

## New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 1 – Matthew

We talk about the four gospels, but of course there is only one gospel, and that is the good news of Jesus Christ. We should therefore refer to ‘the gospel according to Matthew,’ ‘the gospel according to Mark,’ etc. It’s not that they are all so very different – they are telling the same story – but each has its own focus. Each evangelist is telling the story from a different angle, if you like, and it is this variety of detail when put together which helps to complete the picture.

We will start with Matthew and the book that bears his name. Matthew, also known by his surname, Levi, is someone we know very little about. He makes direct reference to himself only twice, very briefly, and by the time his name is last mentioned with the other apostles (Acts 1:13) he passes into obscurity. We do know, though, that he was once a tax collector who worked in the city of Capernaum (Matt. 9:9; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), that he collected taxes for Rome, and like all Jewish tax collectors he would have been hated by many of his fellow countrymen. Such people were thought to be traitors, partly because they worked for the enemy, Rome, and partly, too, because they drew their wages (often excessively) from the taxes they collected. This is not to say that Matthew himself was corrupt, of course, or that he engaged in any unethical practices, but we may be sure that he must have suffered some measure of that damaged reputation of tax collectors. What would have been particularly surprising to his contemporaries is that Jesus chose him to be one of His disciples. Yet Jesus came to call, as we know, not the righteous but sinners to repentance.

It is of particular interest to note that Matthew responded to the call of Christ immediately. Undoubtedly, he was already familiar with Jesus, he would have listened to His teaching and witnessed some of His miracles, but it is always worth noting how quickly and without reservation some people – especially if they are rich, like Matthew – do respond to such a call. This is a work of God. What may be somewhat surprising to us today is that he had so many friends, a great company of tax collectors and others, who sat down with him at a great feast held at his house. Apparently, Matthew’s reputation did not alienate everybody. The whole purpose of such a feast, of course, was to testify to his new faith and to introduce his friends to Jesus whom he had now resolved to serve.

Though we do not know a great deal about him, this evangelist is presented to us as a challenging example to us all. When we hear the call of God in the gospel, do we respond immediately and with all our heart, or do we offer excuses and try to hide behind other responsibilities which we think warrant our attention? (See Matt. 8:21,22.) Also, do we care enough for our family and friends, for our co-workers and neighbours, that we want to win them to Christ as well? The man of Gadara begged to go with Jesus, remember, but what was more important for him at that time was to tell others what great things the Lord had done for him, and how He had shown him such compassion. The result of his doing so was that people marveled at the change they saw in him, and that, in turn, created a desire in their hearts to receive the Lord Jesus when He returned to that same area.

The book of Matthew, the first of the twenty-seven books which make up the New Testament, was probably not the first gospel account to be written – there is some evidence to suggest that Mark was first – nevertheless, there is good reason to begin with Matthew. Matthew gives us the best transition from the Old Testament to the New, showing with great precision that the coming Christ is the fulfilment of Old Testament promise. Sixty-five Old Testament passages are alluded to, forty-three of which are actually quoted, a number equal to all the other gospel writers combined. And, really, this is where we need to begin if we are going to understand and appreciate all that follows. Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah, the hope and expectation of Israel, and Matthew's mission is to tell us that He has at last come.

Matthew's account of the gospel is about **Christ the King** – that is his theme – the fact that Jesus is David's greater Son and the true Heir of the throne of Israel. Mark's account will be about Christ the Servant, but first we need to learn about Christ the King, and how all the judges and other deliverers in Jewish history were but types, figures and shadows of this great King who was to come. Matthew focuses, as I say, on the kingship of Jesus, on His victory over all the forces of evil, and on His return in power and glory. Indeed, no other evangelist gives such emphasis as he does to the Second Coming of Christ, to the judgment He will usher in at the end of the world and the eternal separation of people it will bring about. If you want to learn about Christ the King, this book is a must-read.

Matthew traces Jesus' history from a royal line – His birth is dreaded by a rival king – the magi present to Him royal gifts – His herald, John the Baptist, declares that His kingdom is at hand – and His temptation reaches its climax when Satan, in an attempt to dissuade Him from establishing His own kingdom, offers Him all the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus was an anomaly to many. On the one hand, He had no permanent residence (Matt. 8:20); on the other hand, evil spirits were subject to Him, and even the wind and sea obeyed Him. At one time, He was hailed by many Jews as their King; only days later those same people turned against Him and crucified Him because He would not allow Himself to be the political and military commander they wanted Him to be, to rescue the people of Israel from the tyranny of Rome, but He insisted instead that His kingdom was not of this world. Yet for all that, He was the King of kings, rejected by Jews and accepted by Gentiles, who claimed that all authority had been given to Him in heaven and on earth, and who demonstrated that to be the case by His resurrection from the tomb and thereby showing His power even over death.

The outline for the book of Matthew with regard to the time and place of Jesus' ministry is as follows: Introduction, 1:1-4:11; His Ministry in Galilee, 4:12-18:35; His Journey through Perea, chapters 19 & 20; and His Last Week in Jerusalem, chapters 21-28.

In ordering his material for writing, however, Matthew is quite unlike the other evangelists. Luke follows a strict time-frame, whereas Matthew does not consistently follow the order of time, but groups similar events or teachings which may be logically related, and in doing that his writing makes its own kind of impact on the reader. For instance, he arranges together seven of the fourteen parables he records, and in the same way he arranges ten of the twenty miracles. There is order to Matthew's method, but not necessarily the kind that is most familiar to many people.

A similar pattern of collecting and arranging can be seen in Matthew's record of Jesus' sermons, what is commonly referred to as our Lord's Five Great Discourses. These are His Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), His commission to the twelve apostles on their first missionary journey (chapter 10), His Parables of the Kingdom (chapter 13), His condemnation of religious hypocrisy (chapter 23), and

His Olivet Discourse (chapters 24 & 25). Included in Matthew's message is not merely **that** Jesus taught, in other words, but **what** He taught. These sermons are like the formal proclamations of a king as he sets forth the fundamental laws and manners of his kingdom, and each concludes with the same distinguishing phrase, "when Jesus had finished all these sayings." Portions of these sermons are found in other gospel accounts, but none of them is as rich, or as detailed and complete, as what we find here.

When you read the book of Matthew, and learn all that you can of this King who has come, it is not enough for you just to know these things about Him. You need to know Him personally, to enter into a vital relationship with Him, to subject yourself freely and wholeheartedly to His sovereign rule, and to serve Him as all who are faithful citizens of His kingdom are eager to do. Consider His gracious promise, "Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28,29).

If you are yet a stranger to such grace but an earnest inquirer, look for a church where Christ is faithfully proclaimed and place yourself every sabbath day under the counsel of God's Word.

If, on the other hand, you are a believer who is reading this, you should know and be assured that you were so born of God (Matt. 11:25-27). This did not come from any human source, or by any natural means, but as this was the work of God Himself in Matthew's life, so it was by this same intervention and work of the Almighty that you also became a trophy of His saving grace. Be thankful for that, dear Christian, and give praise to Him from whom all blessings flow. Seek now to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. Confidence in the Lord and a determination to serve Him will increase by our studying His Word, by our striving for a closer walk with Him and learning by such experience what a wonderful Saviour we have!

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