough for us and for you. Instead, go to the vendors and buy *oil* for yourselves!' <sup>10</sup>While they went out to buy, the bridegroom came, and those prepared went in with him to the

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1 Literally, *virgins*. The word meant young women who were not yet married.

2 The Greek implies that they were asleep for a long time.

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wedding celebration, and then they locked the gate. <sup>11</sup>Afterwards, the rest of the maidens also came and said, ‘Lord! Lord! Please open up to us!’ <sup>12</sup>But he replied and said to them, ‘Amen, I tell you, I don’t know you.’

<sup>13</sup>“So, stay alert! Because you don’t know the day or the hour.”

In a Jewish wedding, the bride and her maidens would wait at her father’s house for the groom. The groom would come sometime after nightfall, and he might be quite late. When the groom arrived, some ceremonies would take place, then the wedding party would proceed through the streets to the groom’s home, with everyone carrying lamps or torches to show that they were part of the party. The main celebration took place at the groom’s house.

In telling the parable, Jesus left out a number of details—note that Jesus doesn’t mention the bride. He did this because his audience knew what happened at weddings; he wanted to focus on the details that had symbolism.

In the parable, the groom represented Jesus, and the groom’s arrival represented the great affliction Jesus had predicted, together with his subsequent coming. The maidens represented Christians living in Judea and Galilee, and the long delay, with the maidens falling asleep, represented that *all* the believers would lose their sense of urgency over Jesus’ prediction as many years passed. Jesus implied that this was understandable; Christians wouldn’t be at fault for going on with their lives.

When the announcement that the groom was coming was made, all the maidens woke up and adjusted their lamps. The lamps were part of the ceremony, and any maidens without lighted lamps could not participate. However, since the groom had taken a long time in coming, all the lamps were running low on oil.

Half the maidens were wise, and half were foolish. Both groups brought their lamps filled with oil, but the wise prepared and brought extra oil in case the groom took a long time to come, and they refilled their lamps. The foolish did not prepare, and their lamps began to go out. The wise didn’t have enough to share with the foolish, so the foolish had to leave the celebration to go out to buy oil in the middle of the night.

The somewhat harsh response of the wise to the foolish emphasized that the foolish could not expect others to bail them out at the last moment; their failure to prepare sealed their fate. Jesus emphasized this by using the word *own* repeatedly in the parable. In the same way, believers who were not prepared for the coming calamity would be swept away by it.

While the foolish maidens were out buying oil, the groom arrived, the wedding party returned to the groom’s house, and his attendants shut the gate. When the foolish finally arrived at his house, the groom sent them away. This represented the seriousness and finality for believers who failed to prepare; Jesus would shut out and reject them.

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This raises two questions. “Why would Jesus reject believers caught up in the destruction of Jerusalem?” The answer lies in *why* they were caught up. People had plenty of time to flee before it was too late, in spite of Jesus’ earlier hyperbole about not having time to return to their houses. They would stay because they didn’t take Jesus seriously, and because they were too attached to their lifestyles, possessions, patriotism, et cetera, not to leave them. They hadn’t maintained their faith, and their faith would fail when tested.

“What preparations should those believers have made?” Jesus provided a clue in the parable of the sower and the four soils. In the weedy third soil, the seed sprouted and the plants grew up; however, later on, weeds choked them out. Garden plants require attention, and weeds grow in the good soil of a garden. The solution is to cultivate the plants while removing the weeds. To cultivate our faith, we can read the Bible, pray, build good relationships with other believers, and strive to do God’s will. We must also continue to uproot sin and complacency as they appear.

## **Parables on True Faithfulness**

Jesus told two more parables of a more general nature. Both deal with true faithfulness and focus on the idea that faith produces action. These parables parallel the last two remarks of the first teaching section, 7:21ff and 7:24ff, in that they show that faith must lead to action.

### ***Parable of the Lazy Slave (25:14)***

<sup>14</sup>“For it’s just like a man going on a journey who called his own slaves and entrusted his belongings to them. <sup>15</sup>He gave five *silver bars*<sup>1</sup> to this, and two to this, and one to this, to each according to his own ability, and he left. Immediately, <sup>16</sup>the one having received five *silver bars* went and worked with them, and he gained another five. <sup>17</sup>Likewise, the slave with two gained another two. <sup>18</sup>But the slave having received one went and dug in the ground and hid his lord’s silver.

<sup>19</sup>“After much time, the slaves’ lord came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>The slave having received five *silver bars* approached and presented another five *silver bars*, saying, ‘Lord, you entrusted five *silver bars* to me. Look! I gained another five *silver bars*.’ <sup>21</sup>His lord said to him, ‘Good and faithful servant, well done! You were faithful with little; I will put you in charge of much. Enter into your master’s joy.’ <sup>22</sup>The slave with two *silver bars* also approached and said, ‘Lord, you entrusted two *silver bars* to me. Look! I gained another two *silver bars*.’ <sup>21</sup>His lord said to him, ‘Good and faithful servant, well done! You were faithful with little; I will put you in charge of much. Enter into your master’s joy.’

<sup>24</sup>“The slave having received one *silver bar* also approached and said, ‘Lord, I know that you are a hard man, reaping from where you didn’t sow and gathering from where you didn’t winnow,<sup>2</sup> and I was afraid. I went out and hid your *silver bar* in the ground. Look! Have what’s yours.’ <sup>26</sup>His master replied

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1 Seventy-five pounds of silver was worth about \$18,000 in 2020.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

and said to him, ‘Wicked and lazy slave! Were you aware that I harvest from where I didn't sow and gather from where I didn't winnow? <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have deposited my silver with the money-changers, and when I returned, I would have received what's mine with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take the *silver bar* from him and give it to the one having ten *silver bars*. <sup>29</sup>For to all who have, to them will be given, and they will have much, but to all who don't have, even what they have will be taken away from them. <sup>30</sup>And this worthless slave, cast him out into the darkness outside. In that place there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.’

In the parable, the master gave his slaves responsibilities in keeping with their abilities, so the master's expectations were reasonable. In addition, these slaves, who were responsible for the master's finances, lived very secure and comfortable lifestyles compared to free laborers.

When two of the slaves completed their responsibilities, the master rewarded them in exactly the same way; he looked at their faithfulness and not the amount of his gain.

However, the slave with the fewest responsibilities decided to do nothing; he justified this by returning what his master had entrusted to him. When his master returned, the slave justified himself by condemning his master as a thief who profited from other's labor. He also offered the excuse that he was afraid.

The master agreed that he profited from the work of his slaves; the slave should have known this and worked hard. Instead, he lazed around for all the time his master was away, at the master's expense. Calling the slave wicked and lazy, the master threw the slave out.

The master represents Jesus, and the slaves represent believers. The parable contains several lessons.

- Jesus' servants are far better off than free unbelievers
- Jesus has expectations of us that are appropriate to our abilities
- Jesus will reward us based on our willingness to serve, not on the “greatness” of what we accomplish
- We must resist the temptations to view Jesus as harsh and demanding or to give in to our insecurities
- Faith produces effort; Jesus will reject those who make no effort

### ***Parable of the Sheep and Goats (25:31)***

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the messengers with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup>All the Tribes will be gathered before him, and he will separate them from one another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

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2 The slave accused the master of harvesting from other people's field and gathering grain from other people's threshing floors; he was calling his master a thief.

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<sup>34</sup>“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world! For I was hungry, and you gave me *food* to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger to you, and you took me in as a guest, <sup>36</sup>naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after for me. I was in prison, and you came to me.’ <sup>1</sup>

<sup>37</sup>“Then the godly will answer him saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and take you in as a guest, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and come to you?’

<sup>40</sup>“Then the King will answer them, saying, ‘Amen, I tell you, as much as you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

<sup>41</sup>“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘You accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the Slanderer and his messengers! <sup>42</sup>For I was hungry, and you didn’t give me *food* to eat. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me anything to drink. <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger, and you didn’t take me in as a guest, naked, and you didn’t clothe me, weak and in prison, and you didn’t look after me.’

<sup>44</sup>“Then they will answer him saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or weak or in prison, and we didn’t minister to you?’

<sup>45</sup>“Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Amen, I tell you, as much as you didn’t do for one of these least, neither did you do for me.’

<sup>46</sup>“And these will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life.”

### ***Note on Sheep and Goats***

On one level, ancient people considered sheep and goats to be equivalent. For example, in *Exodus* 12:5, God told Moses that the Passover lamb could be taken from the sheep or the goats. Both animals live in herds, and the hair and skins of both are useful. Additionally, goats can be milked. However, there are differences. Goats are intelligent, while sheep are dumb and helpless. Tending goats required little effort compared to sheep, which required continuous hard work. Forced to choose, most people would prefer to be compared to a goat rather than a sheep.

Jesus ended with a parable about the final judgment. He compared the godly to sheep and the condemned to goats. In doing this, Jesus implied that those who were dumb and helpless in the eyes of the world would be chosen over the wise and independent.

He also noted that *all* the nations, including the Jews, would be included in this judgment, and no preference would be shown to the Jews. In the Old Testament, God chose the Israelites to be his treasured possession and holy nation—see *Exodus* 19:1–6, but ultimate his purpose was

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1 Prisoners were fed by friends who brought food to them.



## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

to fulfill his promise to Abraham that *all* nations would be blessed through him—see *Genesis* 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4.

In the context of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, two things would happen. First, with the coming of the new kingdom, God's ultimate plan to bless all nations would be fulfilled. Second, Israel, aka the Jews, had failed to keep the covenant God made with them, and God would withdraw their favored nation status. That didn't mean that God was rejecting *all* Jews; It meant that he would set aside the old covenant, and that simply being a Jew would no longer ensure salvation. Jews who put their faith in Jesus would be saved, just like everyone else.

The sheep were blessed because they had cared for the least of Jesus' followers in small ways. They would inherit Jesus' eternal kingdom. The goats were cursed because they failed to care for the least of Jesus' followers. They were destined for eternal fire, which God had prepared to punish the Devil.

Note that the goats considered themselves to be followers of Jesus and that they were surprised when Jesus condemned them. Jesus used the parable to indicate that true faith produces active concern for others; lack of concern indicates a lack of faith.

Note also that the king refers to the lowly as his brothers. In doing this, Jesus elevated the status of believers to royalty.

Throughout *Matthew*, Jesus had described judgment for those whom he rejected in various unpleasant ways. In this last parable, however, Jesus took this to a new level. Those who fell short of salvation would share the same fiery, eternal punishment prepared for the Devil himself.

### **Conclusion (26:1)**

26 <sup>1</sup>When Jesus had finished all these teachings, he said to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>“You know that the Passover will take place in two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified!”

After Jesus finished instructing the disciples, he told them that he would be crucified in two days. This was the fourth time he had warned them, however, they still did not accept it.

### **Chapters 26–28: Jesus' Arrest, Trial, Death, and Resurrection**

This narrative section describes the climax of Jesus' ministry. In the previous section, Jesus' confronted the religious leaders publicly and repeatedly; pushing them past their limits. Now, Jesus celebrates the Passover feast with his disciples and prepares for his ordeal. In less than 24 hours, he will be dead and placed in a tomb. However, three days and nights later, he will rise from the dead and give his final instructions to his disciples.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **The Religious Leaders Plot to Kill Jesus (26:3)**

<sup>26:3</sup>Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered together in the courtyard of the Chief Priest, named Caiaphas. They consulted together how they might cunningly seize Jesus and kill him, <sup>5</sup>but they were saying, “Not during the Feast, so that no uproar occurs among the people!”

The chief priests and other wealthy leaders met together to plot how to get rid of Jesus. They knew that the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin would go along with their plans, and they had the money and political power to carry them out. Their one concern was to do this quietly, out of the public view, because they feared that the people might riot.

## **A Woman Pours Perfume on Jesus (26:6)**

<sup>6</sup>While Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the Leper, <sup>1</sup> a woman having an alabaster jar <sup>2</sup> of very expensive fragrant oil <sup>3</sup> approached him and poured it out on his head as he reclined. <sup>8</sup>When the disciples saw this, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? <sup>9</sup>For it could have been sold for much and given to the poor!” <sup>10</sup>Jesus noticed this and said to them, “Why are you causing trouble for this woman? For she has done a good deed by me. <sup>11</sup>For you always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me. <sup>12</sup>For she applied this fragrant oil on my body in order to prepare me to be buried. <sup>13</sup>Amen, I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in all the world, what she has done will be spoken of, as a memorial of her.

Matthew provided minimal details of an event recorded in all four Gospels. Simon the Leper held a banquet on Jesus' behalf. As Jesus, the guest of honor, reclined at the table, a woman came in and poured very expensive fragrant oil on Jesus' head.

At least some of Jesus' disciples saw this as a waste and rebuked the woman, claiming that the oil should have been sold and the money given to the poor. In addition, they were probably upset that the woman had approached Jesus in a formal setting such as a banquet, which violated social norms.

Jesus told his disciples to leave the woman alone, and he commended her. He saw symbolic significance in what she had done, since he was about to die. Jewish burial custom required washing a dead body and wrapping it in strips of cloth before burial; those who could afford it used fragrant oils during this process.

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1 This Simon was wealthy enough to hold a banquet. Possibly, he had some form of skin disease that had healed, allowing him to return to society but leaving him with the nickname.

2 Alabaster jars were made in Egypt from a soft, white stone that is similar to marble. The jar held around 16 ounces; see *John* 12:3 that says the contents weighed around a pound, or 16 ounces of water.

