

# The Gospels

LESSON  
TWO

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW



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# The Gospels

## Lesson Two

### The Gospel According to Matthew

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## INTRODUCTION

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In 1919 King Albert of Belgium was traveling across the United States by train. He was something of an authority on locomotives, so for a ten-mile stretch he dressed as an engineer and ran the train. At the next stop, the cheering crowd looked for King Albert but couldn't find him. They expected the king to look a certain way, and to act in a certain way. So, they didn't realize that the tall man dressed in a flannel shirt and a railroad cap was actually the king of Belgium.

From one perspective, the Gospel of Matthew tells a similar story. It's the story of a king — Jesus, the King of the Jews. But many in his day didn't recognize him because he didn't look the way people expected him to look, and he didn't act as they expected him to act. He was a different kind of king.

This is the second lesson in our series *The Gospels*. We have entitled this lesson "The Gospel According to Matthew," because we will focus our attention on the first gospel, the book of Matthew.

Our study of Matthew's gospel will divide into three parts. First, we'll consider the background of Matthew's book. Second, we'll explore its structure and content. And third, we'll look at some major themes in Matthew's gospel. Let's begin with the background of the Gospel According to Matthew.

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## BACKGROUND

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**A lot of people ask the question, "Why do I need to know all of this contextual stuff about the Bible? Can't I just read the Bible in a good English translation and figure out what it means?" I like to say a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean. The problem is that all ancient texts are given in certain kinds of historical, literary, rhetorical, archeological, religious context, and those contexts are all different from ours. One person once said, "The past is like a foreign country. They do things differently there." The past is very different from the present and the greatest hedge we have against anachronism, a reading back into the past all of our modern assumptions, is careful contextual study of the Bible.**

— Dr. Ben Witherington

**It's important to understand background issues such as who the author is and what the historical context is when we're interpreting books of the Bible precisely because when authors write books, they assume that their audience is operating in a shared culture, and they take for granted that their audience is going to know much of the broader context of the statements that they make. And so, our task, in many cases, is to discern who this author is and what his culture is so that we can get some more light from the broader culture and history so that we can fill in some of these assumptions and given realities.**

— Dr. James Hamilton

We'll discuss the background of Matthew's gospel in three steps. First, we'll speak of Matthew as the author of the work. Second, we'll talk about Matthew's original audience. And third, we'll look at the occasion or circumstances in which Matthew wrote. Let's turn first to the question of the author of this gospel.

## **AUTHOR**

Whenever we study a book, or a letter, or any other writing, it's helpful to know who wrote it. After all, the more we know about an author and his context, the better prepared we are to understand his perspectives and meaning. And the same is true when we study the Bible. The more we know about biblical authors, the better prepared we are to understand the lessons they are teaching us. So, as we approach the Gospel of Matthew, one of the first questions we want to ask is "Who wrote this book?"

We'll consider the author of the *Gospel According to Matthew* in two stages. First, we'll affirm the traditional view that this book was written by the apostle Matthew, who was one of Jesus' original twelve disciples. And second, we'll explore Matthew's personal history. Let's start with the traditional view that this gospel was written by Matthew.

### **Traditional View**

**I think we can have a lot of confidence that Matthew, the apostle Matthew, really is the author of the Gospel of Matthew, though some scholars today doubt that. For one thing, we know that the early church fathers were very skeptical — in fact, that's an understatement actually — that they were absolutely opposed to accepting forgeries as being authentic, canonical works, as belonging to the inspired collection of Scriptures. Secondly, there's absolutely no competing tradition regarding the authorship of Matthew. The only tradition we have is that Matthew wrote this book. Thirdly, if the early church were going to associate the name of someone with this**

**gospel for anything other than historical reasons, just make up a name, or just pick one of the apostles out of a hat, to attach to this book, they made a poor choice with Matthew. The reason is because Matthew was a tax collector. He followed a profession that was absolutely despised by the Jewish people. And yet Matthew's gospel is a gospel that is written to a Jewish audience, trying to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. So we have this gospel written to Jews to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah, and they're going to pick Matthew to be the writer of this gospel? That makes no sense at all. The only reason they would associate Matthew's name with the Gospel of Matthew is if they had good, strong reason to believe that Matthew actually wrote it.**

— Dr. Steve Cowan

The traditional view that Matthew wrote the first gospel comes from the earliest centuries of the church. In every ancient manuscript of this gospel that contains a title, the title attributes the book to Matthew and only to Matthew. We have no evidence that this gospel ever circulated among the churches without Matthew's name attached to it.

One of the earliest people to attribute the first gospel to Matthew was Papias of Hierapolis. Papias lived from the end of the first century into the second century. He represents viewpoints from the earliest period of the church to which we have access.

The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote around A.D. 325, recorded Papias' testimony regarding the authorship of Matthew's gospel in his *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, 39, section 16. Listen to Papias' words:

**Matthew put the logia in an ordered arrangement.**

Here we see that early in the second century, Papias attributed the gospel to Matthew. It's also worth noting that Eusebius quoted Papias in order to corroborate his own view that Matthew wrote the first gospel.

Another early church father — Irenaeus of Lyons — who wrote around A.D. 180, also attributed the first gospel to Matthew. Listen to what he wrote in *Against Heresies*, book 3, 1, section 1:

**Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church.**

Tertullian lived a little later, from AD 155 to 230. He affirmed Matthew's authorship in his work *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 2:

**Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us ... Luke and Mark renew it afterwards.**

As far as Irenaeus and Tertullian were concerned, Matthew wrote this gospel. And their conviction was shared by the early church. Matthew's authorship of the first gospel was accepted as a certainty.

It's also important to realize that these early claims of Matthew's authorship are strengthened by Matthew's relative obscurity. Presumably, if the church or someone else had wanted to give credibility to a gospel by attributing it to an apostle of their own choosing, they would probably have chosen one of the more prominent apostles. But Matthew is rarely mentioned in the Gospels. This makes it unlikely that his name was falsely attached to this gospel.

**First of all, we have to recognize the importance of eyewitness testimony in the first century. Eyewitness testimony was very highly regarded, and no one claiming eyewitness testimony was taken lightly. It's almost, if you will, a sacred category of saying things about things that happened. We also know that in the early second century, a fellow named Papias wrote that the Gospel of Matthew was by the apostle Matthew. And Papias would have very likely known apostles firsthand because of his lifespan. The final reason I would say that we can be confident that the Gospel of Matthew is by the apostle Matthew is that even though Matthew's name is not mentioned in the text of the Gospel of Matthew, the fact is that the Gospel of Matthew from our earliest records never circulated without Matthew the apostle's name associated with it as its author and authority.**

— Rev. Michael Glodo

Of course, some modern critical scholars have doubted that the apostle Matthew wrote the first gospel, just as they have questioned many other traditional views of biblical authorship. But the overall strength of the ancient attestation to Matthew as the author of this gospel, together with the complete absence of any ancient challenges, gives us strong reason to believe that he wrote this book.

Now that we have looked at the traditional view that Matthew wrote this first gospel, we should turn to Matthew's personal history.

## Personal History

Scripture tells us a few important facts about Matthew's personal history. For instance, it mentions that he was both a Jew and a tax collector. We'll consider both of these details, beginning with the fact that Matthew was a Jew.

Matthew's Jewish heritage is revealed in a number of ways. For one thing, he was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, who were all Jewish. For another, Matthew had Jewish names. The name Matthew is itself a Jewish name, derived from the Hebrew Old Testament. And his other name, Levi, which we find in Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:28, was the name of one of the tribes of Israel. So, both names demonstrate that Matthew was

Jewish. Matthew's Jewish ancestry may also be implied by ancient Christian reports that he wrote in Hebrew.

Matthew's Jewish heritage is important background for understanding his gospel because it helps us interpret his distinctly Jewish emphasis. We'll study the Jewish character of this gospel in greater detail later in this lesson. So for now, we'll mention only one example for the sake of illustration.

In Matthew 15:24, Matthew reported that Jesus made the following claim:

**I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 15:24).**

More than any other gospel, Matthew emphasized that Jesus had come particularly to the nation of Israel.

Besides Matthew's Jewish heritage, another detail of his life worth noting is that he was a tax collector.

In the first century, many Jews in Palestine collected taxes on behalf of the Roman Empire. Some of these tax collectors collected tariffs on goods that moved from one area to another. They were private entrepreneurs who paid the rulers for the authority to collect taxes. They made their profit by inflating the taxes they collected from the people. As a result, these tax collectors were seen as extortionists and thieves — and this reputation was often justified.

For this reason, Jewish tax collectors were doubly guilty in the eyes of their countrymen. First, they were the agents of the hated occupying forces of Rome. And second, they robbed their own people for the sake of personal gain. In fact, they were considered to be so evil and untrustworthy that early rabbinic writings prohibited them from testifying in a Jewish court. Moreover, lying to tax collectors was approved and even praised as an act of justified rebellion.

Listen to the way Matthew recorded his own call from Jesus in Matthew 9:9-10:

**Jesus ... saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples (Matthew 9:9-10).**

Matthew was very candid in his description of himself, and openly admitted that he and other tax collectors were associated with "sinners" in Jesus' day. By doing so, Matthew put himself, Jesus, and his written gospel at odds with the Jewish leadership. This division is often expressed in Matthew's gospel.

For example, listen to the way Jesus criticized the Jewish leadership in Matthew 21:31-32:

**I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him (Matthew 21:31-32).**



Matthew's willingness to speak openly about his sinful personal history may also be related to another emphasis of his gospel, which we will look at more closely later in this lesson. Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, stressed the fact that Jesus was a humble king who called for humility in his followers. By acknowledging his past, Matthew freely admitted his own need for grace, and proclaimed his willingness to follow the King that had called and changed him. Jesus had transformed him from a sinful servant of Herod into a humble servant of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven.

**In our lives, humility should look like we are glad, we are satisfied when good things are happening for other people, for ourselves as well, but when other people are progressing, when other people are in some sense finding honor or their works are shown to be fruitful, we are glad in that. We are thankful to God for that, and we want to honor and thank God in the first place. We want to live for God's sake above all, not simply for our sake. So, humility is going to be that — not looking to my interests being fulfilled, but looking, in the first place, God's interests being fulfilled, whether that's through somebody else, or through me.**

— Dr. John McKinley

Now that we've concluded that the traditional view that Matthew wrote the first gospel is correct, and become familiar with a little of his personal history, we'll explore the identity of the original audience for whom Matthew wrote.

### ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

Matthew did not specifically identify his original audience. But he did give us a few clues about them. As we'll see, Matthew appears to have written primarily for Jewish Christians.

