

Great Questions | Matthew 1-5

Scripture: And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11

Question: What happened to the gold, frankincense and myrrh?

Response

The answer to this question is, “We do not know”. The Bible is silent. I am always hesitant to speculate when the Bible is silent. The narrative focuses on the gifts as acts of worship worthy of a king, rather than the gifts as a means of provision. As we read the story, our focus should be the same.

That said, by the time the magi arrived, Jesus was probably about two years old. The family had moved from the stable into a more suitable “house” accommodation. Immediately following the visit of the magi and presentation of their gifts, God spoke to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Get up” and “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him” (Matthew 2:13). That same night the family departed for Egypt and stayed there until the death of Herod.

The Bible does not say what Mary and Joseph did with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but many scholars believe that these gifts would have helped finance the family’s material needs during their trip to Egypt and beyond. Any of the gifts could have been sold or traded for supplies, accommodations, and living expenses.

There are some who believe Mary saved the frankincense and myrrh to use as ointments to anoint Jesus’ body for burial. But the Bible doesn’t mention this. Instead, John’s Gospel states that Nicodemus brought “about seventy-five pounds” of a perfumed mixture of “myrrh and aloes” to anoint Jesus’ body for burial (John 19:39–40).

Since the Bible does not reveal what Joseph and Mary did with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, speculation only seems to lead us away from the primary expression of worship that the gifts represented.

Scripture: *And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene. Matthew 2:23*

Question: Who was the prophet that was referred to in this scripture that declared that Jesus would be called a Nazarene?

Response

To understand this verse, we need a little background information. First, remember that Matthew is writing looking back. He has walked with Jesus, listened to Jesus and after the resurrection begins to make connections to the Old Testament that he may have missed earlier, or have now become clearer.

Second, let's consider the town of Nazareth. It was a small town in Galilee that history tells us may have garrisoned Roman soldiers. When Philip finds Jesus, he quickly invited Nathanael to join him. Nathanael's response is telling. ⁴⁵ *Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."* ⁴⁶ *Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."* John 1:45-46. Nazareth had a well-known reputation of being a despised place or place of contempt.

Third, notice that Matthew uses the term, "prophets", not "prophet". Matthew seems to not be referencing a specific prophet but to a general idea communicated by the prophets. A common theme of the prophets was that Jesus would be despised and considered contemptible in the eyes of many. See Psalm 22:6-8 and Isaiah 53:1-3 as examples.

So, what it appears is that Matthew is using a current expression of derision that found its roots in the Old Testament. "Matthew is not saying that a specific Old Testament prophet foretold that the Messiah would live in Nazareth; he is saying that the Old Testament prophets foretold that the Messiah would be despised." The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8, Page 96.

Scripture: ¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him,^[c] and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son,^[d] with whom I am well pleased.” Matthew 3:13-17

Question: When Jesus was baptized the heavens opened and the Spirit was released. Since the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have always existed as the Trinity, did Old Testament people have the help of the Spirit? Or was it not until Jesus died and the Holy Spirit was sent down?

Response

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit did not permanently indwell God’s people but would come upon them as directed by the Father to accomplish His purpose. For instance, in Numbers 27:18-23, the Spirit comes upon Joshua to succeed Moses as leader of Israel. In 1 Samuel 16:12-13 the Spirit comes upon David when Samuel anoints him the future king of Israel. The book of Judges records this same experience several times. In this regard, the ministry of the Spirit was the same in the Old Testament as the New Testament with the difference being temporary versus permanent.

The permanent indwelling of the Spirit was promised by Jesus (John 14-16). See specifically John 14:25-26. ²⁵ *“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

The fulfillment of Jesus’ promise occurred in Acts 2:1-4, *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested^[a] on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

In summary, the ministry of the Spirit has remained similar throughout the Bible with the exception being a temporary indwelling in the O.T. and then a permanent indwelling in the N.T. The ministry of the Spirit includes conviction of sin, regeneration, restraining sin in the world, indwelling and sealing of salvation, and empowerment for service.

Scripture:

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

¹⁵ “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death,
on them a light has dawned.” Matthew 4:12-16

Question: Where is the land of Zebulun and Naphtali located and what is the Galilee of the Gentiles and what was going on that they were living in darkness the shadow of darkness.