3 *Mark* 14:3–5 and *John* 12:3–5 state the contents was olive oil mixed with nard, or spikenard, and that Judas Iscariot estimated the value at 300 denarii, or about a laborer's annual wages. Brides commonly used the oil to prepare themselves for their weddings.

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## **Judas Iscariot Agrees to Betray Jesus (26:14)**

<sup>14</sup>Then one of the Twelve, Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests, <sup>15</sup>saying, “What are you willing to give me, that I will hand him over to you?” They set a price with him of thirty silver. <sup>1</sup> <sup>16</sup>So, from that time he sought an opportunity to hand Jesus over.

Matthew strongly implies that the woman “wasting” the fragrant oil, and Jesus’ subsequent support for her, was the last straw for Judas. He went to the chief priests and asked what they would pay him if he handed Jesus over to them. The chief priests offered 30 silver coins; possibly staters<sup>2</sup> that were worth four denarii each. Ironically, this was the price the owner of an ox that gored someone else’s slave paid to compensate the slave’s owner, see *Exodus* 21:32.

Judas certainly felt betrayed by Jesus; in Judas’ mind, he had sacrificed everything for Jesus, and now Jesus intended to die. Perhaps he thought that helping Jesus to fulfill his death wish while rebuilding his own life was justified. However, Jesus had given Judas authority to do miracles, just as he had the other Apostles, and Judas no doubt had done many miracles himself. This alone was all the evidence he needed to know that God had sent Jesus, and that Judas simply needed to trust.

## **Preparing for the Passover Meal (26:17)**

<sup>17</sup>On the first of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, <sup>3</sup> Jesus’ disciples approached him saying, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover lamb?” <sup>18</sup>Jesus said, “Go into the city to a certain man <sup>4</sup> and tell him, ‘The teacher says, “My time is near; I will celebrate the Passover at your house with my disciples.”’” <sup>19</sup>The disciples did as Jesus directed them and prepared the Passover.

This Passover probably fell on a Thursday, April 6, 30, <sup>5</sup> and the first day of Unleavened Bread fell on a Friday. That meant that both the following Friday and Saturday were Sabbath days that year, requiring the Jews to rest for two days in a row.

Jesus’ disciples asked him where they should make preparations for the Passover meal. Jesus mentioned a certain person, and his disciples went to him and prepared the meal at his house. This person was wealthy to own a large house with room for all of them, which points to

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1 See *Zechariah* 11:12–13. Matthew means 30 silver coins; however, in Zechariah’s day, silver would be weighed out, and Matthew suggests this.

2 27:6 says that the chief priest considered putting the coins in the Temple treasure; therefore, the coins were either didrachmas or staters. However, didrachmas were scarce. Also, a stater weighed about the same as a shekel, which Matthew alludes to by referring to *Zechariah*.

3 Matthew means the day before the Passover, when the priests slaughtered the lambs. Matthew informally refers to this day, and the Passover itself, as part of the Feast of Unleavened bread.

4 Jesus apparently named an individual, but Matthew didn’t publish his name.

5 Or, Friday, April 7, 30. See the section *Additional Information—The Day of Jesus’ Death* for a discussion.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

a location on the west side of Jerusalem. This meal, Jesus' last, would become known as the Last Supper.

## **Jesus Announces His Betrayal (26:20)**

<sup>20</sup>When evening came, he was reclining with the Twelve. <sup>21</sup>As he was eating with them he said, "Amen, I tell you that one of you will hand me over." <sup>22</sup>They were extremely distressed, and they each one began to say, "Lord, it isn't me, is it?" <sup>23</sup>He replied, saying, "The one whose hand dipped into the dish with mine, this one will hand me over. <sup>24</sup>For, indeed, the Son of Man goes just as was written about him. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is handed over. It would be better for him if that man hadn't been born!" <sup>25</sup>Then Judas, the one handing him over, replied to him and said, "Rabbi, it isn't me, is it?" Jesus said to him, "You say."

Middle Eastern meals were served in shared dishes; those reclining at the table used pieces of bread to scoop out food. This made eating a meal more intimate, and eating with someone and then betraying them was considered despicable.

As they were eating, Jesus announced that one of them would betray him. As the disciples protested, Jesus warned them of the severe consequences. In doing this, Jesus gave Judas one last chance to repent of what he was about to do. Note that Jesus had been fully aware of Judas intentions for some time, yet the disciples were unaware. Jesus had treated Judas the same as the others, all of whom would go on to serve him faithfully and even lay down their lives for him.

Judas responded with deception. Jesus gave him a cryptic response; he only acknowledged that Judas has said something without agreeing or disagreeing. Jesus would continue to give these cryptic replies to the Chief Priest and the Roman governor.

## **The Bread and the Wine (26:26)**

<sup>26</sup>While they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed it. He broke it and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take and eat! This is my body." <sup>27</sup>He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "All of you drink from this, <sup>28</sup>for this is my blood of the covenant poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sin. <sup>29</sup>I tell you, I surely won't drink of this, the produce of the grapevine, from now until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom.

A host could honor his guests by serving them. Jesus did this with bread and a cup of wine. However, he added special significance. The bread represented his body that was about to be "broken" on the cross, and the wine in the cup represented his blood that would soon be poured out.

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In *Exodus* 24:3ff, Moses established the covenant between God and the Israelites with the blood of bulls. Jesus intended to establish a new covenant through his own blood, poured out on the cross, that would provide eternal forgiveness for those who gave themselves to him.

Jesus then made a prediction of both his death and his resurrection. He wouldn't drink wine again until after he had completed his work on the cross and then raised from the dead.

This event became the pattern for Communion, or the Lord's Supper, which remembers Jesus' death on our behalf. Curiously, none of the Gospels record an instruction from Jesus to make this a regular practice. However, the Apostle Paul wrote in *1 Corinthians*,

<sup>11:23</sup>“For I, having received *this* from the Lord, also passed this on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread <sup>24</sup>and, having given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you; do this as a remembrance of me.’ <sup>25</sup>In the same way, after the meal, he also *took* the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, as often as you drink, in remembrance of me.’” (*1 Corinthians* 11:23–25)

### **The Disciples Will Stumble, Peter Will Deny Jesus (26:30)**

<sup>30</sup>Having sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

<sup>31</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “This night, all of you will stumble because of me, for it was written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” <sup>1</sup>

<sup>32</sup>But after my resurrection, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

<sup>33</sup>But Peter responded to him saying, “Even if all stumble because of you, I will never stumble.”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus declared to him, “Amen, I tell you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times. <sup>35</sup>Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I surely won't deny you.” And all the disciples said likewise.

After ending the Passover meal with a hymn, Jesus led them out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, to the Mount of Olives. Along the way, Jesus warned the disciples that, during the night, their courage and commitment would fail. However, after he was raised from the dead, he would meet them in Galilee.

Peter responded that he wouldn't falter, regardless of what the others did. Jesus then told him that before a rooster crowed, Peter would deny him three times. Peter insisted that he would die first. This helps to explain Peter's following actions.

We often criticize Peter for running his mouth, but he only said what the others were thinking. Peter's willingness to speak up when others wouldn't was one of his qualities that soon made him a great leader.

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1 *Zechariah* 13:7

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## **Jesus Prays in Gethsemane (26:36)**

<sup>36</sup>Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane. <sup>1</sup> He said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there so that I can pray.” <sup>37</sup>He took Rock and the two sons of Zebedee and began to be grieved and distressed; then he said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me!”

<sup>39</sup>Going on a little, he fell on his face, and he prayed, saying, “My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not as I want but as you *do*.” <sup>40</sup>And then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Rock, “So, you weren't strong enough to keep watch with me for one hour? <sup>41</sup>Keep watch and pray! Then you won't come into temptation. Indeed, the spirit <sup>2</sup> is eager, but the flesh is weak.”

<sup>42</sup>He went away again. For the second time he prayed, saying, “My Father, if this can't pass unless I drink it, your will be done!” <sup>43</sup>Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup>Leaving them, he again went away. For the third time he prayed, saying the same things again.

<sup>45</sup>Then he came to the disciples and said, “You sleep and rest for the remainder *of the time*. <sup>3</sup> Behold! The hour has come near, and the Son of Man is handed over into the hands of sinners. Get up! We must go! Behold! The one who hands me over has come near.”

Jesus came to a quiet place and told his disciples to sit and wait for him. He then took Peter, James, and John with him a way farther, where the others couldn't hear. Jesus then told the three that he was overwhelmed with anxiety. Most likely, he didn't want the others to see him struggling, but he wanted his three closest disciples to understand and keep watch while he prayed.

He went off by himself and fell down on his face to pray. Using the idea of drinking from a cup to represent the brutal treatment he knew he was about to receive, he asked God to free him from the coming ordeal. He then expressed his commitment to doing God's will and not his own.

Using very few words, Matthew told us that Jesus struggled immensely to go through with God's plan. He was honest with God about his feelings, and he sought God's strength to overcome them. Denying his own feelings and desires, Jesus committed himself to completing it.

After about an hour, Jesus went back to check on Peter, James, and John. He expected them to be praying or at least standing guard, but they were all asleep. Jesus admonished them that they needed to pray for strength so that they wouldn't falter, as he had warned them

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<sup>1</sup> This is from an Aramaic word that meant *oil press*. *John* 18:1 refers to it as a garden or a vineyard.

<sup>2</sup> Or, *the Spirit*. Whether Jesus referred to the disciples' intentions or the Holy Spirit is unclear.

<sup>3</sup> The exact meaning of this sentence is unclear, but Jesus was admonishing them for what they had already done, having lost their opportunity to prepare themselves.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

they would. Their intentions were good, but they were too weak to carry them out without God's help.

Jesus went away and prayed again; his words indicate that he was more resolved than before. Returning to the disciples, he again found them sleeping. Without waking them, he went away to pray a third time. We may assume he prayed until he was fully resolved and in control of his emotions.

Returning to the three a third time, he woke them and expressed his disappointment; they had wasted their opportunity to find strength in prayer. He then told them to get up, they needed to rejoin the others. The time had come, and his betrayer was near.

### **Judas Betrays Jesus (26:47)**

<sup>47</sup>While Jesus was still talking, behold! Judas, one of the Twelve, came, and with him a large crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and elders of the people. <sup>1</sup> <sup>48</sup>He who was handing him over had given them a sign, saying, "The one I kiss is he, arrest him!" <sup>49</sup>Immediately he went to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and he earnestly kissed him. <sup>50</sup>Jesus said to him, "Comrade, why <sup>2</sup> are you here?" Then they approached Jesus, threw their hands on him, and arrested him.

<sup>51</sup>Behold! One of those with Jesus reached out his hand, drew his sword, <sup>3</sup> and striking the Chief Priest's slave, he cut off his ear. <sup>52</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Return your sword to its place! For all who draw the sword will die by the sword. <sup>53</sup>Or do you think that I'm unable to call upon my Father, and he will provide me, right now, with more than twelve legions <sup>4</sup> of messengers? <sup>54</sup>How then would the Scriptures be fulfilled *that say* that it must happen this way?

<sup>55</sup>At that hour, Jesus said to the crowd, "Do you come upon me like a thief, with swords and clubs, to capture me? Each day I was sitting in the Temple teaching, and you didn't arrest me. <sup>56</sup>But this happened entirely so that the Scriptures of the prophets would be fulfilled. Then all the disciples abandoned him and fled.

Judas arrived with a crowd of armed Temple guards and slaves, including one of whom belonged to the Chief Priest and was most likely in charge. The chief priests expected Jesus and his followers to arms themselves as rebels would, and the guards came ready for a fight.

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- 1 The Temple Warden was the second highest ranking chief priest. He was in charge of security at the Temple, and he had Levites serving as an armed guard. The wealthy aristocrats had also sent some of their slaves.
  - 2 Literally, *for what reason?* Jesus seemed to be speaking cryptically. However, many translators see this as a command, *do what you came for*; the Greek is terse and unclear.
  - 3 *Luke 22:36–38* says that Jesus, after eating the Passover, told his disciples to buy swords; the disciples found two of them at the house where they were eating. Most likely, Jesus did this so that the disciples would know that he *didn't* want them to use them, even if they had them.
  - 4 A *legion* was a Latin word for an army of 6,000 soldiers.

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Judas wanted to point out Jesus to the guards, so he used a kiss, a normal greeting among close friends, as a signal. Jesus played along with Judas, acting as if he didn't know what Judas was doing. Perhaps Jesus wanted to give Judas every opportunity to repent, even at the end, or perhaps Jesus was simply practicing his teachings about loving your enemies and not judging them.

When Jesus' disciples realized what was happening, one of them drew a sword and attacked the slave of the Chief Priest, cutting off his ear. The disciples swung down and at an angle at the man's neck, and the man ducked slightly; otherwise, the disciple would have killed him. Peter, and then the others, had all said that they were ready to die with Jesus, and one of them tried to make good on his promise. We may assume that Jesus somehow intervened, so that the guards didn't attack. However, Matthew only tells us that Jesus rebuked the disciple's lack of faith; the disciple didn't trust that God could defend his Christ, nor did he trust that God had a purpose in allowing Jesus to be arrested. In fact, Jesus had been telling them that this must happen for some time.

At this, the disciples' faith failed, just as Jesus had said, and they all ran off. <sup>1</sup>

## **Jesus Tried Before the Sanhedrin (26:57)**

<sup>57</sup>Those who had arrested Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the Chief Priest, where the scribes and elders had gathered. <sup>58</sup>Rock followed him at a distance as far as the gate of the Chief Priest, and he went inside and sat down with the attendants <sup>2</sup> to see the outcome.