As we mentioned in a prior lesson, all the Gospels were written specifically for Christian audiences. But several emphases in Matthew's gospel make it particularly well-suited for a Christian audience from a Jewish background. For example, Matthew quoted the Old Testament more than any other gospel writer. He frequently pointed out the ways in which Jesus fulfilled Old Testament expectations. And he especially emphasized that Jesus was the messianic King the Jews had awaited for centuries. His emphasis on Jewish issues also appears in Jesus' conflicts with the unbelieving leaders of the Jews, which Matthew described in more detail than the other gospel writers did. And Matthew also put the greatest focus on Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament law, especially as its Lord.

Later in this lesson we'll look at some of these emphases in greater detail. So, at this point, we'll simply mention two examples that suggest Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience, beginning with Matthew's use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven."

## Kingdom of Heaven

In a prior lesson, we noted that all four gospels are unified by the theme of the kingdom of God. But Matthew rarely used the phrase “kingdom of *God*.” Instead he generally used the phrase “kingdom of *heaven*.” The Gospel of Matthew is the only book in the Bible that uses this terminology. And as we have seen, both phrases mean the same thing.

Out of reverence for God, the Jews often avoided using the divine name — or anything close to it — so that they would not accidentally take God’s name in vain. One way that they did this was by replacing the word “God” with the word “heaven.” And this is precisely what Matthew did when he used the phrase “kingdom of heaven.” When we compare parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels, we see that where the other gospel writers used the term “kingdom of God,” Matthew used the phrase “kingdom of heaven.”

**Matthew uses the phrase, “kingdom of heaven,” almost the whole time in his gospel for what we, in the other gospels, refer to as the “kingdom of God.” I think that there’s a couple of occasions where Matthew uses the phrase, “kingdom of God,” but it’s because Matthew is a Jewish writer, a Jewish believer in Christ, and for Jews, the name of God was something almost too holy to use. So, to use the phrase “heaven” is another way of referring to God. We read in another gospel, “I have sinned against heaven and against earth.” It means, “I have sinned against God.” And, the danger is that when we hear the phrase, “kingdom of heaven,” we mishear that and think, “Oh, it sounds rather ethereal and anemic... the kingdom of heaven — can’t see that.” But in fact, he was talking about the kingdom of God, with the idea that God really now is becoming King of this world through Jesus Christ. So, there’s a real danger of Christians later to mishear “kingdom of heaven.” Actually, Jesus is saying, God is King, and is becoming King through me.**

— Dr. Peter Walker

Listen to Mark’s record of the parable of the mustard seed in Mark 4:30-31:

**[Jesus] said: “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground” (Mark 4:30-31).**

Here Mark used the normal form of the phrase: kingdom of God. But listen to Matthew’s version of the parable in Matthew 13:31:

**[Jesus] told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field” (Matthew 13:31).**

When Matthew recounted this same event, he used the term “kingdom of heaven” where Mark had used the term “kingdom of God.”

**When you compare what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven with other places where Mark and Luke have the very same passage and call it the kingdom of God, that’s one of the definitive ways to see that they have the same reference, that they refer to the same thing. Well, when you read Matthew overall you’ll see that there’s a major theme of contrasting God in heaven with humanity on earth. God’s way of doing kingdom, which he calls the kingdom of heaven, and humanity’s way of ruling and reigning and acting and behaving towards each other, which we might call the kingdoms of this world. And for Matthew to talk about the kingdom of heaven is a very powerful way for him to feel the difference between merely the things of this world, and our Father in heaven who reigns and rules and promises to come again. So the point of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s language is to let us feel and taste the difference between God’s reign that is still yet to come, and all the reigns and ruling and behavior of this earth, there’s a contrast between those two realities, and Matthew using “kingdom of heaven,” helps us feel and taste and hope in that time coming for God’s kingdom of heaven.**

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Many scholars believe that Matthew preserved the way Jesus spoke to Jewish crowds, and that Mark and other New Testament writers used the phrase “kingdom of God“ in order to make Jesus’ meaning more clear to broader audiences. But whether or not this is true, Matthew’s use of the phrase “kingdom of heaven” adds weight to the view that his original audience was Jewish.

## **Jewish Customs**

Another aspect of Matthew’s gospel that points to a Jewish audience is the way Matthew assumed that his audience had substantial knowledge of Jewish customs. As just one example, in Matthew 15:1-2, Matthew recorded this event:

**Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!” (Matthew 15:1-2).**

Mark included this same story in 7:1-5 of his gospel. But Mark added a three-verse explanation of the Jewish custom of hand washing so that his Roman audience would

understand the custom. Matthew felt no need to add that sort of explanation for his audience.

Now, assuming that Matthew did write for a Jewish audience, there is one characteristic of his gospel that seems to be out of place. In a few instances, Matthew quoted Jesus speaking in Aramaic, and then translated those Aramaic words into the language of his audience.

For example, listen to the words of Matthew 27:46:

**Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” — which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).**

There are a variety of explanations for why Matthew might have written in this way, even if his audience were primarily Jewish. First, even though his audience was primarily Jewish, it was not exclusively Jewish. So, he may have included these translations for the non-Jews among his readers. Second, Matthew’s audience may have included people living outside Palestine that did not know Aramaic. And third, Matthew may simply have copied the information from another source. For example, the translation from Matthew 27:46 also appears in Mark 15:34, which Matthew may have used as a source.

In all events, the weight of evidence strongly suggests that Matthew wrote his gospel primarily for Jewish Christians, in order to strengthen their faith in Jesus by addressing many issues that were particularly important to them.

Now that we have investigated the author and audience of the first gospel, we’re ready to examine the occasion of its composition.

## OCCASION

When we speak of the “occasion” of a book, we have in mind several things that are related to its historical context — things like its date of composition, its location of composition, the location of its intended audience, and the purpose for which it was written. Knowing when, where, to whom, and why a book was written gives us a lot of information about its context. It helps us understand its historical setting, its grammar and vocabulary, its religious and social assumptions, and its rhetorical strategies. And in turn, this information helps us understand and apply the book.

We’ll consider three aspects of the occasion for the writing of Matthew’s gospel: first, the date of the writing; second, the location of both the author and audience; and third, the purpose for which Matthew wrote. Let’s begin with the date of Matthew’s gospel.

### Date

First, as the majority of scholars believe, Matthew probably used the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources. As we will see in a later lesson, it’s likely that Mark was

written around A.D. 64. If this is correct, the earliest date at which Matthew probably wrote was the mid-to-late 60s.

Second, Matthew was an apostle of Jesus. This means that he was already an adult by the time he engaged in ministry with Jesus, probably by the year A.D. 30. So, unless Matthew lived an extraordinarily long life, the latest date at which he could have written would be around the end of the first century.

This gives us a fairly wide range in which Matthew might have written. But we can narrow down the likely dates within this range by noticing a particular detail in Matthew's writing. Specifically, Matthew frequently referred to the temple, as well as to the Sadducees, who were closely associated with the temple. Some of these references are largely historical, but a few references suggest that both the temple and the Sadducees were still significant factors at the time that Matthew wrote. Since the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, these references make the most sense if Matthew wrote before then.

In light of all the evidence, it seems best to conclude that Matthew wrote his gospel in the late 60s, perhaps around A.D. 67 or 68. Certainty in this matter is not possible. But fortunately, while it is helpful to know the approximate time when Matthew wrote, the precise dating of his gospel is rarely if ever critical to the interpretation of his teachings.

Now that we've looked at the date of the writing of this gospel, let's turn to the question of the geographical location of the author and audience.

## Location

We should start by noting that scholars have debated the location of this gospel, so we should not be dogmatic in our conclusions. Even so, there are a number of details worth noting.

To begin with, because Matthew wrote primarily to Jewish Christians, it's most likely that he addressed his gospel to a group that lived in an area with a significant Jewish population. Palestine is one obvious possibility, since this was the traditional homeland of the Jews, and since they were concentrated there.

But parts of Syria also had substantial Jewish populations. And Ignatius, who was the bishop of Antioch in Syria, is the earliest of the Church Fathers to demonstrate familiarity with Matthew's gospel. For this reason, a number of scholars have argued that Matthew wrote to believers in Syrian Antioch.

And of course, we can't rule out the possibility that Matthew had a wider audience in mind, writing to Jewish Christians in general, throughout the Mediterranean world.

Palestine, Syria, or any other area with a significant Jewish population within the Roman Empire would be a fitting destination for a gospel with the strong Jewish character of Matthew.

**During the first century A.D., the Jewish people were spread around much of the Roman Empire, and indeed, to the further east as well. This goes back a long time. Ever since the time of the Babylonian exile there have been Jews living outside the land of Palestine. And they**

**continued to live over there in the Far East, as it were. That's in Mesopotamia, modern Iraq. Then they come to Syria, Damascus, and then the Diaspora — that's the name for the spreading or the dispersion of the Jewish people — well, it spreads further west into Asia Minor, modern Turkey, and as far as Rome — the Jewish population there by the River Tiber in Rome — and not forgetting North Africa as well. We read in the Gospels of Simon of Cyrene coming from... to Jerusalem from North Africa. So, imagine the whole of the eastern half of the Roman Empire and to the further east, that's where the Jews are living.**

— Dr. Peter Walker

Now that we have spoken of both the date and location of Matthew's gospel, we can consider Matthew's purpose in writing his gospel.

## **Purpose**

Broadly speaking, Matthew wrote because the true history of who Jesus was and what he had done was critically important. But he also had narrower, more immediate goals. Specifically, Matthew wrote to Jewish Christians in order to nurture their faith in Jesus as their messianic King.

At the time that Matthew wrote, Jewish converts to Christianity were strongly rejected by Jewish authorities, and often by former friends and family members. The book of Acts makes it clear that in the Mediterranean world of that day, persecution had become a way of life for Jewish Christians.

As we read in Acts 8:1:

**Great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).**

Because of persecution, Jews who followed Jesus as their Messiah certainly faced the temptation to return to their former lives and abandon Christianity. In response to this temptation, Matthew wrote to remind them that Jesus was the true Messiah who had brought the kingdom of heaven. His gospel was a story of encouragement, a story of comfort. But it was also a story of challenge because Jesus had not brought the kingdom in the way many of them had expected, and the demands of the kingdom were great.

In this context, Matthew reassured his readers that Jesus had begun to fulfill the Old Testament expectations for the messianic kingdom. At the same time, the kingdom of heaven was not yet complete. So, Matthew also wrote to encourage Jewish believers to remain faithful until the King himself returned to make everything right — until the time that Jesus destroyed the enemies of his kingdom, and welcomed his faithful people into the full experience of his kingdom blessings.