Response

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the 12 tribes of Israel, and their portions of land were located in the Northern part of Israel. Capernaum was a city located on the Northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee. To understand the phrase “Galilee of the Gentiles” we need a little history lesson. When the United Kingdom of Israel was divided during the reign of Rehoboam, Galilee became a part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Southern Kingdom was Judah, which continued to be ruled by the descendants of David.

The Northern Kingdom, under Jeroboam and subsequent ungodly kings, turned to false worship. Judah did a little better with many godly kings. When both kingdoms became corrupt, God began to warn of a coming day of judgment, a day when God would use the Assyrians as His instrument of judgment, carrying the people of the Northern Kingdom into captivity. The Assyrians would threaten Judah and Jerusalem but would not succeed in sacking that city (See Isaiah 8:1-8).

Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, did just as God had forewarned (see 2 Kings 15:29). When the Assyrians sacked the Northern Kingdom, they carried the people to Assyria. Later, Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, would once again march against Israel and would carry the Israelites into exile in Assyria (2 Kings 17:1-6). The Assyrians then brought captives from other places to live in the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:24). As a result, the Northern Kingdom (which included Galilee) became diluted (the people of Judah would probably say polluted) ethnically and spiritually. Over time the Jewish population in the Northern Kingdom increased somewhat. Nevertheless, for the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem, Galilee was not considered a place of status.

As a result, Galilee was the most pagan of the Jewish provinces, at least in the eyes of the Southern Jewish people. Those in Galilee were considered less biblically pure and less obedient to the Law. Therefore, they are referred to as a people “dwelling in darkness” and “shadow of death” who have seen the “great light” of Christ which has “dawned” in their very presence.

The fact that Jesus begins His ministry in Galilee is Matthew’s way of saying to his Jewish audience, the Messiah is for all people, regardless of ethnicity or background.

Scripture: ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:17-20

Question: Jesus references heaven and earth disappearing. Does that mean it will? Or is he saying this will never happen so continue to follow the commandments. Lastly how do we ensure our righteousness is good or better?

Response

Let's begin by identifying the context. Obviously, this is part of the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is Jesus presenting the Kingdom of God to Israel. He is proclaiming that Messiah has come and His Kingdom is present. Then He describes life in the Kingdom.

Jesus references heaven and earth disappearing. Does that mean it will? Or is he saying this will never happen so continue to follow the commandments. Jesus' declaration that He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to abolish them, contains two statements in one. There is something Jesus *did* and something He did *not* do. What Jesus did was fulfill the Law and Prophets in His actions and teachings, all of the Old Testament. What He did not do. He did not render them invalid. The Prophets will be fulfilled; the Law will continue to accomplish the purpose for which it was given. At the same time, Jesus emphasized the eternal nature of the Word of God.

Jesus is also drawing a contrast between the temporary nature of physical creation and the eternal nature of God's Word. Revelation 21:1-8 describes God destroying physical creation and creating a new heaven and earth. Note that heaven refers not to the abode of God but to the heavens or skies. In contrast to the temporary nature of creation, God's Word will remain eternal. Verse 18 does not say the Law will end but will be fully accomplished or fulfilled.

Lastly how do we ensure our righteousness is good or better? Is this meaning to always continue to study and read the Bible? This is an intriguing question. How do we measure righteousness? First, remember in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is redefining righteousness to include not just what we do but the heart attitude behind what we do. In other words, Jesus is elevating righteousness to a standard way higher than the Pharisees accepted.

Second, notice just a few verses later the standard, *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Matthew 5:48. The term “perfect” communicates maturity or to be brought to the purpose for which something was created. Why did God create people? To bring them into relationship with Him where they obey, honor and glorify Him.

Righteousness is tied to the idea of justification. Justification has two aspects. First, Christ pays our unpayable sin debt through His sacrifice on the cross. Second, Jesus imparts to us His righteousness through His resurrection. Our sin debt is paid and our ‘righteousness’ bank account

is filled with the righteousness of Jesus. This is what Paul says, *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* 2 Corinthians 5:21

The pursuit of righteousness is you and I increasingly aligning our lives, behaviors, attitudes, etc. with what has been imparted to us, the righteousness of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. So perhaps instead of “good or better” we think in terms of aligning more and more with Christ and His teachings. That would certainly include studying God’s Word, repentance, loving others, and loving God.