<sup>59</sup>The Chief Priest and the entire High Court sought false testimony against Jesus so that they could put him to death. <sup>60</sup>They found nothing, many false witnesses having come forward. Finally, two came forward, <sup>61</sup>saying, "This man said, 'I'm able to destroy God's sanctuary, and after three days, to rebuild it.'" The Chief Priest rose up and said to him, "You say nothing in reply? What are these men testifying against you?" <sup>63</sup>But Jesus remained silent.

Then the Chief Priest said to him, "I command you on oath by the living God! <sup>3</sup> Tell us if you are the Anointed, the Son of God!" <sup>64</sup>Jesus said to him, "You say. Yet I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming upon the clouds of the heavens."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Then the Chief Priest tore his robes and said, "He blasphemed! What need do we still have of witnesses? Look! Now you heard the blasphemy! <sup>66</sup>What do you think?" They answered him, "He is

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1 Over 50 years later, John corrected the record, noting that he stayed close to Jesus the entire time. He also identified Peter as the one who attacked with the sword. See *John* 18:15–16, 19:25–27.

2 These were slaves that conducted the business of the Chief Priest's household.

3 The Chief Priest placed Jesus under an oath that required him to answer. From this Greek word we get *exorcise*.

4 See *Daniel* 7:13–14, *Psalms* 110:1.



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worthy of death!”<sup>67</sup> Then they spat in his face and beat him with their fists. They slapped him<sup>68</sup> and said, “Prophecy to us, Anointed! Who’s hitting you?”

The Chief Priest assembled the Sanhedrin at his house, sometime well before dawn. He did this for the sake of secrecy; he wanted Jesus tried, convicted, and handed over to Pilate for execution before Jerusalem woke.

The Sanhedrin went through the formalities of a trial and called a number of witnesses. However, the court found that none of the testimony was valid; two people had to give the same testimony for it to be accepted. Finally, two men came together and claimed that Jesus intended to destroy the sanctuary and then rebuild it. *John 2:18ff* tells us what actually happened.

<sup>2:18</sup> The Jews replied and said to him, “What sign will you show us, *to justify* that you do these things?”<sup>19</sup> Jesus replied and said to them, “Destroy this sanctuary! And in three days, I will raise it.”<sup>20</sup> Then the Jews said, “This sanctuary was built forty-six years ago, and you, in three days, will raise it?”<sup>21</sup> But he was speaking about the sanctuary of his body. (*John 2:18–21*)

Thus, their claim, that Jesus intended to destroy the sanctuary, was false. The Chief Priest tried to force Jesus to respond to this accusation, but Jesus remained silent.

Then the Chief Priest had an idea. He used his authority to force Jesus to give an answer and then asked if Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God. Jesus answered cryptically, only acknowledging that the Chief Priest had said so. However, to meet the Chief Priest’s demand, he referred to himself as the Son of Man and tied two well-known prophecies about the Christ together. In doing so, he indirectly agreed with the Chief Priest’s statement.

The Chief Priest immediately accused Jesus of blasphemy. Tearing his clothing was a customary show of outrage at what he had heard. The Sanhedrin agreed Jesus had blasphemed and said that he should die.

Jesus had been publicly provoking them for days; now, all their anger overflowed against him. They spat in his face, beat him, and mocked him; the high court turned into a violent mob.

### **Peter Denies Jesus Three Times (26:69)**

<sup>69</sup> Rock was sitting in the courtyard, and one little girl<sup>1</sup> approached him and said, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee!”<sup>70</sup> Rock denied it before them all, saying, “I don’t know what you are saying!”<sup>71</sup> When he had gone outside the gate, another girl saw him and said to those there, “This man was with Jesus the Nazarene!”<sup>72</sup> Again Rock denied it, with an oath; “I don’t know the man!”<sup>73</sup> After a short time, those standing around approached him and said to Rock, “You really are one of them, as your

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1 Here, *little girl* refers to a low-ranking slave performing the most menial tasks in the household.

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speech makes clear!” <sup>74</sup>Then he began to curse <sup>1</sup> and make oaths, “I don’t know the man!” Immediately, a rooster crowed.

<sup>75</sup>Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times,” and he went outside and wailed bitterly.

While Peter sat and waited, a slave woman saw that he didn’t belong in the Chief Priest’s courtyard and realized that he had followed Jesus in. She promptly accused him, but Peter denied any knowledge of Jesus. Realizing that he was in trouble, Peter went outside; perhaps some of the slaves followed him. Another slave woman accused him, and this time Peter made an oath that he didn’t know Jesus. Next, a group approached him, saying that his Galilean accent gave him away. Peter answered with more oaths, this time calling for harm to come upon him if he lied, that he didn’t know Jesus. Then a rooster crowed. Peter remembered Jesus’ warning and his own brash claims. Matthew says that he went outside, probably meaning outside the city, where he mourned his failure.

Rather than judge Peter harshly, we should ask ourselves what we would have done in his situation.

### **Jesus Handed Over to Pilate (27:1)**

**27** <sup>1</sup>When first light came, the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus in order to put him to death. <sup>2</sup>Binding him, they led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

The Sanhedrin rules required that trials involving a death sentence take place during the day; they met briefly at dawn to confirm their judgment that Jesus deserved death. The Romans didn’t allow the Jews to carry out death sentences, so handed Jesus over to the Roman governor, Pilate. They wanted him to carry out their request for a death sentence quickly; if Pilate delayed, then word would get out, and the people might rise up to support Jesus.

### **Judas’ Remorse (27:3)**

<sup>3</sup>Then Judas, who had handed him over, saw that Jesus had been sentenced. Having regretted *his actions*, he returned the thirty silver to the chief priests and elders, <sup>4</sup>saying, “I sinned by handing over innocent blood!” They said, “What is that to us? You see to it!” <sup>5</sup>Judas hurled the silver toward <sup>2</sup> the

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1 Peter bound himself with oaths that had consequences such, as, “May God strike me dead if I know him!” This does not necessarily imply foul language.

2 Typically, *into*. However, the Greek word can also mean *toward*. Matthew says that Judas through the money toward or into the sanctuary itself. However, it’s highly unlikely the priests would allow Judas to get near the sanctuary, much less allow him to throw anything into it.

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sanctuary and left. He went away and hanged himself. <sup>6</sup>The chief priests removed the silver and said, “It isn’t proper to put this into the Temple treasury, since it’s blood money. <sup>7</sup>They took counsel and bought the potter’s field for burying foreigners. <sup>8</sup>Because of this, that field has been called Bloody Field until today. <sup>9</sup>Then the saying of Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying,

‘And they took the thirty silver, the price of the one having been appraised, the one the sons of Israel appraised, and they gave it for the potter’s field, just as my Lord directed.’ <sup>1</sup>

Judas saw the consequences of his betrayal and was filled with remorse. He went back to the chief priests seeking forgiveness, but they dismissed him. Judas then took their money and threw it toward the sanctuary; he then went out of the city and hanged himself.

The chief priests retrieved the money and set it aside while they considered what to do with it. They considered it defiled because it had been used to buy a man’s death; the irony that *they* were the ones who had defiled the money was lost on them.

Matthew’s audience was familiar with the details of what happened next, so he didn’t include them. Perhaps the owner of the field discovered Judas’ body hanging from a tree and realized the connection to the chief priests, so the chief priests used the defiled money to buy the defiled field. Regardless, the field was defiled by Judas’ corpse, so the chief priests turned it into a place for burying foreigners. Traditionally, the field was located in the southeast corner of the Hinnom Valley, but this isn’t certain. See the section *Additional Information—How Judas Died* for further discussion.

Matthew was following accepted Jewish scribal tradition when he made his heavily customized quotation that links *Zechariah* to *Jeremiah*. This may not seem right to twenty-first century readers, but the Jewish Christians who heard it found it clever. He wanted his audience to think of *Jeremiah* 19, where the prophet bought a potter’s jar and called the elders and priests to come to a defiled place in the Hinnom Valley. There, Jeremiah predicted the utter destruction of Jerusalem, breaking the jar as an illustration of what would happen to the city. Jeremiah then said that the spot where they stood would be used as a burial site. The Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem within the next 20 years. Matthew saw the events surrounding Judas as a partial fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, with the second destruction of Jerusalem looming.

### **Jesus Before Pilate (27:11)**

<sup>11</sup>Jesus was made to stand before the governor, and the governor questioned him, saying, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say.” <sup>12</sup>During the accusations of the chief priests and elders, he said nothing in reply. <sup>13</sup>Then Pilate said to him, “You hear how much they are testifying against you, don’t you?” <sup>14</sup>Jesus didn’t answer him, not one word, so that the governor marveled exceedingly.

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1 See *Zechariah* 11:7–14, which is the basis for Matthew’s mashed up quotation. See also *Jeremiah* 19, which probably the main passage to which Matthew referred.

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<sup>15</sup>During the feast, the governor traditionally released one of the prisoners to the crowd that they wanted. <sup>16</sup>At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner called [Jesus] <sup>1</sup> Barabbas. <sup>2</sup> <sup>17</sup>After they assembled, Pilate said to them, “Which one do you want me to release to you, Barabbas or Jesus called the Anointed?” <sup>18</sup>For he knew that they had handed him over out of envy.

<sup>19</sup>While he was sitting on the judgment seat, <sup>3</sup> his woman sent to him, saying, “Have nothing to do with that just man! Today I have suffered much in a dream because of him.”

<sup>20</sup>The chief priests and the elder persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas, but that they should put Jesus to death. <sup>21</sup>The governor kept saying to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” The crowd said, “Barabbas!” <sup>22</sup>Pilate said to them, “What then will I do with Jesus called the Anointed?” They all said, “Crucify him!” <sup>23</sup>He said, “What evil has he done?” They cried out exceedingly, saying, “Crucify him!”

<sup>24</sup>Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing; instead, more uproar was happening. He took water and washed his hands before the crowd and said, “I’m innocent of this man’s blood. You see to it!” <sup>25</sup>All the people responded saying, “His blood be upon us and upon our children!” <sup>26</sup>Then Pilate released Barabbas to them, but he handed over Jesus, having scourged <sup>4</sup> him, so that he could be crucified.

Standing before Pilate, Jesus gave him a cryptic response when asked if he was the king of the Jews, only acknowledging that Pilate said so. As the religious leaders accused him, Jesus said nothing at all. Pilate marveled at Jesus’ composure and confidence, for he could see that Jesus had already received a beating.

*Mark 15:7* tells us that Pilate was holding three men in prison; their leader was a notorious man who called himself the Son of the Father. He had committed murder during a recent uprising, and the three of them were scheduled to be crucified that day. The Romans tended to schedule these executions on religious holidays so that the most people would see them, and three crosses had been prepared for them.

The chief priests were prepared for Pilate to play tricks. They made sure that a crowd was on hand composed mostly of their own slaves. It was just after dawn and the normal crowds hadn’t gathered, especially not at Herod’s Palace, where Pilate stayed during the Feasts.

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1 This appears to be an early addition to the Greek text, but the editors of the standard text chose to include in brackets it because it appears in a fourth century manuscript and early Syriac—a form of Aramaic—translations. Most likely, it was added to enhance the irony of the name Barabbas—see the note below—and isn’t original.

2 Barabbas means *Son of the Father* in Aramaic.

3 A bench on a platform with steps leading up to it where a governor would hear cases, similar to a modern judge’s bench.

4 This was the most severe form of flogging; it could be fatal.

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Knowing that Pilate would offer to release a prisoner, the religious leaders had prepped the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead of Jesus. This conveniently left a fully prepared cross available, so that Pilate could execute Jesus immediately. Otherwise, Pilate would have delayed the execution for days or weeks and eventually released Jesus.

Matthew sees the irony in this plan. The religious leaders asked for a false, murderous Son of the Father because they hated the true, life-giving one.

While the crowd assembled, Pilate's wife sent him a message warning him to not harm Jesus. Romans tended to take such signs very seriously, and this gave Pilate even more motivation to avoid punishing Jesus.

However, the crowd did their masters' bidding, and they loudly demanded that Pilate release Barabbas. When Pilate protested and tried to offer to release Jesus, the crowd obediently demanded that Pilate have Jesus crucified. When Pilate pushed back, the crowd became very loud, causing Pilate to fear that a riot might start.

Pilate was a stubborn and vain man, but underneath, he was weak-willed. He gave in to the crowd and released Barabbas. He then made a show that he was innocent of Jesus' blood because the crowd had forced him into crucifying him. From a Roman point of view, Pilate's behavior was intolerably spineless and a perversion of justice.

Matthew notes in passing that Pilate had Jesus scourged before handing him over to be crucified without giving any indication for why Pilate did this. However, it made Jesus' ordeal far worse.

Scourging was a deliberately brutal process; the Romans had a number of different levels of flogging, and scourging was the worst. The victim was stripped naked, stretched out, and beaten from the shoulders down to the legs with a lash designed to inflict maximum damage. Flogging normally left marks and bruising, but scourging shredded the skin and caused extensive bleeding, sending the victim into shock; some victims died as a result.

Jesus' scourging was a brutal punishment by itself; in addition, he had already been beaten by members of the Sanhedrin and their slaves, yet the worst was yet to come.

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## **Soldiers Mock Jesus (27:27)**

<sup>27</sup>Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the praetorium,<sup>1</sup> where the entire cohort<sup>2</sup> gathered around him. <sup>28</sup>Having stripped him, they put a scarlet military cloak on him; they wove a victor's crown<sup>3</sup> out of thorns and placed it on his head and a stick<sup>4</sup> in his right hand. Kneeling down before him, they mocked him, saying, "Greetings, King of the Jews!" <sup>30</sup>They spat on him, and taking the reed, they struck him on his head. <sup>31</sup>When they had mocked him, they stripped the cloak off him and dressed him in his own clothes, and they led him away to be crucified.