This is why Matthew so often mentioned the theme of the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he used the words “king” and “kingdom” over 75 times in his gospel. The other three gospel writers together used them fewer than 110 times. For Matthew, the best way to encourage and challenge his Jewish audience was to tell them the story of their messianic King and his kingdom.

**In Matthew’s gospel we find a great emphasis on the kingdom of heaven. Matthew begins his gospel with the lineage of Jesus with the intent of showing that Jesus is the rightful heir, the Davidic king. This Davidic king is Jesus of Nazareth. His audience, his original audience, was primarily a Jewish audience, we believe, and this book is to say to the people, “Here’s your rightful king.” And he emphasizes the kingdom of heaven in its concrete manifestation as he demonstrates in this gospel that this term “kingdom of heaven” refers to Christ’s rule over all people and all spheres. It is a question of authority. The Pharisees and the Sadducees always asked Jesus, “By what authority do you do these things?” The gospel ends with the words Jesus said, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and in earth.” And this kingdom idea is much more than the nationalistic, Davidic king that the people had come to expect and to look for. This is the statement that Matthew makes that Christ is king over every square inch of creation.**

— Rev. Jim Maples

Now that we have studied the background of Matthew’s gospel, let’s turn to the structure and content of the gospel.

## **STRUCTURE AND CONTENT**

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There is considerable agreement among scholars about some of the features of the structure of the Gospel of Matthew. And this agreement is due to the fact that Matthew has given us a very helpful key. At five different points, he uses a phrase such as, “When Jesus had finished saying these things...” to indicate major transitions in the gospel. Sometimes a statement like this appears as the last sentence of a division, and at other times it’s the first sentence of a new division. But it always indicates a major transition.

Following these structural markers, most scholars agree that the Gospel of Matthew divides into seven sections. There are five major sections set off by transitional statements in Matthew 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, and 26:1. And Matthew also included an introductory narrative, and a concluding narrative.

- The gospel begins with a narrative introduction that presents Jesus as the messianic King in Matthew 1:1–2:23.
- The first major division describes the gospel of the kingdom in Matthew 3:1–7:29.
- The second major division focuses on the spread of the kingdom in Matthew 8:1–11:1.
- The third major division records the signs and parables of the kingdom in Matthew 11:2–13:53.
- The fourth major division of Matthew’s account focuses on faith and greatness beginning in 13:54 and continuing through 18:35.
- The fifth and last major division is about the present opposition to the kingdom and the future victory of the kingdom in Matthew 19:1–25:46.
- Finally, there is a conclusion that narrates the King’s death and resurrection in Matthew 26:1–28:20.

Each of these sections of Matthew’s gospel furthers the story of Jesus, the messianic King that brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Let’s take a closer look at each of these sections, beginning with the introduction in Matthew 1:1–2:23.

## **INTRODUCTION: THE MESSIANIC KING**

The Introduction to Matthew’s gospel introduces us to Jesus as the messianic King, and is made up of two sections: a genealogy and an infancy narrative.

### **Genealogy**

The genealogy is found in Matthew 1:1-17. Technically, the first verse is actually an introduction or title, in which Matthew summarized his main point, namely, that Jesus is the messianic King of Israel.

Matthew 1:1 reads as follows:

**A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).**

From the very beginning, Matthew placed special emphasis on David the King of Israel, and on Abraham the father of the Jewish people.

Following this introductory statement, the genealogy itself begins in verse 2. According to Matthew 1:17, the genealogy is arranged in three segments, each containing fourteen generations. The first began with God’s covenant with Abraham, in which Abraham was promised that his descendants would rule the world.

The second segment begins with King David and with God’s promise to fulfill his covenant with Abraham by establishing David’s dynasty forever. This second segment



ends with God's people being exiled from the Promised Land because of their sin and covenant breaking.

The third segment of the genealogy runs from the exile to the birth of Jesus. Israel had broken God's covenant and fallen under his covenant curses. But God still intended to bless Israel by fulfilling the promises he had made to Abraham and David. The past kings of Israel had failed. But now the last King of Israel, the one who would fulfill Israel's destiny, had finally come.

The list of Jesus' ancestors ends in Matthew 1:16, where we read these words:

**Jacob [was] the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ (Matthew 1:16).**

In this way, Matthew proved that Jesus had a fully legal claim to David's throne through his father Joseph.

**The Messiah had to be a descendant of David because of prophetic revelation basically because it was predicted so. And that goes all the way back to Genesis where the tribe of Judah is prophesied to be the one through whom the kingship would come. That prophecy was, of course, fulfilled in David, King David, himself, who was the greatest king of Israel. Every king that followed David was compared to him either favorably or unfavorably. Then, of course, we have the covenant made with David himself. When David proposed to Nathan, the prophet, to build a house for the Lord, to build the temple, Nathan came back and said, "You're not going to build a house for the Lord; the Lord is going to build a house for you." And by house, he meant dynasty. It's in 2 Samuel 7, and that prophecy that God would build a house for him, would establish his kingdom forever, that his descendant would reign forever on David's throne, became the foundation for the messianic prophecies that followed. And so, when the prophets referred back after the collapse — especially of the Davidic dynasty, the Davidic kingdom — when they referred back and looked forward to the hope that God would restore the glories of the Davidic dynasty, it was through the line of David that God would raise up a king. And so the King, the Messiah, had to come through the line of David.**

— Dr. Mark Strauss

Following Jesus' genealogy, we find his infancy narrative.

## **Infancy Narrative**

Jesus' infancy narrative runs from Matthew 1:18–2:23. This section is fairly brief, only 31 verses, compared to 116 verses in the Gospel of Luke. In this section, Matthew's

purpose was quite limited. Each of the five short paragraphs was designed to focus attention on one central fact: Jesus the Messiah had been born. Each paragraph tells a brief story, and then explains how that story fulfills the Old Testament expectations for the Messiah.

One of the most interesting things we learn in Jesus' infancy narrative is that he didn't have a human father. Instead, God was his father — literally. The Holy Spirit caused Mary to conceive Jesus even though she was still a virgin.

Now, some critics of Christianity have suggested that this is a weakness in Jesus' genealogy, since he wasn't physically a descendant of Joseph, through whom he claimed the throne of David. But it's a well-recognized fact that biblical genealogies, such as those in 1 Chronicles 1–9, often trace ancestries through adoptive parents.

Moreover, because Jesus was the Son of God, he was also fully divine. And this meant that he was able to keep God's covenant perfectly. Merely human kings had never perfectly obeyed God's covenant. And therefore, they had never been able to inherit the full covenant blessings God had promised to Abraham and David. So, God sent his perfect Son to be King, in order to ensure that his covenant would be kept, so that his promises of blessing would be fulfilled.

**It's very clear that the Messiah comes through David's line as human. And there's a lot of important truths there. But it's also crucial to realize that the Messiah also has to be God, has to be divine. Why is that the case? Well, ultimately it's because our problem as human beings before God is that we have sinned against him. He must provide the answer. He must provide the solution. The problem of forgiveness that we want to sometimes speak about, is that our sin before God isn't something that he can overlook. It's not something that he can say, "I'll grade on the curve," or "You do your best." God is a holy God. God is righteous and just. We cannot simply have him overlook our sin. That would be a denial of himself. So, for him to forgive us, he must take the initiative. He must provide, ultimately, the solution to the satisfaction of his own righteous requirements. God himself must do it. Now, when you read the Old Testament, this comes through over and over again. You think of, say, of Jonah 2:9: "Salvation is of the Lord." It's God himself that must provide. It's God himself that must provide the solution. It's God himself that must forgive. So that if there is going to be salvation through the Messiah, he must represent us — be human. Yet, he also must be the Lord. The Lord who comes. The Lord who saves. The Lord who satisfies his holiness and righteousness, and that is why the Messiah must be divine.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

In the introduction to his gospel, Matthew presented Jesus as the messianic King, the royal Son of David who received all the blessings God had promised to Abraham and

the people of Israel. In this way, Matthew set the stage for the amazing good news that is the subject of the rest of his book.

Following the introduction are the five major literary divisions of the gospel. Each of these five divisions is composed of two parts: a narrative section, in which Matthew described what Jesus did, followed by a discourse section, in which Matthew reported what Jesus said.

## THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

The first major division of Matthew's gospel tells the story of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. This section extends from Matthew 3:1–7:29.

### The Messiah had Come

The narrative portion begins in Matthew 3:1 and ends in 4:25. Here, Matthew proclaimed that the messianic King had come, and that he had brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

The first section of the narrative is Matthew 3:1-12, where John the Baptist announced that God's Messiah would soon come and baptize his faithful people with the Holy Spirit. For 400 years, the Holy Spirit had been relatively inactive in Israel because of God's judgment against his wayward people. But now, just as Old Testament prophets had predicted, a new day was about to dawn when God's Spirit would be poured out.

The narrative continues with Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:13-17. In this event, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, anointing him for his messianic ministry, and the Father announced from heaven, "This is my Son," applying to Jesus the royal title from Psalm 2:7.

The divine voice also alluded to the suffering servant of Isaiah 42:1-2 by describing Jesus as the one "whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Jesus was the royal Messiah, but he would be a different kind of King. He would fulfill his calling through suffering.

In the next story in the narrative, found in Matthew 4:1-11, Satan challenged Jesus' commitment to this role of a royal suffering Messiah. Three times he tempted Jesus to be a Messiah without suffering, essentially saying, "Don't be hungry like a man. Astonish people into believing without pain. Rule the nations without suffering." But each time Jesus rejected the easy path that would have denied the character of his suffering messiahship.

Then in Matthew 4:12-17, Jesus began his public messianic mission by preaching the gospel of the kingdom.

Listen to how Matthew summarized Jesus' message in Matthew 4:17:

**From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17).**

According to Matthew, the good news that Jesus preached was that the kingdom of heaven was near — that through his own ministry, Jesus was about to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. And this kingdom was available to all who would repent of their sin and faithfully follow Jesus as king.

**The “kingdom of heaven” is used in Matthew’s gospel, and only in Matthew’s gospel, I think synonymously with the “kingdom of God.” I would agree with most scholars who say there’s no difference between them. The fact that it is described by Jesus as being near, or as some translations have it, “at hand,” indicates that the end-time rule of God has in some sense already come in the person and work of Jesus. But there’s a sense in which it awaits its completion. The technical term is “consummation,” which will happen at the second coming of Christ, so that Christians then live in a rather — to use a technical expression — a rather dialectical existence. They have one foot in God’s end time kingdom, but there is another foot that is not yet within God’s end time kingdom. And a great deal of the challenge of Christian discipleship is negotiating in terms of life and life decisions and how we think about life, what it means that the kingdom of heaven is already here in some sense and what it means on the other hand that it is not yet fully appeared.**

— Dr. David Bauer

**When Jesus went preaching from village to village in the Gospels, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand,” or “is near,” he was saying a couple of things. He was saying, first of all, that in him the kingdom of God was present, was in their midst. And that’s something that he showed and demonstrated by his authoritative teaching, by casting out demons and taking authority over the demons, and also through his healing ministry as well. So, the first thing Jesus was saying was that the kingdom and the authority of the King is present in me, right here in your midst. But the other thing that he was saying is that the kingdom is coming; the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness, but at one time in the future the fullness of God’s reign will be visible to everyone. So that’s what Jesus was talking about when he was saying, “the kingdom of God is near.” So, by calling people to repent because the kingdom of God was near, he was calling them to submit to the king, that by their submission, by their obedience, by literally following the King they were then being incorporated, or reincorporated, into the covenant people of God. So, it’s that sort of submission to the King that is signified by repentance.**

— Dr. Greg Perry

In Matthew 4:18-22, Jesus called his disciples. The picture is one of the messianic King recruiting the leaders of his kingdom.

Following this, in Matthew 4:23-25, Matthew gave a preview of the next two sections of the gospel. He announced that Jesus traveled throughout Galilee teaching and healing the crowds. Matthew 5–7 illustrate Jesus’ teaching, while chapters 8–9 illustrate his healing.

Now that we’ve looked at Matthew’s narrative on the gospel of the kingdom, let’s turn to the accompanying discourse that appears in Matthew 5:1–7:29.

## Sermon on the Mount

This discourse is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. In this teaching, Jesus described the righteous lives of kingdom citizens. He explicitly mentioned the kingdom seven times, and the entire sermon revolves around this theme.

Time after time, Jesus stressed that the challenges of righteousness were far greater than the leaders of Judaism had imagined. He also stressed that the heavenly Father of the citizens of the kingdom was closer and more ready to bless than they ever imagined. It’s the combination of these twin thoughts that gives the sermon its distinctive character.

Consider just one example from the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus’ teaching on adultery. Jesus taught that the law of God demanded more than a surface reading might indicate, and more than the Jewish teachers commonly taught.

Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28:

**You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28).**

When Jesus referred to what was “said,” he was talking about common interpretations of Scripture among the Jewish rabbis of the day. Some rabbis taught that the Old Testament commandments prohibited adultery, but they failed to address the more fundamental issue of the human heart. But Jesus pointed out something that was true even in the days of the Old Testament: God is not just interested in controlling outward behavior; he wants obedience to begin in the heart.

**I think sometimes we can have a perspective on the Old Testament versus the New Testament where we think, in the Old Testament God required these external signs: he wanted people to be circumcised, he wanted sacrifice, he wanted them to observe special days. And that was a sort of an external religious expression. And then in the New Testament this is now as a religion of the heart. God wants our hearts; he wants our affections. But that won’t work, I don’t think, when one begins to look closely at the material in the Old Testament, especially in the prophets. The prophet Joel, for example, says, “Rend your hearts, not your garments,” which is a direct statement against an**

**external religion, where God didn't just want their external forms of expression to him, but he wanted their hearts, he wanted what was internal to them, what made them who they were. You see this as well, for example, in Psalm 103. "Bless the Lord, O my soul. All that is within me bless his holy name." I mean, here the psalmist is calling on the people of God to bless him, to worship the Lord with everything that makes them who they are. So, this sort of idea that the affections is something that's in the New Testament and heartfelt religion's not in the Old Testament, doesn't do justice to the full orb'd reality of God's covenantal involvement with his people in the Old Testament.**

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Jesus' emphasis on heartfelt obedience led him to describe the citizens of the kingdom as "meek" in 5:5, as "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" in 5:6, and as "pure in heart" in 5:8. Now, of course, Jesus knew that his followers would not be completely changed into these kinds of citizens until the kingdom of heaven had come in all its fullness. But he still exhorted them to be righteous before then. Listen to what he said in Matthew 5:48:

**Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).**

In one sense, this command is impossible to fulfill — no one can be as perfect as God is. But that shouldn't lead us to despair. On the contrary, Jesus also gave us a gracious, encouraging promise. Throughout his sermon, he assured his faithful followers that the kingdom already belongs to us.

For instance, in the Beatitudes, found in Matthew 5:3-10, we find eight blessings. The six in the middle promise that the blessings will be received on that future day when the kingdom of heaven comes in all its fullness. But the first and the last blessings are different — Jesus said his people already have these blessings of the kingdom.

Listen to the way Jesus stated these blessings in Matthew 5:3, 10:

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...  
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3, 10).**

The truly great challenge of following Jesus is matched by the equally great promise that God's kingdom power is already transforming us into righteous citizens of his kingdom.

In the first major division of his gospel, Matthew emphasized the gospel of the kingdom by drawing attention to the purpose and message of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was the messianic King that brought the kingdom of heaven to the people of God. He taught them about the life-transforming power of that kingdom. And he promised them that if they were faithful, they would inherit the great blessings of the kingdom when it came in all of its fullness.

## THE SPREAD OF THE KINGDOM

The second major division of Matthew's gospel deals with the spread of the kingdom. It extends from Matthew 8:1–11:1.

### Jesus' Miracles and Reactions

The narrative dealing with the spread of the kingdom runs from Matthew 8:1–9:38. It consists of stories about Jesus' miracles and the reactions that different people had to his miracles.

This narrative section divides into eleven segments involving Jesus and a leper in 8:1-4, a centurion's servant in 8:5-13, Peter's mother-in-law in 8:14-17, a storm in 8:18-27, two demoniacs in 8:28-34, a paralytic in 9:1-8, tax collectors and sinners in 9:9-17, a girl and a woman in 9:18-26, two blind men in 9:27-31, and another demoniac in 9:32-34. Then this section ends with a depiction of Jesus' compassion in 9:35-38.

Time will only permit us to make a few observations about these events in Jesus' life. He exercised his kingdom power over sickness by healing a leper in 8:1-4, a centurion's servant in 8:5-13, and Peter's mother-in-law in 8:14-17, a paralytic in 9:1-8, a hemorrhaging woman in 9:20-22, and two blind men in 9:27-31.

He also brought a dead girl back to life in Matthew 9:18-26, proving that he even had power and authority over death itself. Jesus demonstrated his control over nature by calming the storm in Matthew 8:23-27.

Beyond this, Jesus demonstrated his power over the kingdom of Satan by driving demons out of two men who lived among the tombs in Matthew 8:28-34, and out of a man who couldn't speak in 9:32-34. The call of Matthew as a disciple introduces a larger segment in dealing with Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners in 9:9-17. Jesus called Matthew to leave his life as a tax collector and to begin a new life. This change was nothing short of a miracle. The transformation of tax collectors and sinners was so astonishing that Matthew immediately moved to Jesus feasting with tax collectors and sinners so much that he had to explain the reason for their joy.

In addition to focusing on Jesus' power, Matthew also called attention to the crowds' reaction to Jesus' power. Simply put, they were amazed. We see this in places like Matthew 8:27, 34, and 9:8, 26, 31, and 33. And their amazement most commonly led them to oppose Jesus.

Some opposed Jesus simply by disbelieving. Others — especially the Jewish leaders — criticized him openly. Some feared Jesus, as in Matthew 8:34. Others were horrified and shocked, as in Matthew 9:3. Occasionally, the opposition to Jesus seems to have been well-intentioned, as in 9:14 — though it was still wrong. And sometimes people opposed Jesus because they willfully rejected what they knew to be true, as in Matthew 9:34. Sadly, opposition to Jesus became more and more prominent as Jesus' ministry continued.

**Probably one of the greatest puzzles, when you look at the New Testament, is how the people could reject Christ when they saw with their own eyes the miracles. The people were amazed, the Scripture**

says, over and over at what he did. When we consider that question, how could they do that, I think we need to look at Matthew 22:29. Jesus said to the Pharisees you are in error because you do not know the Scripture or the power of God. Now he, in that context, specifically addressed the Sadducees, but I think the same could be said of the Pharisees, the teachers of the law. They had taught the people in error; the expectations for the Messiah who was to come had been shaped by incorrect teaching. I think there is a great lesson for us there today — people who mishandle the Word of God and incorrectly teach the people, set up false expectations on the part of people. And I think that is exactly what happened in the first century in Israel. They had expected a messiah to come, and it was a nationalistic triumphalism, you might say. And Jesus came. Even though he did things they had never seen and would never see again, they ended up rejecting him because the attacks of the leaders upon Christ always sought to discredit his miracles. They wanted to put him in a league with Satan as the means of doing these things. And this eventually, sad to say, the decades, the generations, of incorrect teaching, the attacks of those in positions of authority, religious authority, eventually turned the hearts of many of the people away from Christ in spite of the miracles that they saw.

— Rev. Jim Maples

Matthew closed this narrative section on Jesus' powerful miracles in 9:35-38 by describing Jesus' compassion for the crowds. Listen to this account in Matthew 9:36-38.

**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:36-38).**

Jesus understood that one reason his people did not receive him as king was that they had been mistreated and poorly taught by many of their leaders. But he also knew that his miracles were softening their hearts, and inclining them to follow him. So he instructed his disciples to pray that God would raise up evangelists and righteous leaders — men who would bring the lost into God's heavenly kingdom on earth, and teach them how to be its righteous citizens.

## **Emissaries of the King**

Having explored Matthew's narrative on the spread of the kingdom, let's turn to the corresponding discourse in Matthew 10:1–11:1. This discourse focuses on the disciples as emissaries, or representatives, of the king.



In this section, Jesus answered the challenge that he had posed at the end of the preceding narrative. After commanding his followers to pray for God to raise up evangelists and leaders, Jesus extended his personal kingdom ministry by empowering twelve disciples for ministry, and commanding them to announce the presence of the kingdom in word and deed, just as he himself had done.

As we read in Matthew 10:7-8, Jesus commissioned them with these words:

**As you go, preach this message: “The kingdom of heaven is near.”  
Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons (Matthew 10:7-8).**

Jesus gave his disciples many warnings before he sent them out. Life would not be easy when they followed Jesus’ example. The world would not be kind to them. They would suffer. They would be mocked, arrested, and killed.

But Jesus also promised that their ministry would be blessed by their heavenly Father and that eventually the life of the kingdom would be theirs. Listen to how Jesus reassured his disciples in Matthew 10:39:

**Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:39).**

Jesus’ disciples were abandoning their prior lives for the sake of Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry. But Jesus assured them that they would find true kingdom life in the company of King Jesus himself.

In this second major division of the gospel, we’ve seen that Matthew described the spread of the kingdom especially in terms of Jesus’ works of power, and Jesus’ instructions to his disciples. And this provides a good model for our own ministry in the modern church. As we rely on Jesus’ power and serve him as faithful disciples, Jesus will build his kingdom through us as well, and reward us with heavenly blessings.