The soldiers who had scourged Jesus brought him back to their quarters, still bleeding. The soldiers weren't Romans but men recruited from the neighboring regions, and they held Jews in contempt. The sight of the "King of the Jews" bleeding and about to collapse struck them as amusing, and they gathered around Jesus to mock. The soldiers used one of their scarlet military cloaks as a royal robe, made a crown out of thorns, and put a stick in his hand as a scepter. They then knelt down in front of this "king" and pretended to honor him. They then spat on him and whacked him over the head with the stick, driving the thorns into his scalp.

When they had finished their fun, the soldiers took off the cloak and dressed Jesus in his own clothes. They then led him out to be crucified.

## **Jesus Crucified (27:32)**

<sup>32</sup>As they went out, the soldiers found a Cyrenian<sup>5</sup> man named Simon; they impressed<sup>6</sup> this man to carry Jesus' cross. <sup>33</sup>They came to a place called Golgotha,<sup>7</sup> which is called Place of the Skull. <sup>34</sup>They gave him wine mixed with bile;<sup>8</sup> when Jesus tasted it, he didn't want to drink *it*. <sup>35</sup>Then they crucified

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- 1 This was a Roman military term that refers to the dwelling of the commander, in this case, Pilate. However, Pilate stayed in Herod's palace in Jerusalem temporarily during the major feasts, and it seems unusual that his soldiers would also be staying in the palace. Perhaps Matthew meant the Antonia Fortress in the northwest corner of the Temple.
  - 2 This is a Roman military term for one tenth of legion, or 300-600 soldiers. Most of them had accompanied Pilate from Caesarea, greatly adding to the number of those who stayed in the fortress full-time.
  - 3 Ancient Greeks awarded crowns made of leafy branches to those who won races and other contests; by the first century, these crowns were also awarded to conquering generals and could be made of gold. However, they weren't diadems, such as those worn by royalty.
  - 4 The Greek word normally means a reed, but it can be a thin stick, like bamboo.
  - 5 Cyrene was a city located in what is now eastern Libya. Simon was probably a Jew making a pilgrimage for the Passover. The fact that Matthew mentions him by name indicates that Simon became well-known in the early church.
  - 6 Roman soldiers could force non-citizens to carry loads for them for up to one mile.
  - 7 Aramaic for *skull*.
  - 8 That is, the product of the gall bladder. Matthew must have used an idiom that his audience would recognize. *Mark* has myrrh, which is possible but expensive and more of a flavoring. Scholars have also suggested wormwood, which is a herb that is mildly poisonous and can cause intoxication.

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him; casting lots, they divided up his clothes. <sup>36</sup>They sat down and were keeping watch over him there. <sup>37</sup>They placed the charge against him above his head, it had been written, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

A Roman cross typically consisted of three parts, a large stake driven into the ground, a crossbar, and a sign posted above the victim’s head. Soldiers had to prepare the stake in advance, so carrying the cross actually meant just the crossbar. The victim was nailed to the crossbar using spikes driven through the wrists. Next, the soldiers hoisted the crossbar, with the victim hanging by his wrists, up onto the stake; then they nailed the victim’s feet to the stake. Last, they attached the sign. Perhaps the soldiers used ropes in some way in this process; however, the spikes held the victim’s full weight by in their hands and feet. Victim’s could dangle like this for two or three days before they died. The Romans considered crucifixion so brutal and degrading that citizens were exempt unless the emperor himself issued a special edict; it was reserved for slaves and foreigners, and then only for those who committed the most serious crimes.

The first step in a crucifixion was a parade where the condemned carried their crossbar through the streets. Jesus, weakened by the scourging, must have collapsed along the way, so the soldiers forced a man named Simon to carry the crossbar to the site, called Place of the Skull.

The site would be near a city gate, along a main road; the goal was to make the punishment as public as possible, to move others to avoid the same fate. Tradition says that Golgotha was just north of the city walls near the main road.

The soldiers offered Jesus a cup of wine, but they had put something bitter in it to make it undrinkable. Jesus tasted it and then refused it. Apparently, they did this as a cruel prank. Matthew may see this as a fulfillment of *Psalms* 69:21, but see verse 48 below.

A traditional explanation is that Jewish women actually offered the cup, and they had put a painkiller in the wine. However, there is no mention of women, and Jesus wouldn’t have tasted it first if he knew that it contained a painkiller that he didn’t intend to drink.

The soldiers removed the victim’s clothes before crucifying them, and they divided the clothing among themselves, casting lots to see who would get what. Matthew likely saw this as a fulfillment of *Psalms* 22:18. The soldiers then watched to make sure that no one interfered with the punishment.

Pilate, in a bit of passive-aggression, made the charge that Jesus *was* the King of the Jews, rather than that he *claimed* to be. This no doubt annoyed the religious leaders greatly.

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## **Two Rebels Crucified, Jesus Mocked (27:38)**

<sup>38</sup>Then the soldiers crucified two rebels with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup>Those passing by slandered him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup>and saying, “O Destroyer of the Sanctuary and Builder of It in Three Days! Save yourself, if you are the Son of God, and come down from the cross!” <sup>41</sup>In the same way, the chief priests, along with the scribes and the elders, mocked him, saying, “He saved others; he is unable to save himself! He is the king of Israel, now let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him!

<sup>43</sup>‘He trusted in God, now let God rescue him,’ <sup>1</sup> if he wants him! For he said that he is the Son of God!” The rebels who had been crucified with him also reviled him.

The soldiers had prepared three stakes; originally, Pilate had intended them for Barabbas and his two fellow rebels. The soldiers crucified Jesus first, on the center stake. When they finished with him, they crucified the two rebels as well.

People walking by shook their heads and scoffed at Jesus, because the miracle worker who had made great claims couldn’t save himself. Apparently, the charge that Jesus claimed he would destroy the sanctuary and then rebuild it in three days had spread, and people found it ridiculous.

Members of the Sanhedrin also came out and mocked, noting that Jesus had saved others but couldn’t save himself. They joked that if Jesus freed himself from the cross, then they would believe. Ironically, they accidentally quoted from *Psalms* 22, where David complained of his suffering but ended by expressing his confidence that God would rescue and exalt him.

The rebels also raged at Jesus; perhaps they wanted him to rescue himself and them as well.

Jesus showed tremendous self-control in staying on the cross. The only thing holding him there was his willingness to complete God’s will. We can only imagine the devastation if Jesus had lost his temper and shouted, “Drop dead!”

## **Jesus’ Death (27:45)**

<sup>45</sup>From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, <sup>2</sup> darkness came upon all the land. <sup>46</sup>About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a great voice, saying,

“Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” This is, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” <sup>3</sup>

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1 *Psalms* 22:8

2 Noon until 3:00 PM. Matthew didn’t say at what time Jesus was crucified, but his trial before Pilate started shortly after dawn, and it took some time, including the scourging. *Mark* 15:25 says that Jesus was crucified at the third hour, or 9:00 AM.



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<sup>47</sup>Some of those standing there heard this and said, “This man is calling Elijah!” <sup>48</sup>Immediately one of them ran and brought a sponge filled with sour wine, <sup>1</sup> put it on a reed, and began offering him a drink. <sup>49</sup>The rest said, “Leave *him*! Let’s see if Elijah comes and will save him.”

<sup>50</sup>Then Jesus, having cried out again with a great voice, gave up the spirit. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>51</sup>And behold! The curtain <sup>3</sup> of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The land was shaken and the rocks <sup>4</sup> were split, <sup>52</sup>and the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the holy who had fallen asleep were awakened. <sup>5</sup> <sup>53</sup>Coming out of the tombs after their resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

<sup>54</sup>The centurion and those keeping watch over Jesus with him saw the signs and the happenings and were exceedingly frightened. They said, “Truly this was a son of god!” <sup>6</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Many women were there watching from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee as they ministered to him. <sup>56</sup>Among them was Mary the Magdalene, <sup>7</sup> Mary the mother of Jacob <sup>8</sup> and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons. <sup>9</sup>

From noon until three, the land was covered in darkness. Matthew gives us no indication of what caused this, and we are best off not attempting to choose between dense clouds, a dust storm, or God causing this by supernatural means. Matthew’s point is that a great sign occurred that was evident to all. About three, Jesus called out to God, quoting the first verse of *Psalms 22*. We shouldn’t read too much into why he did this; it’s enough to say that Jesus sensed that death was near and that he was feeling the full weight of his sacrifice. Perhaps Jesus had in mind that *Psalms 22* ends on a note of ultimate victory, but that isn’t what he was feeling at the moment.

Some of those watching misunderstood what Jesus said and thought he was calling for Elijah the prophet. One of them felt pity and brought Jesus cheap wine to drink, but the others sensed that the end was near and called him off, wanting to see what would happen.

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3 *Psalms 22:1*. Matthew records Jesus’ words in a mix of Hebrew—*Eli*—and Aramaic; he then provides a translation of them. This implies that Matthew expected many in his original audience to understand Aramaic but not Hebrew. They would recognize the Hebrew *Eli*; the Aramaic word is *Eloi*.

1 Cheap wine that common people could afford. The word could also mean vinegar, but that isn’t what was offered to Jesus. See *Psalms 69:21*.

2 Less literally, *breathed his last*. The Greek word means both *spirit* and *breath*.

3 The curtain is often referred to as a *veil*.

4 The word refers to large rock formations, bedrock.

5 Or, *raised*. Matthew probably had both ideas in mind here.

6 In the Greek, there are no indicators for capitalizing son or god. To Greeks, god meant Zeus.

7 Magdala was a town along west shore of the Sea of Galilee.

8 English translations, *James*.

9 That is, of James and John.

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Jesus cried out again and then died. Soldiers could tell that a victim of crucifixion was actually dead because an unconscious person hanging by their arms can't breathe. Unless the victim pushes himself up using his legs, he quickly suffocates. After Jesus hung motionless for several minutes, everyone could clearly see that he was dead. In fact, he hung like this for quite some time before the soldiers took him down. The theory that Jesus was only unconscious is contradicted by the facts.

As Jesus died, the curtain in the sanctuary, which separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, was torn in half from top to bottom. This curtain was enormous, 30 feet tall and as thick as a man's hand, or four inches. It was designed to be impenetrable; this was clearly a supernatural event.

The Most Holy Place held the Ark of the Covenant,<sup>1</sup> and God's presence hovered over the Ark. No one was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place except the Chief Priest, and he was allowed to enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, after special preparation. To Matthew, the tearing of the curtain symbolized that the way to God's presence in the Most Holy Place was opened to all.

At the same time, a sizable earthquake occurred. Matthew says that tombs broke open and the bodies of the holy men were raised and appeared in Jerusalem. Some may question this, but Matthew wrote a dozen years after the event, and he many in his audience were present in Jerusalem at the time. That Matthew would invent such a supernatural occurrence, and that his audience, which included the other Apostles and James, Jesus' brother, the leader of the Jerusalem church, would have accepted it, is unlikely.

The soldiers keeping watch saw what happened and were terrified, and their leader exclaimed that Jesus must have been divine. To the Greeks, "God" meant Zeus, and legend claimed that Zeus fathered many children by women, such as Hercules. The man's exclamation wasn't a confession of Christian faith but an expression of his own beliefs. However, Matthew sees the irony that a Gentile could see the obvious truth, while the Jewish religious leaders blinded themselves to it.

Matthew also noted that several women, who were disciples of Jesus from Galilee, were watching from a distance, and that they had ministered to Jesus. Most likely they were wives of wealthy men who had the means to be away from home for an extended period of time. By the social standards of that time, Jesus was very progressive to allow them to accompany him, and Matthew recorded this fact.

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1 The ark of covenant isn't mentioned after the time of Josiah. Most likely, it was destroyed, possibly by the Babylonians or to prevent the Babylonians from capturing it.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Jesus' Burial (27:57)**

<sup>57</sup>As evening approached, a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph came; he himself had become a disciple of Jesus. <sup>58</sup>This man approached Pilate and requested Jesus' body, then Pilate ordered *it* to be given. <sup>59</sup>Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it in clean linen cloth <sup>60</sup>and placed it in his own new tomb, which was cut from bedrock. Having rolled a great stone against the door of the tomb, he went away. Mary the Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the burial place.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy aristocrat—*Luke 23:50* tells us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin—who had become Jesus' disciple. He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body so that he could bury it. Jewish custom was to bury a dead body the same day the person died, and the next two days were Sabbaths, so Joseph felt particular urgency.

Joseph took a risk in approaching Pilate. Pilate might have been suspicious of someone requesting the body of a man condemned for what the Romans viewed as rebellion. However, Pilate was sympathetic to Jesus, so he turned over the body. More than Pilate's anger, Joseph risked the wrath of his fellow religious leaders. They had gone to great lengths to get rid of Jesus, and now Joseph was openly supporting him. Most likely, they shunned Joseph after this and it cost him dearly, but he became an important member of the church.

Joseph had a new tomb, most likely it was very fancy. It was located just outside the northern wall of the city, near the crucifixion site. He took Jesus' body, hastily wrapped it in linen cloth per Jewish custom, and placed it in the tomb. He had to do this before sunset, so he skipped important steps in preparing the body. He quickly sealed the tomb with a huge stone prepared for that purpose and departed. Meanwhile, two of the women who followed Jesus sat and watched.