## **SIGNS AND PARABLES**

The third major division of Matthew’s gospel continues the display of the King and his kingdom through both signs and parables, and is found in Matthew 11:2–13:53.

### **Signs and Reactions**

Matthew’s narrative focuses on the signs Jesus performed and reactions to his signs and extends from Matthew 11:2–12:50. These signs demonstrated that the King and his kingdom were present, and corrected false expectations of what the kingdom would look like. As a result, the criticism that had already taken root began to grow and spread.

This series of episodes divides into five segments: In 11:2-19, Jesus assured John the Baptist that his signs proved that he was the Messiah who fulfilled Old Testament

prophecies, and Jesus called for the crowds to respond to his signs with repentance. In 11:20-30 Jesus addressed the cities where he had performed miracles, and he warned the unrepentant and offered rest to those who would come to him. As he put it in Matthew 11:30:

**For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:30).**

In 12:1-21, Matthew begins several episodes that focused explicitly on the reactions of the Pharisees to Jesus' signs. First, he reported how Jesus disputed with the Pharisees about God's purposes for the Sabbath and demonstrated his authority by healing a man on the Sabbath. Jesus taught that the Sabbath is for healing and saving lives.

In 12:22-37, the Pharisees accused Jesus of using the power of Beelzebub, even as the crowds were astonished by his miracles. Rather than receiving him as the Messiah, the teachers of the law believed he was possessed by the devil.

In 12:38-50, the Pharisees hypocritically demanded another sign, but Jesus warned that they would only receive the sign of Jonah. And what was this sign? Much like Jonah's exit from the huge fish after three days led to the repentance of Gentiles in Nineveh, Jesus' future resurrection after three days in the earth would lead to the repentance of many more Gentiles.

To demonstrate how God would receive anyone from any nationality who repented, Jesus even went so far as to say that his natural Jewish mother and brothers were not his family. Rather, as he put it in Matthew 12:49-50:

**Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother (Matthew 12:49-50).**

Now that we've looked at Matthew's narrative of the signs that Jesus performed, let's turn to his discourse on Jesus' kingdom parables in Matthew 13:1-53.

## **Kingdom Parables**

Matthew's account reports Jesus' well-known parables in five segments. The parable of the sower in 13:1-23, the parable of the weeds in 13:24-30, the mustard seed and the yeast in 13:31-43, the hidden treasure and pearl in 13:44-46, and the parable of the net in 13:47-53. These parables were designed to correct misunderstandings that explained the kingdom of God.

In some of the parables — such as the parables of the mustard seed in 13:31-32, the yeast in verse 33, the treasure in verse 44, and the pearl in verses 45-46 — Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven was of supreme value and was to be sought at all cost. It might look insignificant at first, but one day it would be seen in all of its glory.

But Jesus also told other parables that focused on Israel's failure to embrace King Jesus and his kingdom. In the parable of the sower and its explanation in Matthew 13:1-

23, Jesus made it clear that there were many obstacles to belief, and that most people would reject the kingdom.

This idea is reinforced by the parable of the weeds in verses 24-30 and 36-43, and the parable of the net in verses 47-51. Jesus taught that many would refuse to embrace the kingdom and would be destroyed in the end. These parables were clear warnings to those who opposed Jesus; they provided an opportunity for unbelievers to repent, and to become faithful followers of the one true King.

**Christ has come. He has fulfilled the prophecies; he has brought his kingdom to pass. Yet, it still awaits its culmination. We as Christians, we enter into that kingdom, but we need to constantly be reevaluating in terms of our priorities, repenting of not following him as we ought, making sure that we are faithfully seeking to live out our lives in conformity to his will, agreeing with him in terms of his values, what the kingdom is all about. So, there's a constant need for repentance, confession, coming to him as a Prophet, as well as Priest, as well as King, the one that we then seek to follow and serve in such a way where we carry out his purposes for us in this world.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

**We are to encourage Christians to pursue and long for the coming of God's kingdom. First, in the personal dimension, the authority of the kingdom of heaven is our power in life. It motivates us to submit to God, and live a God-centered life, so that the authority of God manifested in our lives would become the goal of our spiritual lives. Second, we need to learn the concept of the kingdom of heaven in view of redemptive history. As we learn how it begins, uncovers, and completes his redemptive plan. Then we will see that the teachings of the kingdom of heaven unify the Old and New Testament. They help us to see the grand blue print of our redeeming God and easily grasp his comprehensive purpose. Third, the kingdom of heaven creates a right biblical world-view, and helps us to see that all things belong to God. His kingdom will come to completion, and he will judge and wipe out all the evil powers on earth because God himself is the absolute King. So, we no longer live just for ourselves. We want to care for our neighbors, society, and the well-being of this world. We ought to pay attention to the things, either near or far from us. We ought to enter into the society and transform all aspects accordingly, as our duty.**

— Dr. Stephen Chan, translation

## FAITH AND GREATNESS

The fourth major division of Matthew's account focuses on faith and greatness beginning in 13:54 and continuing through 18:35. This division reveals what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus who reaches greatness in his kingdom.

### Resisting Faith in Jesus

The narrative portion of this section runs from 13:54–17:27 and includes thirteen episodes that report different ways in which all but one woman resisted putting their full faith in Jesus.

The first two episodes focus on two times when faith in Jesus was entirely rejected. First, when Jesus came to his hometown in Nazareth, in 13:54-58, his former neighbors did not dispute his ability to do miracles. But they still took offense and rejected him. In 13:58 we read that the people of Nazareth did not receive many miracles because they lacked faith.

Next, 14:1-12 is about Herod and the death of John the Baptist. Herod deserved the judgment of God for what he did to John. But more than this, verse 1 explains that Herod did not dispute the reports of Jesus' miracles. Instead, his advisors believed that Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead to trouble Herod.

The next three episodes focus on Jesus' disciples and how they needed to grow in faith. Matthew 14:13-21 is the story of Jesus feeding five thousand. Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd that followed him, but in verse 15 his disciples doubted and complained that he had too little food. So, Jesus proved his power by multiplying their food and feeding five thousand with plenty to spare.

In 14:22-36, Jesus walked on water. At first, Peter showed confidence in Jesus by stepping out of the boat, but Peter doubted when he saw the danger and began to sink into the sea. After rescuing him, Jesus commented in verse 31, "You of little faith... why did you doubt?"

Chapter 15:1-20 reports a conflict between Jesus and some Pharisees. Peter asked Jesus for an explanation of something simple that Jesus had said. So, in verse 16, Jesus replied disapprovingly, "Are you still so dull?"

In 15:21-28, we have the only time in these episodes when someone firmly believed in Jesus — a Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter. Unlike others, she begged Jesus to help her. And in verse 28 Jesus responded approvingly by saying, "Woman, you have great faith!"

Matthew then returned to the weak faith of Jesus' disciples. In 15:29-39, he wrote about the feeding of four thousand. In verse 33, the disciples asked where they could find enough food, even though they had seen Jesus feed five thousand earlier.

In 16:1-12, Jesus debated with the Pharisees and Sadducees. At one point, he turned to his disciples and warned them of "the yeast of the Pharisees," and they thought he was angry because they had not brought bread with them. But Jesus reminded them of the times when he had made bread for thousands, and in verse 8 he called his disciples, "you of little faith."

Following this, we find two closely related episodes. On the one hand, Peter's well-known confession of faith in 16:13-20. In 16:16, Peter declared of Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus praised and blessed Peter for his faith.

But on the other hand, in 16:21-27, Jesus rebuked Peter just as strongly. Jesus began to tell the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. When Peter objected, Jesus replied harshly in verse 23: "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus explained that Peter was thinking like men and not like God.

Following this rebuke, we come to Jesus' transfiguration in 17:1-13. When the disciples saw Jesus in his glory, they wanted to build a shrine at the place. But in verse 12, Jesus reminded them that his true glory would be seen only after he died and was resurrected.

In 17:14-23, we read of a young demoniac. Jesus' disciples had tried but failed to cast out the demon. After doing it himself Jesus said in verse 20, "You have too little faith."

Finally, in 17:24-27, collectors came to Jesus' disciples and asked if Jesus paid the temple tax. Peter replied quickly, and probably out of fear, that Jesus did pay. Then later Peter came to Jesus for the money, and Jesus provided by performing a miracle and explained that Peter had no reason to be concerned.

Matthew mentioned those who rejected Jesus and the believing Canaanite woman, but his main focus was on the need for his disciples to grow in their faith in him.

Once again, Matthew followed his narratives with Jesus' discourse in 18:1-35. This discourse focuses on true greatness in the family of God's kingdom, greatness that comes from humble service among the brothers and sisters of God's kingdom.

## Greatness in the Kingdom Family

In the last segment of the previous chapter, Jesus spoke of his followers as sons of God, the King. This identification led Matthew to begin this portion of his gospel with a key question. As we read in Matthew 18:1:

**Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:1).**

Jesus answered this question by mixing instructions with illustrations and parables in four main parts. First, in 18:2-4, Jesus exhorted his disciples to live in humility as little children.

In the face of increasing opposition from his enemies, Jesus taught his disciples how to live in the kingdom of heaven as children of God. He knew that the future consummation of the kingdom had not yet arrived. And he knew that struggles against enemies and sin would be a part of life for God's children.

And in verses 5-14, he taught them to care for the weak like their heavenly Father cared for his lost sheep. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 18:10, 14:

**See that you do not look down on one of these little ones... [Y]our Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost (Matthew 18:10, 14).**

Jesus built on this idea in Matthew 18:15-20, where he demanded that his followers deal with each other as members of the family of God even when sin disrupted their relationships. And in verses 21-35, he insisted that they forgive the sinning “brother” the same way their heavenly Father had forgiven them.

God’s glory continues to increase in our own day, because God continues to do many mighty works and to grow his kingdom on earth. But just as in Jesus’ day, this often means that resistance to God is increasing as well. Thankfully, God gives us many precious gifts to help us in our struggles with hardships and temptations. Among these gifts are endurance and peace, and even his immediate presence with us. And one of the most special gifts is our relationship to God as our Father. God cares for us and protects us, and he understands and sympathizes with our weakness. And he also gives us a family of human beings that can minister to us and love us — the church, our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

### **PRESENT OPPOSITION AND FUTURE VICTORY**

The theme of the fifth major division of Matthew’s gospel is the present opposition to the kingdom of heaven, and its future victory. This narrative extends from 19:1–22:46 and shows how Jesus faced great opposition at this point in his life.

#### **Intensifying Opposition**

These chapters divide into three main sections based on Jesus’ movement. In 19:1–20:16, Jesus faced opposition in Judea. There he dealt with Pharisees and the question of divorce. He also dealt with opposition that grew out of misunderstandings of riches and power.

Earlier in the gospel, Matthew had noted the beginning stage of the tensions between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. In this section, he reported that full hostility had developed. For instance, the Pharisees sometimes asked questions designed to trap Jesus, as in Matthew 19:3-9; 21:16, 23; and 22:15-40.

As just one example, listen to Matthew’s report in Matthew 22:15:

**Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words (Matthew 22:15).**

At the same time, Jesus sometimes challenged the Jewish leaders. We see this in the parables of the two sons, the tenant farmers, and the wedding banquet in 21:28–22:15.

But the conflict wasn’t always limited to verbal exchanges. Sometimes it was more direct and forceful, as when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers and drove them out of the temple in Matthew 21:12-16. Especially biting were his words in the seven cursing woes of 23:13-35.

Listen to how Jesus rebuked them in Matthew 23:15:

**“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15).**

Of course, Jesus and the Jewish leaders were not the only characters in these chapters. The hostility of the Jewish leaders was aggravated by the way the crowds still honored Jesus on occasions such as the triumphal entry in 21:1-11.

Throughout this section Jesus encouraged his disciples to put this confrontation into perspective. In Matthew 19:27-30, he promised that one day they would sit with him in glory. But in 20:17-19, he also warned them that those glorious days would only come after his own suffering death.

Moreover, Jesus insisted that his disciples would reach glory only after a life of humble suffering. Jesus drove home this point three different times. In Matthew 19:30, Jesus said:

**Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first (Matthew 19:30).**

Then in Matthew 20:16, he said:

**The last will be first, and the first will be last (Matthew 20:16).**

And he repeated this in Matthew 20:26-28, saying:

**Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26-28).**

Jesus' kingdom looked strange. His followers would suffer, and the King of Israel himself would be killed by the people of Israel. Apparent defeat would come before victory.

The next segment of intensifying opposition involves Jesus going to Jerusalem in 20:17-34. Jesus made it clear that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He only faced opposition from the mother of two disciples who sought authority for her sons in the kingdom. Then, Jesus was welcomed by the crowds into Jerusalem as he fulfilled Old Testament prophecy in his triumphal entry.

In the next segment, in 21:12–22:46, Jesus faced opposition as he moved in and out of Jerusalem and the temple. He drove out money changers, told parables that warned about God's coming judgment. Moreover, Jesus and the religious leaders disputed theologically over taxes to Caesar, the resurrection of the dead, the greatest commandment and the question of whose son the Messiah was.

But Jesus dealt with his opponents so well that we read these words in Matthew 22:46:

**No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions (Matthew 22:46).**

Having surveyed Matthew's narrative on the intensifying opposition to the kingdom of heaven, we should now look at the discourse that accompanies it.

## **Future Victory**

This section extends from Matthew 23:1–25:46. In this discourse, Jesus described the future victory of the kingdom of heaven.

This section begins with announcements of seven woes against Jesus' opponents in Matthew 23:1-38. This discourse focuses especially on the Pharisees, their false teachings, their abuse of God's people, and their hypocrisies.

Near the end of this discourse, Jesus summed up his feelings about Jerusalem in this way in Matthew 23:37-38.

**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look your house is left to you desolate (Matthew 23:37-38).**

The next section of Jesus' discourse is often called the Olivet Discourse and it appears in Matthew 24:1–25:46. It's often called the Olivet Discourse, because Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the Mount of Olives.

The Olivet Discourse can be divided into three primary sections: In 24:4-28, Jesus described the birth pangs of this strange age in which the kingdom of heaven had come to earth but had not yet been manifested in the fullness of its glory and power.

In 24:29-31, he spoke of the fullness of the kingdom, foretelling the day when the Son of Man would come on the clouds, and the kingdom of heaven would arrive in all of its power and glory.

Then in 24:32–25:46, Jesus exhorted his people to watch carefully for the coming day of glory because no one knows when it will be.

**Well, as far as when Jesus is going to return, he was very intentional to make sure that we didn't try to pinpoint that in some point in time any more than we should. He said no one knows the day or the hour of his return. Even he in his human nature didn't know the time of his return. So, for us to then speculate and think we can narrow it down is just disobeying Jesus. But that's not to say we shouldn't anticipate, look forward to, and even look for signs that his return is near. The main purpose of teaching on the second coming of Christ in the New Testament is primarily to sober us, to give us encouragement, to give**



**us hope, to lead us to holy living, and expectant return of Christ. And so even though we don't know the exact time, we should be ready, at any moment for him to return, so that we can greet him eagerly and joyfully.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

**We should have full confidence that he will be returning. We should have full confidence that he is coming again, and he will culminate all that he has begun. We should also be faithful. We should not be sort of looking at, say, Acts 1 as Jesus departed, and they looked up into the sky and the angel says, "What are you looking up in the sky for? You should be about the business of taking the gospel to the nations." He will come back, but we should be busy carrying out the Great Commission. We should be busy in the service of our King by taking to the nations the announcement that the King has come. He is coming again. Repent and believe the gospel. We should be discipling those who enter into that kingdom who profess faith in Jesus Christ, growing them up so they live to the glory of God, or conform to him. We should be living for God's glory in every aspect of our lives with our constant looking to his coming and saying with the church, in every age, "Come, Lord Jesus."**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

In this fifth major division of his gospel, Matthew reported that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, and even planned to kill him. But Jesus made it clear that all the planning in the world couldn't stop the future triumph of the kingdom. And history proves that he was right. The Jewish leaders did kill him. But his kingdom has continued to grow throughout the ages. And one day, history will prove the last part right, too. Jesus will come again, with power and great glory, to bring his kingdom in all its fullness, and to reward his faithful people with the kingdom's ultimate blessings.

### **CULMINATION OF JESUS' MINISTRY**

The narrative conclusion to Matthew's gospel runs from Matthew 26:1–28:20. Here, Matthew describes the culmination of Jesus' ministry as the messianic King in his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection.

As we explore the conclusion to Matthew's gospel, we'll focus on three themes that involve Matthew's kingdom focus: the themes of conflict, discipleship, and victory. Let's turn first to the theme of conflict.

## Conflict

The kingdom that Jesus actually brought was very different from the kingdom that the Jews expected the Messiah to bring, and this brought them into direct conflict with Jesus and his kingdom. As we have seen, this conflict intensifies throughout Matthew's gospel, but it culminates in the narrative conclusion. For example, we see it in the Jews' plot against Jesus in 26:3-4; in their engineering of his arrest and trial in 26:14-16, verse 47, and verses 57-68; and in their crying out for his crucifixion in 27:20-25. And it comes to a head when the Jews themselves accept responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion. Listen to Matthew's report in Matthew 27:25:

**All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25).**

Then while Jesus suffered on the cross, the Jews mocked him, ridiculing his claim to be the messianic King of Israel. As we read in Matthew 27:41-42:

**The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel!" (Matthew 27:41-42).**

Ironically, the Jews opposed Jesus on the grounds that he was an offense to God and an imposter to the throne, while in reality they were rejecting the only king that had the power to save them.

Besides the theme of conflict, the theme of discipleship also highlights the kingdom emphasis of Matthew's conclusion.

## Discipleship

In particular, Matthew emphasized how difficult it was to follow a suffering Messiah. He stressed this by reporting the failures of Jesus' disciples at this crucial moment of Jesus' ministry. Judas betrayed him in Matthew 26:14-16 and verses 47-50, and he committed suicide over this failure in 27:3-10. Peter, James, and John failed to keep watch with him in Gethsemane in 26:36-46. And Peter repeatedly denied that he even knew Jesus in 26:69-75. Finally, all of Jesus' disciples deserted him in 26:56.

The fact is that following Jesus can be very difficult. We believe in a messianic King that suffered, and who has called us to suffer as well. If we are faithful to him, the likelihood is that we will experience hardship and suffering, too, and that we will be tempted to fall away. The kingdom of heaven has not yet come in all of its fullness. And because of this, there are many aspects of the Christian life that are not yet as they should be.

Having considered the themes of conflict and discipleship, we are ready to turn to the theme of the victory of the kingdom.

## Victory

The theme of victory appears clearly in Jesus' resurrection, which was the proof that the messianic King had conquered all of the enemies of his people, even death itself. And we also see the theme of victory in Jesus' last words before his ascension. Jesus' final words recorded in Matthew's gospel are found in Matthew 28:18-20, and they are usually called the Great Commission. They are the Lord's final instructions to his disciples, commissioning them to ministry in his absence. And it is noteworthy that these instructions begin with Christ boldly claiming all kingdom authority. Listen to Jesus' proclamation in Matthew 28:18.

**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).**

**Jesus is the only one who can claim all dominion, all power, with legitimacy. And, by the way, his power is not destructive because it is power and love. Power motivated by love. Power moderated by love. See, if you have love alone, you have a nice sentiment, but maybe you are helpless because you don't have power to change anything. If you have power alone without love you destroy, you kill, you hate. It's the divine genius that brings love and power together. "God so loved the world that he sent his Son." He is the only one that can legitimately claim all power because he is the only one that walked on this planet earth and never sinned, never lied, never deceived. He's also the only one who, after he was killed, dead, buried, came back. So, he's the risen Lord. It is the inauguration of a new era of human history. He's bringing hope to the nations. And so the kingdom of God is at work in very powerful ways, and that's where world evangelization and discipling the nations then is based on this, what I call, "the great foundation." You don't have a great commission without the great foundation. And then he caps it with a great promise, "And I will be with you to the very end of the ages." So Jesus the Lord, Jesus the King, is the ruler who has all power, and so we go, we disciple, we teach, we proclaim his rule in his power.**

— Dr. Peter Kuzmič

All authority belonged to the king who conquered. The Jews rejected him; the Romans crucified him; and they all mocked him. But the grave could not hold him, and the resurrection was the great victory of the messianic King. Through him, the kingdom of heaven had come to earth. And *that* is the good news of the Gospel According to Matthew.

Now that we've explored the background of the Gospel According to Matthew, as well as its structure and content, we're ready to consider some major themes that Matthew emphasized.

## MAJOR THEMES

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In this section of our lesson, we'll turn our attention to two prominent themes that Matthew emphasized throughout his gospel: the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel, and the people of God for whom Jesus was bringing the kingdom.

Let's start with Matthew's emphasis on the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel.