## **The Religious Leaders Secure the Tomb (27:62)**

<sup>62</sup>The next day, which is after the Preparation *Day*,<sup>1</sup> the chief priests and the Pharisees came together before Pilate, <sup>63</sup>saying, "Lord, we remembered that, while he was still alive, that deceiver said, 'After three days, I am raised.'<sup>64</sup>Therefore, please order for the burial site to be secured until after the three days, lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, 'He was raised from the dead!' The final deception will be worse than the first."<sup>65</sup>Pilate said to them, "You have a watch.<sup>2</sup> Go! Secure it as best you can!"<sup>66</sup>They went out and secured the burial site, sealing the stone with the watch.

Matthew points out that the religious leaders went to Pilate on a special Sabbath to do work, in violation of the Law. They were concerned that Jesus' disciples might steal the body and then claim that Jesus had indeed been raised, just as he said. Pilate told them to post guards.

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1 The day after the Passover, the first day of Unleavened Bread. This day was a special Sabbath.

2 The Greek word, which came from Latin, referred to a group of soldiers watching over something.

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Apparently, Pilate gave them use of some of his soldiers for this purpose and told them to handle securing the tomb. He didn't want them to blame him if something went wrong.

### **The Empty Tomb (28:1)**

**28** <sup>1</sup>After the Sabbaths,<sup>1</sup> at first light on the first of the Sabbaths,<sup>2</sup> Mary the Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the burial site. <sup>2</sup>Behold! A great earthquake happened, for a messenger of the Lord, having come down from Heaven, approached and rolled away the stone, and he sat down on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightening and his clothing was white like snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards shook from fear of him and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>The messenger addressed the women and said, "Don't be frightened! For I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He isn't here, for he was raised, just as he said. Come! Look at that place where he lay! <sup>7</sup>Quickly, go! Tell his disciples, 'He was raised from the dead, and behold! He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold! I have told you."

<sup>8</sup>Quickly leaving the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to report to Jesus' disciples. <sup>9</sup>And behold! Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" They approached him, grasped his feet, and bowed down to him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go! Report to my brothers that they should go away to Galilee, and they will see me there!"

Matthew provides a very brief description of events after the resurrection. He notes that the women went out to the tomb on the day after the Sabbath, at first light before sunrise.

Before the women arrived at the tomb, an angel had come down and rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. Apparently, the guards were so frightened that they fainted. Most likely Jesus had risen before this; possibly, the angel simply made it possible for the women to see that the tomb was empty. The angel then waited for the women.

When the women arrived, the angel told them that Jesus had been raised, and that they should go and tell the Apostles to go back to Galilee to meet with Jesus.

As the women ran back to the Apostles, Jesus suddenly met them. He repeated the instructions that the Apostles should go to Galilee, and that they would see him there.

#### ***Note on Variations in the Post-Resurrection Accounts***

*Luke* and *Acts* recorded a different series of events; it implied that the Apostles never left Jerusalem. Mark didn't try to reconcile *Matthew* and *Luke*, he just cut his account short—this led later editors to add the "alternate endings" starting at verse 16:9.

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1 As noted before, this does *not* imply multiple Sabbaths.

2 That is, the first day of the week.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

*John* explains this seeming contradiction. The Apostles didn't leave for Galilee as they were told; therefore, Jesus appeared to them twice over eight days. Then the Apostles finally left for Galilee, spent time there, and then returned to Jerusalem. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended in Heaven.

### **A Rumor Starts (28:11)**

<sup>11</sup>After the women left, behold! Some of the guards went into the city and reported everything that had happened to the chief priests. <sup>12</sup>Having met with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a considerable amount of silver to the soldiers, <sup>13</sup>saying, “Say that ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were sleeping.’ <sup>14</sup>If the governor should hear of this, we will persuade him and keep you worry-free.” <sup>15</sup>Taking the silver, the soldiers did as they were told, and this account has been spread among the Jews until this day.

When the guards told the chief priests that Jesus body was missing and that an angel had appeared to open the tomb, they gathered the other leaders and discussed what to do. They bribed the soldiers to claim that they fell asleep during the night, and that Jesus' disciples came and stole the body. This tale spread among the Jews and persisted until the time when Matthew wrote.

The main problem with this claim is that stealing Jesus' body wouldn't cause anyone to believe that he had raised from the dead. In fact, Jesus appeared to no more than several hundred of his disciples. People believed because of the miraculous signs that accompanied the Apostles' teaching, not because of fantastic claims. Also, if the Apostles had stolen the body, one of them would have soon leaked this information. As it is, they believed strongly enough that, according to early Church tradition, all of them, except John, were put to death because of their faith.

### **Jesus Sends Out the Apostles (28:16)**

<sup>16</sup>The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the hill that Jesus had designated. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they bowed down, but some wavered. <sup>18</sup>Jesus approached them and spoke to them, saying, “All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, go! <sup>2</sup> Disciple <sup>3</sup> the Tribes, <sup>4</sup>

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- 1 The Greek word is used only here and in verse 14:31, where Jesus rebuked Peter for sinking into the Sea of Galilee. It implies hesitation or uncertainty, rather than actual doubting.
  - 2 Some claim this should be translated *as you are going*. Grammatically, that is incorrect; the participle is past tense. At most, it could be—weakly—translated *having gone*. This is a *participle of attendant circumstance*. It commands an action that must be performed before the main action can be performed.
  - 3 Modern translations have *make disciples*, which is valid. However, the word literally means *train or instruct committed followers*. Older translations have *teach*, which is too weak.
  - 4 Modern translations have *nations*, which is correct. However, it misses the impact upon a Jewish audience, that Jesus sent the Apostles to the Gentiles.

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to continually guard<sup>5</sup> everything that I have commanded you. And behold! I'm with you all the days, until the end of the age.

The Apostles, minus Judas Iscariot, went to Galilee as Jesus had told them. Note that *1 Corinthians* 15:6 mentions that Jesus appeared to more than 500 men and women at one time. Perhaps Jesus addressed them here.

Matthew says that the Apostles worshiped Jesus, but that some of them also wavered. *Luke* and *John* discuss Jesus' appearances to the Apostles in more depth and describe their doubting.

Matthew then briefly summarizes what was likely part of a sermon by Jesus. Traditionally, this is called the Great Commission. First, he said that God had delegated *all* his authority to Jesus. This went far beyond any expectations set for the Christ by the Old Testament, and it expressed his divinity and equality with God. It also gave him the right to tell his followers to obey his commands without questioning, and it gave his followers confidence that they would accomplish anything he told them to do.

Next, Jesus told them to *go*. Up to this point, Jesus had focused his efforts on Judea and Galilee, and the Apostles had little reason to think outside that geographical box. In order to fulfill what Jesus intended, they would soon have to leave that tiny box and travel the known world.

Jesus commanded the Apostles to train the Gentiles to become his disciples. This teaching was so radical that the early Church didn't practice it for several years, and then only because the Holy Spirit pushed the Apostle Peter to do it—see *Acts* 10. Some Jewish believers never accepted it; Matthew's unique perspective as a tax collector allowed him to accept it and to emphasize it.

This training process had two phases. The first was baptism, which was the culmination of an unbeliever coming to faith, repentance, and commitment to following Jesus as Lord. Note that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share one name, which reflects that the three are one. Saint Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland during the fifth century, illustrated this concept with a three-leaf clover, noting that the three leaves form one plant. Note that what we normally think of as evangelism is only the first, and shorter, of the two phases.

The second phase was ongoing teaching, ensuring that disciples always hold tightly to Jesus' teachings; Jesus calls them commands because living by his teachings isn't optional.

As the Apostles went out, Jesus assured them that he would *always* be with them. That is still true for all believers today.

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<sup>5</sup> Or, *keep, hold on to, observe*. The grammar indicates that this action is ongoing, not something that is done once and is then complete.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Additional Information**

The amount of background information, notes, and footnotes grew to a point where most readers would get bogged down, and some information would be hard to find. This section contains the overflow from the process of pruning controversial or overly detailed information from the main commentary.

## **The Order the Gospels Were Written**

From the early Church until the 1800s in Germany, scholars agreed that Matthew wrote the first Gospel. Then, liberal scholars in Germany proposed various theories that said that Mark wrote first, and Matthew and Luke used *Mark* as their primary source and another, unknown, source for Jesus' teachings. This is known as the "Two Source Theory, or simply "Mark First." One of the reasons for these new theories is that these liberals thought that the Gospel's message had evolved, starting simple and then growing more complex as the early Church grew.

Around 1900, an Oxford scholar named William Sanday chose the most simple Mark First theory and insisted that this theory be adopted. Aided by one of his students named B. F. Streeter, he prevailed, and Mark First became the standard teaching in England and the United States, even among conservative scholars.

For some time, support among scholars for Mark First has been eroding, so that some Bible colleges teach that either Mark or Matthew wrote first, but they then base their teaching on Mark First, since it's well-established.

Mark First has three main problems. First, it assumes that the Gospel message evolved, which implies that all the Gospels contain various amounts of stories and teachings made up by the early Church. This contradicts the idea that Jesus was a real person and that the authors based their Gospels on actual events.

Second, it strongly implies that the Apostle Matthew did not write *Matthew*. One reason is that an Apostle wouldn't rely heavily on an account written by a non-Apostle. Another is that Mark wrote no earlier than 67, after Peter died. By the time *Matthew* was written, the Apostle Matthew, who tradition says was martyred, would have been dead. This raises serious questions about why the early Church accepted *Matthew* or thought that the Apostle Matthew wrote it.

Third, the theory requires at least one additional source document that Matthew and Luke shared but interpreted differently, and this is just the beginning of the complicated assumptions required to make Mark First work at all. A multitude of variations on the source of Jesus' teachings emerged from the start, which is another indication of the theory's weakness.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

I believe that the Bible is God's inspired word, and I believe that Jesus was a real person and that the Gospels present the authors' views of Jesus, his actual teachings, and actual events in his life and ministry. I also believe the early Church was led by intelligent people who were very careful about what writings they accepted as Scripture. For this reason, I reject Mark First.

Based on my viewpoint, I have constructed the following account of who wrote the Gospels and when and why. It both honors the Gospels as inspired by God and fits the available facts, including the hints left by the Early Church.

The Apostle Matthew wrote the first Gospel around 41, shortly after Herod Agrippa killed the Apostle James. Agrippa forced the Apostles to flee, and Matthew wrote to provide the churches in Judea and Galilee with authoritative teaching in the Apostles' absence.

Luke started his Gospel around 57, when the Apostle Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, but Luke did not publish his Gospel, along with *Acts*, until 62, in Rome. Luke wanted to present Paul's take on the Gospel, and he used *Matthew* as a primary source, but he also used many other sources. Moreover, Luke deliberately retold many of Jesus' teachings in order to make his Gospel unique and representative of Paul's viewpoint.

Mark wrote his Gospel around 68 in Rome. *Matthew* had existed since the founding of the church in Rome, and then *Luke* came along. Dissension arose between those who preferred *Matthew* and those who preferred *Luke*, which happened along Jew versus Gentile lines. The church in Rome had experienced years of persecution that led to the deaths of the Apostles Peter and Paul. The leaders of the church came to Mark, a key assistant to Peter, and asked him to record Peter's take on the Gospel. Mark used both *Matthew* and *Luke* as primary sources; his goal was to weave the two accounts together, along with original insights from Peter, into a short and fast-paced account. Where *Matthew* and *Luke* differed, Mark generally left that material out.

The Apostle John wrote his Gospel around 97 in Ephesus. He was very old, and the church leaders wanted him to preserve his take on the Gospel. John had known the other Gospels for decades, so he had two purposes. On one hand, he wanted to present Jesus in a way that was unique; on the other, he wanted to bridge gaps and answer questions left by the other Gospels.

## **Papias on Matthew**

Around 103, a church scholar named Papias quoted what appears to be a scholarly joke, possibly made by the Apostle John.

“Thus, Matthew wrote in a Hebrew dialect, and everyone interpreted it as they were able.”



# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

The joke is that *dialect* can mean either a language or a style of reasoning, and *interpret* can mean either translate or understand. This leads to two completely different meanings.

“Thus, Matthew wrote in the Hebrew *language*, and everyone *translated* it as they were able.”

“Thus, Matthew wrote in a Hebrew *style*, and everyone *understood* it as they were able.”

The remark reflects the fact that Greeks found understanding *Matthew* as difficult as if it had been written in Hebrew. The joke was that, to church scholars from a Greek background, *Matthew* was all Hebrew to them.

Early Church scholars, particularly Irenaeus and Origen, modified Papias' original quote, following the first, more literal, interpretation. This led to the theory that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic, and that someone else subsequently translated it into Greek. By 393, Jerome, who made the Latin translation of the Bible called the Vulgate, claimed to have seen a Hebrew copy of *Matthew*.

However, there is no evidence to support the idea of a Hebrew *Matthew*, and it's almost certainly wrong. This is an example of why the early Church preferred oral teaching to written. Papias himself said, “For I did not think that I could get so much profit from the contents of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice.”

## **Pharaoh and Egypt**

When *Exodus* talks about Pharaoh and the land of Egypt, to whom and to what did it refer?

Tradition associates the ruler during the exodus with Rameses II, one of the greatest kings of Egypt. This tradition came about because scholars of ancient Egypt thought that Rameses ruled during the time of the exodus.<sup>1</sup> Today, scholars know that Rameses ruled 200 years later, and Thutmose III was Pharaoh at the time of the exodus.