### OLD TESTAMENT HERITAGE

**Matthew's gospel is actually a fascinating account of how significant it is that the Old Testament anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus comes onto the scene, and he is Israel incarnate. He goes down to Egypt. He is forced out into the wilderness where he's tempted. He goes onto a mountain and he begins to deliver the Law again. All of these images of the new Moses, or Israel incarnate, find their source and their scope back in the Old Testament. Because when Israel was called, when Israel was elect by God, her election, that was never just a privilege to be enjoyed. It was a responsibility to be performed, to be a blessing to the nations. And yet, because of Israel's long and rather dramatic history of sin, she could never be for herself or for the nations what she was called to be. So, here you have Jesus as the Son of God, as Israel incarnate, who shows up onto the scene, and he is for Israel what Israel couldn't be for herself or for the nations. And I think it gives us a more textured, a deeper reading, on how the Old Testament anticipates Jesus, rather than finding him in a verse here or there. It's the whole history of Israel. It's the election of Israel. It's the whole failure of Israel that anticipates the coming of Jesus, and Matthew picks up on that, especially in his first five or six chapters.**

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Above all else, the story of the Bible is about God binding himself to his people with unbreakable cords of love. It's the story of his faithfulness in keeping his promise to be with them in blessing. This is why Matthew told his generation of God's people that they could still trust the ancient promises and that they could still believe that God was working in their own day in the person of Jesus. And it's why Matthew felt so confident continually drawing on the Old Testament in order to support the claims and ministry of the messianic King, Jesus Christ

We'll briefly survey five ways that Matthew demonstrates the Old Testament Heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel: Matthew's Old Testament quotations and allusions, his emphasis on the kingdom of heaven, his description of Jesus as the messianic King, Jesus' conflict with unbelieving Jewish leaders, and Jesus' humility and gentleness. Let's begin with Matthew's Old Testament quotations and allusions.

## Quotations and Allusions

Matthew quoted the Old Testament far more often than any other gospel writer. Scholars debate the exact number of times Matthew quoted the Old Testament, but certainly he did so at least 40 times, and he alluded to it many other times.

One strategy Matthew commonly used employed the phrase, “in order that it might be fulfilled.” Matthew used this phrase to make explicit connections between the Old Testament and events in Jesus’ life.

For example, listen to what Matthew wrote in Matthew 8:17:

**This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Matthew 8:17).**

Immediately before this Old Testament quotation, Matthew had reported many of Jesus’ healings. But he didn’t just want his readers to see Jesus as a healer. Rather, he wanted them to know that Jesus healed people in fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

**What was important from Matthew’s point of view, and I would say should be from our point of view, is that in Jesus was the manifestation of the coming kingdom of God that people had been longing for, had been waiting for. So, they weren’t necessarily looking for a Messiah to fulfill a pinpoint prediction on a historical map, but they were longing for freedom, for release, for restoration, for salvation. And the Old Testament taught them that when the kingdom of God came, it would be announced by a particular person, the Messiah, and that at that announcement, God’s reign would begin, and all the restoration and salvation and the blessings that the Old Testament promised would begin to come into fruition. And so, the apostles in general, and Matthew in particular, didn’t simply sit with a chart on their lap waiting to see who fulfilled all of these predictions, but they saw a person in whose works and in whose teaching, and whose character, and everything about him, manifested the kingdom of God. In fact, the kingdom of God was in Jesus, not just announced by him, and he brought that kingdom. And so, out of that experience of the power and the teaching and the working of Jesus, the apostles — Matthew included — went back to their Old Testaments to see how Jesus had been anticipated by the Old Testament. And when they read their Old Testaments from the standpoint of experiencing Jesus, they found that the Old Testament Scriptures had, in fact, witnessed to him and him specifically. So, as we read the Old Testament, we don’t just read it with a jeweler’s magnifying glass on our eye, but we read it looking for an encounter with Christ himself, who is the chief subject of the Gospels as he comes as the witness and as the embodiment of the kingdom of God.**

— Rev. Michael Glodo

The second way Matthew's emphasis on Jesus' Old Testament heritage can be seen is in his emphasis on the kingdom of heaven.

## Kingdom of Heaven

In the Old Testament, God had promised that he would bless his people; and that his blessing would come through a royal Son of David. Matthew announced that God's kingdom blessing in Jesus was the fulfillment of those ancient promises.

And in Matthew's gospel, Jesus himself commonly reminds people of this fact. He regularly teaches that God is faithful to his Old Testament kingdom promises. This is how Jesus was able to present his kingdom as good news, even though it entailed suffering, and even though he didn't do everything the Old Testament prophesies. Jesus insisted that his people trust God's Word in the Old Testament enough to believe that Jesus would eventually return to *finish* everything he had *started* — that he would eventually return to fulfill *everything* that God had promised.

In fact, this confidence in the Old Testament picture of the kingdom of heaven is the basis on which Jesus regularly called his followers to submit to and trust the Old Testament. It is the basis on which he instructed them to love and serve one another, as fellow citizens of God's kingdom.

The knowledge that the God of heaven and earth is in control of all history and is faithful to his promises should motivate his people in every age — including ours — to trust that his promises in Christ are still good. They should inspire us to believe that one day God really will make everything new and right. And they should give us strength and endurance as we wait patiently for God to bring his kingdom in all its fullness.

A third way Matthew emphasized the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel was by insisting that Jesus was the expected messianic King.

## Messianic King

We mentioned this idea earlier in this lesson when we discussed the genealogy of Jesus. It's also seen in the fact that Matthew called Jesus "Son of David" more frequently than all the other gospel writers combined. Matthew also used many other royal titles for Jesus, including King of the Jews, King of Israel, your King, and simply King. Moreover, some of the verses in which Matthew uses royal titles for Jesus don't appear in any other gospel.

For example, in Matthew 2:2, Matthew reported this question from the wise men:

**Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? (Matthew 2:2).**

No other gospel includes this verse, or this great an emphasis on Jesus' messianic kingship.

The fourth emphasis on the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel that we will mention is Jesus' conflict with unbelieving Jewish leaders.

## Unbelieving Jewish Leaders

Matthew's early readers might have been tempted to think that Jesus' conflict with many of the leaders in Israel proved that Jesus wasn't the messiah. To make sure they didn't get this impression, Matthew made it clear that God was keeping his promises through Jesus despite the faithlessness of the Jewish leaders.

Time after time, Jesus rejected the teachings of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. He corrected their views on fasting in Matthew 9:14-17, on the Sabbath in 12:1-13, and on hand washing in 15:1-20. And most of the Sermon on the Mount — especially 5:17-48 — contrasts the Jewish view of the law of God with Jesus' fulfillment of that law.

**Well, sometimes people have wondered when Jesus said the words, “You have heard it was said, but I say to you...” in the Sermon on the Mount, to be Jesus actually contradicting what was said in the Old Testament. But I think what's the most obvious way of reading that is that Jesus was refuting some of the ways in which the Old Testament Law — that God did say — had been interpreted by various scribes and teachers down the ages. And what Jesus is doing is setting himself up as the one who is rightly able to interpret God's law and to take what was written in God's law and apply it to his hearers in that day.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

**When Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount using this phrase, “You have heard it said but I say to you...” he was not saying that the Old Testament Law is now being nullified. In fact, he says quite the opposite very explicitly, that “I have come to fulfill the Law.” But what Jesus is doing is he is using a well-known rabbinic technique that teachers of the Law would use to talk about their own teaching authority. “You've heard different people in the tradition say these things about the teachings of the Law, but I say to you...” And that comes with a present authority, with an additional authority. And so, Jesus is establishing his teaching authority with this well-known teaching technique. Not to discount the Old Testament Law, but to say something very important theologically and christologically, that “it's important to interpret the Old Testament Law in relation to me and to my teaching of the Law.”**

— Dr. Greg Perry

**No, Jesus was not contradicting the Old Testament. But one of the themes we see in the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is the new Moses, and that he is superior to Moses. So, we have the Old**

**Testament revelation given through Moses, which is the authoritative word of God, but Jesus stands as the sovereign interpreter of the Law. So much of what we see in the Sermon on the Mount represents an accurate interpretation of what Moses meant. So, Jesus has not abolished the command, “Do not murder.” He simply explains to us that murder begins in the heart with anger. Remember how that section begins? Jesus says, “I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it,” which I think means to rightly interpret the Law. But I think what Jesus is arguing there is, he actually fulfills the true intention of the Law. The Law must be interpreted in light of Jesus Christ’s coming and his death and resurrection and his ministry. But when we understand him in that way, Jesus does not abolish the Old Testament Law, but he fulfills it.**

— Dr. Thomas Schreiner

Jesus really did fulfill the Old Testament’s messianic expectations. But many Jews rejected him because their own expectations were not fully in line with the Old Testament. And their misunderstandings are a caution to everyone who tries to follow Jesus. They warn us that it’s easy to let our own ideas of what God’s work looks like cloud our vision. They warn us not to place artificial limits on what God can do, but to let him define our hopes and expectations.

The fifth way Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus’ Old Testament heritage is evident is in his description of Jesus’ humility and gentleness.

## **Humility and Gentleness**

The Jews of Jesus’ day correctly understood that, according to the Old Testament, God would send his mighty warrior to deliver his people. But Matthew stressed that the mighty deliverance of God was rooted in his gentle compassion for his people. And he made this point by drawing on the Old Testament.

For instance, in Matthew 11:29, Jesus invited the heavily burdened with these words:

**Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:29).**

Here, Jesus quoted Jeremiah 6:16 to prove that the Messiah would provide rest for his people.

Similarly, in Matthew 12:15-21, Matthew reported Jesus’ compassionate healing ministry, and quoted Isaiah 42:1-4 to explain what Jesus was doing.

Listen to the description of Jesus in Matthew 12:19-20:



**He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out (Matthew 12:19-20).**

Jesus was not the harsh militaristic king many Jews were looking for to lead them in battle against Rome. Instead, he was gentle and compassionate.

In keeping with the Old Testament, Matthew portrayed Jesus as the conquering King and the authoritative teacher of God's people. At the same time, Matthew stressed that Jesus was the humble, compassionate King. The call to follow Jesus in our own lives and ministries challenges us to speak the truth with the same kind of compassion that Jesus modeled.

Matthew stressed the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel in many different ways. At the same time, he made it clear that Jesus fulfilled all the ancient expectations in a way that transcended average expectations. But the good news — the gospel — was that he did fulfill them. The kingdom, the Law, and especially the King himself were all fulfilled as Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Having looked at the Old Testament heritage of Jesus' kingdom and gospel, we're ready to consider the theme of the people of God.

## PEOPLE OF GOD

In the Gospel of Matthew, just as in the rest of the Bible, the people of God are the ones that belong to God, the ones that he keeps as a prized possession, and the special nation that he rules over as king. And they are not just in relationship directly with God; they are also in a close relationship with everyone else that belongs to him.

We'll explore the theme of the people of God in three parts. First, we'll see that Matthew identifies the people of God as the church. Second, we'll see that he also calls them the "family of God." And third, we'll consider the calling the people of God have received from Jesus. Let's begin with the idea that the church is the people of God.

## Church

In the Old Testament, Israel was God's people. But in the New Testament, God's people are most commonly called "the church." Our modern term for "church" translates the Greek word *ekklesia* in Matthew. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *ekklesia* is a translation of the Hebrew word *qahal*, which the Hebrew Old Testament typically used to refer to the assembly or congregation of the people of Israel. This shift in vocabulary — from the "assembly" of Israel to the Christian "church" — demonstrates that both Jesus and Matthew saw the Christian church as the continuation of the assembly of Israel.

Consider the use of the Hebrew word *qahal*, or "assembly," in the Old Testament. The people of Israel are identified as the "assembly" in Leviticus 16:33; Numbers 16:47; Judges 20:2; and Psalm 22:22. In fact, the assembly of God's people was so important in

the Old Testament that it was one of the names the prophet Joel used to identify Israel when he foretold that God's people would be restored in the last days. In Joel 2:16, he proclaimed:

**Gather the people, consecrate the assembly (Joel 2:16).**

In the Hebrew original of this verse, the word translated “assembly” is *qahal*. But in the Greek translation of the Septuagint, the word is *ekklesia* — the word commonly translated “church” in the New Testament.

Matthew used this same language when he reported these words from Jesus in Matthew 16:18:

**I will build my church (Matthew 16:18).**

Here Jesus echoed Joel's prophecy when he said that he would build his church, meaning his *qahal* or his messianic assembly of the last days.

**Jesus does say in Matthew's gospel that he will build his church. I think a good starting point is remembering that the word for church in the Greek New Testament, *ekklesia*, is really the Greek term used to convey the Old Testament idea of the assembly of God's people, the *qahal*, so that the New Testament church is in continuity with the Old Testament assembly, the assembly of God's people.**

— Rev. Michael Glodo

We've already seen that the events of Matthew 16 took place at a time of growing resistance to Jesus' claim to be the messianic King. And this resistance is one of the reasons Jesus encouraged his disciples with a reference to the assembly of Israel — he wanted them to have confidence in his plan to build his messianic assembly, or church.

Jesus' words also made it clear that the church belonged to him. It didn't belong to Peter. It didn't belong to Israel. It wasn't a democratic institution owned by its members. It was the Messiah's church — a point Matthew had already made in the introduction to his gospel when he reported the angel's words to Joseph.

Listen to Matthew's record in 1:21:

**You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).**

In this verse, before Jesus was even born, the angel assured Joseph that the child in Mary's womb was the Messiah to whom the entire people of God belonged. He was their king, and they were his people.

**And so we're not just followers of Jesus individually, but we are the embodiment of this new creation that Jesus has brought in by his resurrection from the dead and by his giving of the Spirit to us as his**

**new temple, so that we are the presence of the kingdom of God in the church where people can find mercy and forgiveness, and they can find provision when they lack, and they can find companionship when they are lonely. So, the church really is a foretaste of the new heavens and earth, which will one day be visible throughout the whole creation.**

— **Rev. Michael Glodo**

When God’s people are under pressure, when the events of life threaten to drag them down, when the darkness hanging around them can almost be felt, Jesus says, “I will build my church. I will build my messianic assembly.” He assures us that he is our king, that he has our best interests in mind, and that he will certainly rescue and bless us in the end. It may not happen in *this* life. But it *will* happen. Of *that* we can be certain.

In addition to describing the people of God as the church, Matthew also identified them as the family of God.

## **Family of God**

The Gospel of Matthew uses familial language like “father,” “son,” and “brother” over 150 times to describe the relationship of God’s people to himself and to each other. The only other gospel writer to use familial language so frequently was John. But when John used it, he was typically talking about the relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father.

In contrast, when Matthew used it he was talking about the relationship between God and his people — he was talking about the family of God. And primarily, Matthew used this vocabulary to emphasize the care and protection that God shows for his children.

For example, in Matthew 6:4, Jesus spoke of God’s care for his people in this way:

**Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:4).**

And he used this same language again in verse 6, and yet again in verse 18. His point was that God was concerned with his children and intent on encouraging and providing for them.

And when Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he prefaced his instructions in Matthew 6:8 by telling them:

**Your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:8).**

We can be confident that God will bless us, and that he will hear our prayers, because we know that he is our loving Father.

**My teaching area is spiritual formation, and one of the things I say about the Lord’s Prayer is that we start prayer by the recognition that at any given moment there could be millions of other people who are praying at the same time. One of the reasons we call God “God,” is that God can take each one of those prayers and can deal with them as if they were the only one that was vying for his attention in that moment. But that brings us into a holy fellowship, part of that kingdom of heaven personnel. Then right after that, of course, is the word “Father.” So that no matter who I am or where I am in that prayer, I’m moving toward God as Abba, moving toward God as Father. And if a person in Poland is calling God “Father” and I’m calling God “Father” in the United States, then that means we’re brothers and sisters. If we have the same father, then we’re members of the same family. So, I think Matthew gets at this in a powerful way with the concept of the kingdom of heaven, which he uses over and over again. But it’s the life of prayer that draws us into the realization that in the moment that I’m praying, I’m praying with other people who are saying the same thing that I am, but when they’re saying what I’m saying, it means we’re family.**

— Dr. Steve Harper

**There is nothing more encouraging than to think about the fact that God has adopted us into his family. It’s a great thing to be forgiven, but as J. I. Packer says in his book *Knowing God*, it is also a great thing to be justified, but it is an even greater thing to be adopted into God’s family. To have God as our father, really, is the pinnacle of God’s work in our lives. We’re not just forgiven by the judge, we’re adopted into God’s family, and he’s our Father, and we’re his children. And, so then, we are co-heirs with Christ. Everything that’s coming to Jesus, which is all things, becomes ours. That’s our inheritance as well. There was a time when we were just children of wrath, when our inheritance was the wrath of God. And rather than wrath, we now are co-heirs with Christ. We are partakers of the divine nature and we are actually called brothers with Christ because we have sonship in him. We’ve traded in our filthy rags of unrighteousness for Christ’s righteousness. But in that we then become children of God, invited into his family. And that is the greatest blessing we could ever imagine.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus used two different examples to assure God’s children of his care. He talked about the “birds of the air” and “the lilies of the field,” pointing out that God cares for the needs of the smallest members of his creation. And his point was

that if God cares even for these small things, then he will certainly care far more for his people. Our heavenly Father will provide even better food, clothing and protection for us.

Jesus also emphasized God's fatherly care and protection when he warned his disciples of the great difficulties of ministry. For instance, in 10:19-20, Jesus told them that they would be arrested. But he also told them that the Father's Spirit would be with them. And he reminded them that when their lives were in danger because of their ministry, their Father would protect them.

Listen to Jesus' encouraging words in Matthew 10:29-31:

**Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father... So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31).**

**For many believers, life is very difficult being a Christian. Many parts of the world are under persecution. And the great joy of their life is that they are part of the body, and they can identify themselves as the people of God. The Scripture tells us that God is our Father. We have the tremendous privilege, as Romans 8 tells us, of being able to call upon God as Abba. We also have the fact that God is constantly caring for us. And we also see that God gives the members of his family a love. And so, for the believer, the heart of his life is this encouragement that comes through Christ because God is now our Father.**

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

Having considered the people of God as both the church and the family of God, we are ready to consider the calling of the people of God.

## Calling

The people of God are greatly privileged to be his church and his family. But our calling as his people also includes hardship, danger, and suffering. Jesus himself is our suffering messianic King. And as we follow him, we suffer too.

For instance, in Matthew 10:34-36, Jesus said that our calling is characterized by strife. Listen to what he said there:

**Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36).**

And in Matthew 16:24-25, he put it this way:

**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it (Matthew 16:24-25).**

Jesus knew that his people would be rejected just like he was rejected. For our King, suffering is the path to glory. And the same is true for us.

**On the cross people may have thought that he was losing a battle, and even in the grave they thought that he was counted out, but they forgot about the third day morning. Jesus said that “you tear this body down, in three days I’ll rise again.” And so, when we think about how the church has been ostracized, criticized, maligned on every corner, we do understand that this same church that Jesus put forth into action is the same church that is working today. Look how much it has sustained and how much it has gone through, yet it is still there. And let me go a little step further. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh — they couldn’t kill him then, they can’t kill him now. So, we are part of... we are the church that is his church, and he will not allow anything, not even the very gates of hell to prevail and stop his mission. This church has a mission, and it is to go into all the world to bring and make disciples of those that are lost. And what a joy that is, and you and I can have a great security and have a really resurrected moment even now, knowing that the church will be sustained.**

— Dr. Willie Wells

Jesus promises to end the suffering of his people, to give us rest from our hardship, to establish peace for us, and to bless us immeasurably — but not yet. Until he returns to make all things new, our calling is to follow in the footsteps of our suffering King.

**Jesus told us that he came in order that we might have life and have it more abundantly. But, you know, in this life, after we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, we still experience suffering, pain, illness; we still die. We still have frustrations and ambitions. We still experience irritations and, for that matter, griefs. You know, a part of what we need to recognize here is that evidently a part of what it means to receive this abundant life is to have Christ in the midst of these things. We will come to know things in our Christian life we would not know if we were never irritated or frustrated. We would never know if we did not experience grief as well as exhilaration and joy. I think there’s something more here that’s really important. Jesus said, “I came that you might have life, and that you might have life that is abundant.” But, you know, we are yearning for something. A part of what it**

means to be “in Christ” is to yearn for the fullness that he’s going to bring. There’s a day coming when Christ is coming for his church. There’s a day coming when Christ will reign over all things in a way that is visible to all. There’s coming a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. There’s coming a day when every eye will be dry, and every tear will be wiped away. And part of what it means right now, for us to have the abundant life in Christ is for us to rest in Christ, experiencing all the joys and travails that come into a life and this fallen world while yearning for that which we know is coming. The abundant life means trusting Christ until he comes.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

## CONCLUSION

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In this study of the Gospel According to Matthew, we have explored its background in terms of its authorship, original audience and occasion; we have surveyed its structure and content, and we have considered the major themes of its Old Testament heritage and its emphasis on the people of God.

Matthew’s gospel proclaims the good news that the Old Testament promises of the kingdom of heaven have been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus the messianic King. And the good news is that Jesus established and continues to build his kingdom for us and through us. But this good news is not always easy. As we have seen, Matthew described our calling to follow the suffering messianic King in radical terms. But he also described the blessings of the heavenly Father in radical terms — blessings that enable us to follow our King faithfully, and to persevere through our own suffering, until the kingdom of heaven comes to earth in its full glory.