However, Thutmose ruled from Thebes, hundreds of miles to the south. Most likely, Moses never went that far south in his life. The “Pharaoh” ruling over the Israelites was an unknown regional governor. At the time of Moses, *pharaoh* simply meant *great house*, and it wasn't yet used as a title for the king.

In addition, the Israelites lived in the remote northeastern corner of Egypt. When God brought plagues on “Egypt,” he most likely limited them to the region where the Israelites lived. This helps explain why there is no record of Thutmose dying or of all Egypt experiencing devastation from the plagues. This isn't to say that the Biblical account is inaccurate; Moses'

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1 James Ussher in *The Annals of the World*, published in English in 1658, dates Rameses' reign to 1577 BCE. Apparently, that date moved 100 years when the tradition started. Modern scholars now date his reign to 1279 BCE.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

perception of his ruler and “Egypt” were simply different from ours. It's our job to understand what Moses meant.

This isn't to suggest that God couldn't bring ruin on all Egypt, if he chose to. However, God's purpose did not require bringing down an empire, just a proud regional official. Later on, however, God brought down both the Assyrian and Babylonian empires.

## **Ancient Money**

Most ancient money mentioned in the Bible was made of silver. The price of silver today fluctuates greatly, but in 2020, \$17 per troy ounce is a reasonable average. There are 14.5 troy ounces in a standard pound.

The common Roman coin was the *denarius*. The weight of the denarius went down periodically, but during Jesus' ministry, it weighed 0.13 troy ounces or around \$2.25. The typical day's wage for a laborer in Judea and Galilee was one denarius.

The common Greek coin was the *drachma*; it weighed 0.14 troy ounces or around \$2.40. It was very close to a denarius. A *didrachma* was two drachmas, and a *stater* was four drachmas.

Greek coins minted in Attica, the region in Greece around Athens, were of greater purity than Roman coins. The chief priests in the Temple only accepted these Greek coins; thus, money changers in the Temple exchanged Roman coins for these.

In the Old Testament, the *shekel* was a standard unit of weight of 0.38 troy ounces; a shekel of silver was worth around \$6.50.

For the purpose of the Temple tax, which was a half-shekel of silver, the chief priests accepted a didrachma, which weighed almost as much as a half-shekel. Didrachmas were scarce, so two men often went in together to pay the tax with a stater.

A *talent* was the largest unit of weight, equal to around 75 pounds. A silver bar weighing a talent was equivalent to 8,365 denarii or \$18,822. This was equivalent to 28 years wages for a laborer.

## **Leaven**

*Leaven* is bread dough that contains yeast. When a baker mixes a small amount of leaven into a large amount of new dough and leaves it in a warm place, the yeast reproduces and spreads throughout the new dough. As it grows, the yeast releases carbon dioxide that forms bubbles in the dough, causing the dough to “rise.” The bubbles make the bread lighter and less chewy.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

People in ancient times didn't know about yeast or how leaven worked; it was somewhat mysterious. Because of this, leaven could be used as a metaphor for a hidden, silent influence with the ability to transform, either for good or for evil.

Women set aside a small amount of leavened dough and then baked the rest. The next day, they took the leaven and made a new batch of dough, again setting aside a small amount of the leavened lump.

## **Resurrection, Judgment, Jesus' Coming, End of the Age**

*Matthew* contains the earliest New Testament teachings about the resurrection, judgment, Jesus' coming, and the end of the age. This topic is extremely controversial and the subject of many doctrines. In the following, I don't want to create controversy, nor do I want to discuss doctrines. However, since these topics come up throughout *Matthew*, I must talk about them.

My thoughts about these topics are these. God is vastly more intelligent than we are. Heaven is a place vastly larger than the Universe in which we live, which is also vastly larger than Earth. Time, as we experience it, is part of the creation; therefore, God existed *before* he created our time. If that last statement may be confusing, but it captures the fact that God's reality is beyond our understanding.

In various places in the Bible, God tells us that part of us is spiritual, eternal, created in God's image. Death is the end of life as we understand it, but it isn't the end of our spirits; our spirits continue in some way that we can't understand.

God understands this fully, but since we are not capable of understanding, he teaches in the way that parents or preschool teachers do young children. He gives us simplified, picture book lessons and accepts the fact that our understanding is limited, inaccurate, incomplete.

We must admit our limitations and then approach the Bible's teachings about anything eternal with humility and caution; we must take care not to read into a lesson more than what God intended, especially ones written for people 2,000 or more years ago. Moreover, we must not add to what God said, thinking that our own wisdom is sufficient for the task.

## **Summary**

For those not interested in all the details, here is a summary of what is covered below.

The first-century Jews generally viewed the "last days" as a time of hardship and war that would soon happen. God would purge the world of the wicked, subdue the Gentiles, and establish his kingdom *on earth*, with the Christ as its king and the Jews ruling with him. Some Jews believed in a resurrection of the just; they would participate in this earthly kingdom.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

Jesus, during his ministry, had a spiritual, eternal view of the kingdom. However, *he had to work with the limited understanding of the Jews*. He was also concerned that, with the coming destruction of Jerusalem, the believers shouldn't be led astray or give up their faith during that catastrophe. Therefore, *he carefully taught in a way that fit the earthly expectations of the Jews while pointing to a spiritual reality*.

Before the last days, he would “come” to establish his kingdom; most likely, this took place at the Pentecost Feast, 50 days after his death and a week after he ascended into Heaven.

In last days, he would “come” for a time of judgment that would involve the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans; this led to the end of the ritual of the Law of Moses. He would also protect the faithful during this catastrophe. Jesus limited himself to the earthly aspect of these events.

At the same time, Jesus saw, and hinted at, a much bigger picture. Beyond the earthly age was an eternal age; both judgment and salvation would have eternal consequences. Jesus clearly believed in the resurrection of the dead and either eternal life or punishment.

## **Jewish Beliefs**

The Jews had a number of ideas about the last days, the coming of Christ, and the restoration of God's kingdom.

On one extreme, the Sadducees didn't accept the Prophets, and they rejected the idea of any sort of coming judgment. In their minds, God judged people during their lives. If people were wealthy and prosperous, that was a sign of God's favor. Those born into poverty or those who lost their fortunes or who suffered illness were experiencing God's judgment.

On the other extreme, the Essenes had a detailed, 40-year-long war plan that would end with the defeat of the Gentiles and God's reign on earth.

The Pharisees believed in some sort of resurrection from the dead. However, this resurrection would be limited to those whom God found worthy. In addition, those whom God found to be particularly wicked would experience eternal punishment.

Generally, the Jews believed that the Christ would play an important role leading the faithful Jews in purging wickedness and establishing God's kingdom on earth. This could involve a resurrection of the just; those raised would then participate in the earthly kingdom.

This battle wouldn't be easy. *Daniel* predicted that Jerusalem and the sanctuary itself would be destroyed. However, God would prevail in the end, establish his kingdom, and his Christ would rule over the nations.

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

## **Jesus in the Middle**

Jesus, of course, understood the spiritual realities, even more than we do today. However, as Jesus taught, he had work with Jewish expectations even as he worked to reshape them. Note that the Apostles didn't even accept that Jesus himself would rise from the dead until after it happened. Jesus wanted to teach Heavenly truths, but he had to frame them in a way that his worldly-minded disciples could accept at the time. They would begin to realize the spiritual significance later, starting with Jesus' resurrection.

## **Resurrection**

*Matthew* has little to say about the resurrection, apart from that of Jesus. The only place the topic is addressed is in 22:23ff, where the Sadducees claimed that there would be no resurrection, and Jesus refuted them. He also said that after the resurrection, people would be like the angels in Heaven, implying a very different kind of body and society. *Matthew* has no clear teaching on when the resurrection would take place.

However, Jesus did teach openly about eternity in a few places. He talked about punishment in eternal fire, 18:8, believers would receive eternal life, 19:29, he would send those who fell short into eternal fire, 25:41, those he rejected would go to eternal punishment, 25:46, the godly would go to eternal life, 25:41. Eternal life and eternal punishment strongly imply a resurrection.

While these teachings *could* fit into the idea of an earthly kingdom where people live for forever; they clearly point to something greater.

## **Judgment**

Judgment is a frequent topic in *Matthew*. Jesus saw the Jews around him as *extremely* overconfident about where they stood with God. His view of them can be summed up as, "Enter through the narrow gate! ... *Few* are those who find it," 7:13–14, and "For many are called, but *few* are chosen," 22:14.

For many, judgment would involve punishment. "Bind this man hand and foot and throw him into the darkness outside. In that place there will be wailing and grinding of teeth," 22:13, and "You accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the Slanderer and his messengers!" 25:41. For a few, however, it would be a blessing. "Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!" 25:34.

Jesus said that judgment would take place "on that day," 7:22, "on a day of judgment," 10:15, 11:23,24, 12:36, "at the Judgment", 12:41, 42, "when the Son of Man comes in his glory,"

## ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

25:31. Jesus left room for a catastrophic event, such as the destruction of Jerusalem, that would wipe out the wicked. However, his teachings point to something much greater.

### **End of the Age**

First, the term “end times” doesn’t appear at all in modern translations of the Bible. Instead, the term “last days”—“latter days,” ESV and a few others—appears in a number of places. *Matthew*, however, does not use “last days”; instead, it has “end of the age,” which appears to have the same meaning. However, all these terms are synonymous, and “end times” might express the idea the best.

*John*, written around 97, has “last day” seven times. This term has a different meaning, referring to the end of the present world. John had over 60 years to meditate on Jesus’ teachings; the destruction of Jerusalem was in the past, and he had experienced the visions that produced *The Revelation*. His understanding of the spiritual nature of the kingdom had grown greatly over his long life.

In *Matthew*, Jesus used the expression, “end of the age” five times. The first three occurrences appear in 13:39–49, where Jesus explained the parables of the tares and of the dragnet. In both parables, the angels separate the good from the wicked; the good are gathered together and the wicked are thrown into a fiery furnace. In both parables, the kingdom is purged of the wicked, leaving the good. Jesus did say anything about the end of the world, just the purging of his kingdom, which *could* be on earth.

The fourth occurrence is 24:3, where Jesus told his disciples that the Temple would be destroyed. In response, they asked him about the sign that would precede the “end of the age.” Clearly, Jesus has discussed this with them enough that they had picked up on the term.

Jesus was clearly talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. The “age” Jesus referred to was the age of the Law of Moses, which was centered around the Temple. We shouldn’t underestimate the significance of this event to Jews; they radically reshaped the Jews religion.

The final occurrence is 28.20, where Jesus told his disciples that he would be with them until the “end of the age.” To the disciples, this meant until the destruction of Jerusalem, which they thought, at least initially, would change the nature of the world.

Looking back 2,000 years, the world is basically the same, and Jesus’ Church on earth has thrived. However, the Jewish expectations of an earthly kingdom turned out to be totally wrong. Clearly, the “last day” Jesus taught about it in *John* is still in the future. Jesus’ kingdom continues to grow, but it’s in Heaven, not on earth.

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## ***Day of the Lord***

“Day of the Lord” appears frequently throughout the Bible; it refers to God bringing judgment. In the Old Testament, there appear to have been several “day of the Lord” events that happened at different times. In the Old Testament, the expression is also tied to the “last days,” which is in keeping with the idea of God bringing judgment at that time, which have to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. In the New Testament, the term takes on a more end of the world meaning, although *The Revelation* points to a “day of the lord” for Rome that took place in the early 90s under Domitian.

## **Jesus’ Coming**

Although many will disagree with this definition, “coming” has a special meaning of God, or God’s Son, intervening in human affairs. This can be for judgment or salvation, the important thing is that God brings about a significant change. God’s interventions can be miraculous, such as when God brought plagues on Egypt to force the Egyptians to release the Israelites, or God can work through human agents. God used the Babylonians to bring judgment on Judah, and he used the Medes and Persians to judge Babylon and to restore the Jews to Jerusalem.

*Matthew* combines the expressions “come” and “the Son of Man” in several places.

10:23—The Apostles wouldn’t finish their ministry before the Son of Man came

16:27—The Son of Man would come and repay each according to their deeds

16:28—Some of those present would see the Son of Man come in his kingdom

20:28—The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many

24:27—The coming of the Son of Man would be apparent like lightening in the sky

24:30ff—The coming of the Son of Man would be sudden and unexpected

24:39—The Son of Man would come with power and glory to gather his chosen.

24:44—The Son of Man would come when the believers did not expect

25:31ff—The Son of Man would come in glory, to judge his people

20:28 refers to Jesus coming to earth to minister, to die on the cross, and then to be raised from the dead.

10:23, 16:27, 28 indicate that Jesus would come again during the lives of some of those present. In what appear to be separate events, he would come to establish his kingdom; later, he would come to repay people according to what they had done.

All the occurrences in 24–25 are in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. His coming would be apparent, unexpected, and he would come in judgment.

Verse 24:30ff begs the question, “What did Jesus mean by ‘gather his chosen’?” Jesus was using an expression to describe that he would intervene to lessen the suffering of the believers

# ***The Gospel According To Matthew***

in the midst of the catastrophe of the Jewish War; see verse 23:37, where Jesus wanted to gather the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

In summary, first Jesus “came” as a man give his life as a ransom for many on the cross.

Next, Jesus “came” to establish his kingdom, most likely on the Pentecost a week after he was taken up to Heaven.

Jesus’ “second coming” involved the destruction of Jerusalem; he repaid the Jews for their rebellion and rescued the believers.

These are the “comings” Jesus described in *Matthew*. That doesn’t rule out many more.

## **What Did the Early Church Believe?**

The early Church was fully aware of Jesus’ teachings, as recorded in *Matthew*, and they seemed to take it as implying the imminent end of the world.

The Apostle Paul, around 50, wrote about the last day extensively in *1 Thessalonians* 4:13–5:11 and *2 Thessalonians* 1:5–2:12. Without going into what Paul said in depth, *1 Thessalonians* 4:17 says,

“Then **we** who are alive and remain together with [*Christians who have died*]<sup>1</sup> will be caught up in the clouds to a meeting with the Lord in the air, and in this way we will always be with the Lord.”

Paul thought that Jesus would raise the faithful dead, take *all* the faithful up into Heaven, and then bring about the end of the world. Clearly, he thought he would still be alive when the end came, and he was around 55 years old at the time.

The Apostle Peter, around 67, wrote in *2 Peter* 3:8–10,

“Do not allow this one thing to escape your attention, beloved! In God’s view, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day. **The Lord isn’t tardy regarding the promise**, as some consider tardiness, but he is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance. The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar, the elements, burning up, will be destroyed, and the earth, and the works in it, will be discovered.”

By Peter’s time, the Church was coming to realize that the end might not come so quickly. Peter, however, still insisted that the day of the Lord would come. Peter and Paul were both martyred shortly after Peter wrote, making clear that Paul’s expectation wasn’t fulfilled.

When the Apostle John wrote *The Revelation* in the 70s, his visions pictured an immediate judgment against Rome, a resurrection of the martyrs, and then a thousand-year gap before the final resurrection and judgment. The thousand years appear to have been symbolic, representing that the end was in the far distant future. Almost 2,000 years later, we know the

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1 Literally, *them*. Paul had been speaking of Christians who had died before Christ’s coming.



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end is still off in the future. This all shows that a major change in the Church's thinking took place.

As Peter said, God and Jesus today are still working patiently to fulfill their purpose in bringing people to salvation. Only when that purpose is complete will they bring about the end.

As for us, we need to focus on our daily lives, as Jesus warned in *Matthew 24–25*. Most likely, we will all have our own “last day” before the world does.

## **Dating Herod's Death**

The year of the death of Herod the Great is important, as it's the only way we have of estimating when Jesus was born. However, the scholarly discussion is complicated; as new evidence has emerged, the date has changed from around March, 1 BCE originally to 4 BCE as of 1885, and now back to March, 1 BCE.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, said that Herod the Great died after a vivid lunar eclipse, after which a number of events took place, and before the Passover, which occurs in late March or early April. Josephus also indicated the length of Herod's reign and start of those of his sons point to 4 BCE, and thus for the death of Herod. In 1885, Emil Schürer used this evidence to promote this date.

Some claimed that an astronomical event in 7 BCE involving the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn could be the “Magi's Star.” An eclipse did occur in 4 BCE. Finally, the Roman emperor Augustus called for a census for tax purposes in 8 BCE.

All this makes a strong case for Herod's death taking place in 4 BCE, and Jesus' birth would then have taken place in 7 BCE. This became generally accepted.

Recently, further examination of astronomical data regarding lunar eclipses reveal several eclipses.

A partial eclipse happened on March 13, 4 BCE; it happened early in the morning.

A total eclipse happened on January 10, 1 BCE; it was clearly visible from Jerusalem and lasted almost an hour.

A partial eclipse happened on December 29, 1 BCE.

Based on this data, the 4 BCE date becomes highly unlikely. First, The March 13<sup>th</sup> date leaves only 29 days for the events Josephus described to have taken place before the Passover, which occurred on April 11<sup>th</sup>, a relatively late date. In addition, the eclipse itself wasn't noteworthy enough for the Jews to have considered it an omen.

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Many then chose the third eclipse to date Herod's death in early 1, and this date is widely quoted. However, that eclipse was also not sufficiently impressive for the Jews to see it as an omen.

The middle eclipse is most likely. It was a total eclipse that took place around midnight Jerusalem time; the moon was totally obscured for over 50 minutes. The January 10<sup>th</sup> date leaves plenty of time for the events Josephus described to occur.

This leaves a major conflict, however, with Josephus' dating of the reigns of Herod and his sons. Could Josephus been wrong about these dates by three years?

Scholars have put forth various arguments on this issue; some have noted small errors in his accounts where Josephus tried to nail down exact dates regarding the start of Herod's reign. The start dates of his sons reigns are also in question. While none of the arguments are conclusive, Josephus wrote from Rome after the Jewish War ended, so he didn't have access to Jewish archives. It's reasonable to question Josephus on the precision of his dates and related calculations. Given the astronomical data, the 4 BCE date is unlikely, Josephus' dates are somewhat off, and Herod's death probably occurred around March, 1 BCE.

Other evidence points agrees.

Venus and Jupiter aligned on June 17, 2 BCE, this event could have been the "Magi's Star." Given that these planets, after the Moon, are the brightest objects in the night sky, this would have been a significant event.

Regarding the enrollment mentioned in *Luke*, the Roman Senate conferred the special title "Father of the Fatherland" on Augustus on February 5, 2 BCE. To honor this event, everyone in the empire was required to register. This registration apparently started in 3 BCE and ended in 2 BCE, so Jesus could have been born in either year. The fifth-century Early Church historian Orosius noted this registration in his comments on *Luke*.

Finally, some scholars claim that Quirinius, whom *Luke* 2:2 says was governor of Syria, served in a temporary capacity in 3–2 BCE.

None of the above proves anything except that we must be careful when dealing with historical data, using words like "probably" a great deal. However, taken together, the evidence points to Herod probably dying around March, 1 BCE, and Jesus' birth probably taking place in late 3 BCE or 2 BCE.

# *The Gospel According To Matthew*

## Symbolism and Hyperbole

### Historical Background on Biblical Interpretation

In the third century BCE, Alexandria, Egypt, became the scholarly center of the use of *allegory* to interpret Greek classics, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Allegory rejects the face value meaning of a text; instead, it assigns symbols to the characters and their actions that reveal hidden meanings. Greek scholars used this method because they found the face-value lessons of the classics to be unacceptable to their modern ethics.

As early as the third century, Church scholars in Alexandria began promoting the use of allegory in interpreting the Bible. After a conflict, Alexandrian scholars managed to declare other Church scholars to be heretics, and allegory became the orthodox approach to understanding the Bible. This continued for centuries in the Catholic Church.

During the Reformation, leaders such as Luther and Calvin rejected allegory and insisted on *literal interpretation* of the Bible. While this was generally an improvement, it ignored the fact that the inspired authors of the Bible did, at times, use other means of expressing their messages that did not intend for their audience to understand their words literally. Some approaches include poetry, proverbs, and fictional stories, such as the parables told by Jesus.

I believe in taking the Bible as face-value, where we work to understand what the author *meant* to say rather than viewing what they wrote like a legal contract.

### Understanding the Author's Intent

As we read the Bible, we must be careful to identify the author's intention. For example, if we assume that *everything* should be taken literally, then we will misunderstand what David meant when he said in *Psalms* 22:6,

**“But I am a worm and not a man,**  
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.” (ESV)

Even in books like *Matthew* that we should take at face value, Jesus said things that he didn't mean for anyone to take literally. For example, in 19:12, Jesus said

“and some are eunuchs who **made themselves eunuchs** because of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Clearly, Jesus didn't want anyone to castrate themselves. In context, he was rebuking the Apostles, using heavy sarcasm. Thus, we must look for both the author's intent and, at times, the intent of those the author described.

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## **Symbolism**

Among the Jews and Jewish Christians, certain numbers had symbolic meaning. Note that just because a number appears in Matthew's Gospel, it need not have symbolic meaning. At the same time, Matthew clearly used numbers symbolically at various points.

- 2—Valid witness: Under the Law, all matters had to be established by at least two witnesses
- 3—Divinity: Father, Son, Holy Spirit
- 5—The Books of the Law: Moses wrote the five books of the Law
- 7—Full, complete: God rested on the seventh day after creating the universe
- 12—God's people: The twelve tribes of Israel

## **Hyperbole**

*Hyperbole* is deliberate exaggeration used for emphasis that isn't meant to be taken literally. In the Old Testament, the prophets, often quoting God himself, used hyperbole to express their messages. The following is part of a vision of Isaiah regarding Babylon, where God is speaking.

17 Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them,  
who have no regard for silver  
and do not delight in gold.

18 Their bows will slaughter the young men;  
they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb;  
their eyes won't pity children.

19 **And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms,  
the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans,  
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah  
when God overthrew them.**

20 **It will never be inhabited  
or lived in for all generations;**

no Arab will pitch his tent there;  
no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there.

21 But wild animals will lie down there,  
and their houses will be full of howling creatures;  
there ostriches will dwell,  
and there wild goats will dance.

22 Hyenas will cry in its towers,  
and jackals in the pleasant palaces;  
its time is close at hand

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and its days won't be prolonged. (*Isaiah* 13:17–22, ESV)

The prophecy said that the Medes would leave Babylon uninhabited and deserted. However, when the Medes and Persians overthrew Babylon, they took the city without a fight, and only the king of Babylon died. However, the Babylonian Empire was broken in one night, see *Daniel* 5:13ff. Isaiah's vision used hyperbole to demonstrate that God would totally break the power of the Babylonian Empire, which had taken the Jews into exile. The city itself, however, was spared, and it remained prominent until after the time of Alexander the Great, over 200 years later. Alexander died in the ancient royal palace in Babylon after celebrating of all his victories.

Matthew recorded Jesus making frequent use of hyperbole, both as a preacher and as a prophet. A face-value of understanding of *Matthew* involves understanding Jesus' intent as he spoke.

## **Details about the Translation**

I used the Nestle/Aland 27 Greek text, which is a high quality modern text, as the basis for my translation. It omits two verses that later editors added to the original text; these omitted verses are noted where they occur.

The Greek and English languages are fundamentally different. It isn't possible to make a literal translation from Greek to English, as Greek words have built-in grammar markers that English words don't. In addition, English is much more rigid about the order to words in a sentence. Greek allows the author to move words around in a sentence for emphasis; the grammar markers tell the listener how the words fit together. Greek words, even little words equivalent to "in" and "above," have can several meanings that require different English words to translate them. The two languages have other differences as well; my point is that *translation* of Greek to English involves *interpretation* as well.

My translation is, compared to the standard modern translations, quite literal. However, for readability, I made certain compromises. I frequently changed the subjunctive—*would*, *could*, *should*—and participles—words ending in "ing"—to the indicative. For example,

*You are fortunate when they should revile you and should persecute you and should falsely say every evil thing about you*

becomes

*You are fortunate when they revile you and persecute you and falsely say every evil thing about you,*  
and

*Then, having seen the crowds, Jesus went up onto the hill*

becomes

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up onto the hill

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Proper writing style in English avoids the use of “passive voice.” For example, “Using passive voice is considered poor style” should be, “Editors consider using passive voice as poor style.” New Testament writers, however, used passive voice extensively. I retained passive voice in the translation to remain close to the Greek.

Modern English is attempting to move away from using “he”, et al., in favor of gender-neutral words, and I try to do this in my comments. While translating, I translated *men*, when clearly used in a generic sense, as *people* or as *humankind*. However, doing this with the masculine third-person singular pronoun *he* is non-literal and awkward, so I left the masculine pronouns in place. Also, this reflects the fact that the Greek of the time was male-oriented, even as we are moving toward gender-neutral language.

I used contractions in my translation, for example, I use *don't you?* instead of *do you not?* In modern English, not using contractions sounds overly formal or even robotic. Jesus was an ordinary person using ordinary language, and Matthew's writing is also informal. I also use exclamation points in many places. I often do this where a verb is in the *imperative mood*, that is, it's a command, or where emphasis is clearly intended.

### **The Day of Jesus' Death**

The year 30 is the strongest candidate for the year of Jesus' death; it fits in with the dating of many other events.

Astronomical data points to the Passover, the day Jesus died, as falling on a Friday. In addition, the church in Rome claimed that the Apostle Peter started the tradition of celebrating “Good Friday.” However, this tradition bears further examination.

Note that verse 28:1 indicates that the women arrived before dawn, at first light; Jesus almost certainly was raised during the night. This makes sense; the women stayed away to keep the Sabbath and came as soon after as they could on the first day of the week.

In verse 13:40, Jesus said he would be three days and three nights in the tomb. The following table counts days and nights backwards from Sunday. As we count back, we must remember that ancient counting included partial periods of time. Also, the Jewish day started at nightfall.

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Day of Week	Night	Day
Thursday		3
Friday	3	2
Saturday	2	1
Sunday	1	

We immediately see that, if Jesus died on a Friday afternoon, then he would have spent only two days and two nights in the tomb. Even if we—wrongly—assume that Jesus rose after sunrise on Sunday, that only leaves us with three days and two nights.

This leaves us with two options. We can accept that Jesus died on a Friday and that he didn't literally mean three days and three nights. This option is supported by tradition and astronomical data, and it's the common approach. However, it forces us to make excuses about Jesus' plain words.

We can also assume that the Passover occurred, and Jesus died, on a Thursday; he then spent three days and three nights in the tomb. This raises several questions.

“What about the Sabbath? Why didn't the women go to the tomb on Friday.” In addition to the weekly Sabbath, the day after Passover, when Jesus died, was a *special* Sabbath. This special Sabbath could fall on any day of the week. If the Passover occurred on a Thursday, then the following day, Friday, would be a special Sabbath, followed by the weekly Sabbath. This would force the women to wait for two full days before they went to the tomb.

“What about the astronomical data, which says the Passover fell on a Friday?” This is a valid question, as the Jewish calendar was set by the priests as they observed the new moon. However, attempts to reproduce the Jewish calendar and hold the priests to a certain date assume a great deal.

A new moon rises during the day and sets with the sun; this leaves a few minutes to look for a sliver of light on the moon at dusk. During this time, the priests had to determine if they could see a sliver of light on the moon. If it was cloudy or even hazy, this observation became impossible. The priests likely had a backup plan for these circumstances. They had a very good idea of what day the new moon would appear months in advance; perhaps, in case of clouds, they simply declared the new month to start.

Given that the priests expected to see the new moon on a certain day, would they fudge, thinking they saw a sliver of light when there was none? Were the priests influenced by other factors, such as the Roman governor demanding to know the Passover schedule more than

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fourteen days in advance? The Jewish calendar, with its frequent leap months and human observations, can't be reproduced with the scientific exactness that many assume.

“What about the Apostle Peter’s Good Friday tradition?” In fact, the church in Ephesus, following the Apostle John’s direction, celebrated “Good Friday” on whatever day of the week the Passover occurred each year. In the second century, this led to a conflict with the church in Rome, so that the bishop of Rome excommunicated the bishop of Ephesus for failing to follow Apostolic tradition. Other bishops quickly stepped in, telling the bishop in Rome to stand down. The point is that John didn’t see any special significance to Friday.

Bottom line, this is a matter of opinion. However, a Thursday Passover in 30 agrees with Jesus’ explicit prediction, and the astronomical data doesn’t take into account human factors.

### **Jesus’ Birth and Connection to Nazareth**

*Matthew* contains only a few details of Jesus’ early life, just enough to establish that he was indeed born in Bethlehem, even though he grew up in Nazareth. Tradition generally portrays “three wise men” honoring Jesus immediately after his birth in a barn. *Matthew*, however, says that Jesus had been born *before* the Magi came to Jerusalem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, Jesus’ parents were staying in a house. Together, this implies that Jesus had been born some time before the Magi visited. The family then fled to Egypt, stayed until after Herod’s death, and then moved to Nazareth.

Luke explores Jesus’ conception and birth from Mary’s perspective and goes into more detail. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth when they were engaged, and that a Roman registration forced them to travel to Bethlehem just before Mary gave birth. He implies that the young couple were shunned when they arrived—*inn* should be translated *guest room*; no one extended hospitality to them—and that they were homeless when Mary gave birth in some sort of animal shelter. Angels informed some shepherds of the birth of the Christ, and they came to honor the newborn Jesus. His parents circumcised him on the eighth day, and after 40 days, they took him to the Temple. Subsequently, they returned to Nazareth.

Some claim that these accounts contradict each other; that isn’t so. Luke used *Matthew* as a source and was aware of the events it contained; he wrote his own account around the existing account so that there was no overlap in the specific events. However, both state that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that he grew up in Nazareth.

*Matthew* says nothing about how Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, and Luke says nothing about how long they stayed there before they returned to Nazareth, or whether they went anywhere else in between. We might wish that they covered all the events with a clear timeline, but that wasn’t the intention of either author. Both had limited space to cover what they thought was important; we need to be careful not read in more than what they intended.



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## **Divorce, Women's Rights, Sexual Sin**

### **Women's—Lack of—Rights Under the Law**

In ancient times, women were generally treated as the property of men, first of their fathers and then of their husbands. Neither Hebrew nor Greek have words for *husband* or *wife*, she was simply the man's woman. Among the Israelites and then the Jews, a woman had no right to divorce her husband and few rights in preventing him from divorcing her. In addition, a man was allowed to have multiple wives, even in the first century.

Men expected their brides to be virgins; *Deuteronomy* 22:13–21 covers this issue. A bride had to provide proof of her virginity, if there was no proof, then the woman was guilty of prostitution and must be put to death.

Prior to the Law, women had almost no rights, but the Law provided them with some minimal protections.

An existing tradition required that a man was required to give his wife a certificate of divorce when he sent her away. This certificate proved that the woman wasn't guilty of prostitution and allowed her to remarry. Note that in *Deuteronomy* 24:1–4, Moses simply referred to the tradition about certificates of divorce when he commanded that a man, having divorced his wife and her subsequently remarrying, could not marry her a second time.

*Deuteronomy* 22:13ff provides several protections. The Law provided brides with protection against slanderous accusations by their grooms. If the groom claimed his bride wasn't a virgin, the Law required the elders to investigate. If the woman's father was able to prove the claim was false, the groom had pay the father a huge fine, and the groom could never divorce his wife.

It provided protection for an engaged woman who was raped against punishment.

Finally, if a man forced an unmarried woman to have sex and they were discovered, then the Law required that he marry the woman and never divorce her.

*Deuteronomy* 25:5ff provided widows without sons with an additional protection. The brother of the widow's husband was required to take her and raise a son on his dead brother's behalf. If the brother failed to perform this duty, the elders were to conduct a ritual shaming of the man.

### **Jesus on Divorce Under the Law**

Before saying anything else, note that adultery wasn't grounds for divorce; according to the Law, adultery must be punished by death of both the man and the woman.

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Matthew includes Jesus' teaching on divorce in two places. To understand Jesus' position, it's easier to start in the second place, where the Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce, and Jesus responded with his reasoning.

<sup>3</sup>Pharisees approached him, testing him and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his woman for any reason?" <sup>4</sup>Jesus responded, saying, "You have read that he who created from the beginning

'made them male and female,'  
haven't you? <sup>5</sup>And he said,

'Because of this, a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his woman, and the two will become one flesh.'

<sup>6</sup>So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, **what God has joined together, a man must not separate.**"

<sup>7</sup>The Pharisees said to him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a divorce document and divorce her?" <sup>8</sup>Jesus said to them, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your hard-heartedness; **it wasn't this way from the beginning.** <sup>9</sup>I tell you that **he who divorces his woman, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery.**

Jesus made two points. First, God joined a man and a woman together in marriage, and people shouldn't separate them. This is a core principle, that God takes marriage seriously, and he expects people to honor it.

Based on this, Jesus made a leap of legal interpretation. He claimed that God doesn't *recognize* divorce; in God's sight, the two remain married. Jesus doesn't say this, but his conclusions strongly *imply* it. Therefore, a man divorcing his wife and marrying another committed adultery. Essentially, Jesus banned divorce.

Note that the Law allowed divorce where the groom found that his bride wasn't a virgin. Jesus recognized this exception, referring to it as fornication. As noted above, this isn't talking about adultery.

Verse 5:32 is similar to 19:9, but it has a twist. It puts the blame for adultery on the woman.

<sup>32</sup>However, I tell you that anyone who divorces his woman, except by reason of fornication, **makes her an adulterer, and if a man marries a divorced woman, he commits adultery.**

In this teaching here, Jesus recognized that the Law made no prohibition against a man having multiple wives. Therefore, a man who divorced his wife didn't commit adultery by marrying again; in God's sight, he was married to both women. As we see in verse 19:9, Jesus did *not* agree with this loophole, but he acknowledged it; otherwise, he would have exposed himself to an expert in the Law contradicting him.

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1 See *Deuteronomy* 24:1.

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So, in 5:32 Jesus limited himself to the Law. In 19:1–9, Jesus took a harder line, going beyond the Law and banning divorce completely, with the one exception of premarital sex on the part of the woman. Again, Jesus was still under the Law, and he submitted to its limits.

## **Divorce Now**

How does this apply to us now? Many have claimed that Jesus made adultery a valid reason for divorce. That isn't the case. Jesus allowed divorce in the case of premarital sex by the woman—ancient Jews saw this as prostitution, not adultery; that exception isn't applicable today. In addition, the rule that a man having sex with an unmarried woman must marry her is part of the Law, which Jesus set aside.

Some have also claimed that a divorced woman can't remarry. Based on a legalistic approach to what Jesus taught, neither can a divorced man remarry in places where polygamy is illegal. Jesus didn't put restrictions on women or grant privileges to men; he called all people to honor marriage.

My personal opinion is this. Jesus' teaching was based on the Law to those still under the Law. Now that Jesus has fulfilled the Law, we are no longer under the Law. We can't, by faith, do what Jesus condemns, but we are no longer bound by legalistic rules.

Generally, Jesus didn't intend to put restrictions on those who are divorced; instead, he intended to stop believers from divorcing. We must not take Jesus' words and misuse them to bind up heavy burdens for people, see verse 23:4. People divorced before they became Christians are forgiven, and God gives grace for our sins committed after we made Jesus Lord.

Finally, I don't believe that God expects Christians to suffer in *truly abusive* marriages. God wants marriage to be honored, not used to imprison believers. In extreme cases, we should seek God's guidance through prayer, not turn God into a "bad cop" who inflexibly enforces rules.

## **Premarital Sex**

Some claim that the Bible does not forbid premarital sex. Roman, Greek, and Jewish society all condemned premarital sex, especially for women. Premarital sex, especially among women, was considered prostitution. While aristocrats tended to ignore this code, ordinary people observed it. *Galatians* 5:19ff has a list of "works of the flesh," the first of which is fornication or sexual immorality. This certainly included premarital sex.

*Deuteronomy* 22:22–29 has explicit instructions regarding sexual sin.

1. If a man has sex with another man's wife, both must die
2. The same applies to a virgin who is engaged if she does not cry out; she is treated as if she is married

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3. If a man forces himself on a virgin who is engaged and she cries out, then only the man must die—this is a case of rape
4. If a man forces himself on a virgin who isn't yet engaged, then he must pay a large fine to her father and marry the woman, and he must never divorce her

The first two rules deal with adultery, and the third deals with rape. The fourth also deals with what we would consider rape; however, it only requires that the man marry the woman. This is inherently unfair, but in verse 19:8, Jesus noted that the Law included compromises because of the hard-heartedness of the Israelites.

Regardless, the Law clearly leaves no room for premarital sex; a man and a woman engaging in it would be forced to marry. An unmarried woman with multiple partners was a prostitute.

Modern society has a much more lax attitude about premarital sex, and calling it prostitution goes too far. However, the Bible clearly calls it sin.

### **Jesus Sent Only to the Jews**

Jesus' remarks that he was only sent to the Jews seem out of step with his other teachings that the Kingdom would accept the Gentiles. However, Jesus was speaking of his ministry on earth and not of God's overall intentions.

The Old Testament describes how God called the Israelites to be his own nation. He gave them the Law and the land of Canaan as their home. For over a thousand years, God worked with the Israelites, later called the Jews, to shape their understanding of him. One aspect of this was to cause them to understand their rebelliousness and their need for a savior. God did this to prepare them for the coming of Christ in the form of Jesus, so that they would respond appropriately to him.

However, not even the Apostles understood Jesus' ultimate purpose until after his resurrection. After his resurrection, Jesus had to appear to them over a 40-day period for them to grasp what had happened and what it meant.

The Gentiles didn't know or understand God, and they couldn't recognize Jesus for who he was or understand the significance of his miracles. Doing miracles among them would serve no purpose and could create an uproar. Later, after the Kingdom was established among the Jews, God began to call Gentiles to enter the kingdom as well. Note that even that process began with Samaritans, who understood God to some extent—*Acts 8:9ff*. Sometime after, Peter reached out to Gentiles through a centurion who most likely attended a Jewish synagogue—*Acts 10:1ff*.

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## **Approaching a Believer Who Sinned Against You**

Although Jesus' instructions in chapter 18 regarding a believer who sins against you are simple, Christians often fail to put them into practice. This can result in bitterness, gossip, and sin spreading through the church. Here are some thoughts that can make doing what Jesus said easier.

- When you approach someone who sinned, gently and briefly share what you thought happened; then, ask them what they thought happened. This avoids turning a misunderstanding into a fight.
- If you can't come to resolution quickly, don't press the issue. Instead, suggest getting one or two others involved to help, and end the conversation.
- If you seek one or two others to mediate, don't tell them details; simply let them know that you are involved in a conflict that you can't resolve. This avoids gossip and favoritism, and it gives both sides an equal chance to say what happened.
- If you can't bring yourself to confront someone who sinned against you, seek encouragement from a reliable individual, *without* revealing who sinned or what they did.
- If you become aware of a situation where the person wronged won't approach the other person, even after encouragement, seek a reliable person to mediate the initial discussion.

## **How Judas Died**

Matthew says that Judas hanged himself; however, *Acts 1:18–19* says,

“So, then, this man acquired a field with his unjust wages, and becoming prostrate,<sup>1</sup> he burst open in the middle, and all his guts poured out. This became known among all those living in Jerusalem, so that field was called—in their own language—Hakeldamach, that is, Bloody Field.”

This raises the question, “How did Judas die?” First, it's highly unlikely that Judas bought himself a field before he killed himself there. Second, tremendous force is required to cause a living body to burst open, as described. Finally, if Matthew wrote 20 years before Luke, we may assume that Luke assumed the facts were well-known and embellished his description slightly.

Here is a possible way of merging the two accounts. Judas returned the money to the chief priests and hanged himself from a tree in a field. After more than a week—after the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread had taken place—the owner of the field found the body and complained to the chief priests. They sent slaves to remove the body from the tree, which had

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1 This awkward phrase is generally translated *fell headfirst*, which is an assumption. The Greek, taken at face value, says that Judas ended up face down on the ground without saying how he got there. The fact that his body burst open implies a fall from a substantial height and that he was already dead.

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begun to rot and swell. When a slave cut the rope, the body fell to the ground and burst open in a gory mess. The slaves buried the body where it fell. The chief priests then bought the field to satisfy the owner. Thus, Matthew tells some parts of the story and Luke some others.

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