

PARTNERING  
*with the*  
KING



**STUDY THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW**  
*and Become a Disciple of Jesus*

**PARTNERING**  
*with the*  
**KING**

**JOHN L. HIIGEL**



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*Partnering with the King: Study the Gospel of Matthew and  
Become a Disciple of Jesus*

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*Dedicated with gratitude to*

STEVE STUCKEY

HANK POTT

BRUCE MILLER

AND

SAMUEL CHETTI

*who disciplined me to Jesus during my college years.*



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# INTRODUCTION

When we turn to the Scriptures to ask how to live as Christians, we find not the word *Christian*, but *disciple*. When we ask about how to live as disciples, we find not a topical essay or a set of instructions, but a story.

The story is indispensable, because to be a disciple is to follow a living person: the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Matthew narrates Jesus' life so that we will join with him. It beckons us into the ongoing story of the one who fulfilled God's promises to redeem us, rose from the dead, and promised to be with us always. Discipleship is life with Jesus, for Jesus, in partnership with Jesus.

I invite you to read the Gospel of Matthew with me for a month. The book in your hands is not a commentary but a devotional study meant to be read straight through, a chapter a day, as you immerse yourself in the Gospel of Matthew. (By all means, read it at a different pace if that works better for you. Small groups or Sunday school classes may wish to read it a chapter a week from fall to spring.) For newcomers, the book can serve as an introduction to the Christian life. For more seasoned Christians, I hope that it will be a source of renewal and vision.

For readers who hesitate to begin a life of following Jesus due to questions about whether Matthew is reliable, I have added an appendix at the end that addresses this very question. You may want to read that foundational information before launching into Day 1 of the Gospel study.

*Please don't skip over reading the text of Matthew itself in order to get to what I have to say!* The entire Gospel is reproduced here in

these pages to make it easy to integrate Scripture and explanation. In the end, my chapters are only here to illuminate what is already right there in your Bible.

# YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

**DAY  
1**

Matthew 14:13-21

**T**he Gospel of Matthew is more than a grand announcement of good news about Jesus the Messiah; it is a call to respond. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, as he announces God's kingdom, he calls some individuals to be his disciples. At the end, he commands them to go out and make more disciples all over the world. By narrating Jesus' story, this Gospel tells us what we need to know in order to follow him and to be involved with him in his merciful work. We get to see him in action, hear his voice, and watch what his on-the-scene disciples are learning and doing. As we do, we discover what Jesus intends for us.

One episode from the heart of Matthew's Gospel displays especially well what it means to enter into this sort of life.

## ■ Matthew 14:13-21

<sup>13</sup> When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

<sup>15</sup> As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

<sup>16</sup> Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

<sup>17</sup> “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

<sup>18</sup> “Bring them here to me,” he said. <sup>19</sup> And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. <sup>20</sup> They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

<sup>21</sup> The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

As the story begins, Jesus has received some disheartening news, and we find him traveling by boat across the small Sea of Galilee with his disciples, trying to find some solitude. By this point in the Gospel, Jesus is famous for his work of healing, and when word gets out where he is headed, large crowds pursue him and are waiting when the boat arrives at the shore. Rather than send them away, Jesus responds with compassion and enters into a sustained time of ministering to the people’s ailments and needs.

We become aware of his inner group of disciples in verse 15, where, picking up on the healer’s compassion, they too show sympathy for the people. The place is remote, far from anywhere the people could obtain food. The crowd is becoming hungry, and the hour is late. The disciples bring their concern to Jesus: “Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

Jesus’ response catches our attention: “They do not need to go away. *You* give them something to eat.” The word *you* is emphatic. His command is apparently ludicrous, with the thousands of people present and the distance from any food source. The disciples respond with a protest, “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” as if to say, “You must be joking! This is all we have!”

Jesus, however, is quite serious. He tells them to bring him what little they have. He has the people sit down on the grass. He

takes the precious food, looks to heaven in prayer and gratitude, and then breaks the loaves for distribution. Matthew says, “Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.” The whole crowd is fed until they are fully satisfied, with much more food left over than they had available in the first place.

The question, then, is who fed the people? Our first answer would have to be Jesus. There is simply no question of thousands of people being fed from what amounts to a sack lunch apart from Jesus’ powerful action. In Matthew’s Gospel, the story comes in the middle of a section which is designed to thrust before us the question, “Do you recognize who this remarkable man is who is doing these things?” The section culminates in 16:16 with Peter’s acclamation: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The King has come (*Messiah* means “anointed king”), and his people have gathered to him. All glory and honor and credit belong to King Jesus. *He* has fed the multitude.

But the answer to the question of who fed the people is also the disciples. Jesus commanded them, “You give them something to eat,” and that is what they did. They brought Jesus what they had, and he blessed it and enabled them to love the people effectively and to meet their needs. *This is the picture of discipleship.* To be a disciple is to enter into a surprising partnership with the King. We live with Jesus and learn from him what to care about. *He* then meets people’s needs, but he does so in some significant way through us and with us. We play a decidedly subordinate role in the partnership—Jesus is the *King*—but he has given us an essential role. “You give them something to eat,” he commands, and by his kingly power he makes it possible for us to do it.

Our experience is not identical to those disciples’ face-to-face, in-the-flesh interaction with Jesus, but the pattern of action is quite similar. We draw our life and strength from the resurrected Jesus who has promised to be with us always, to live with us in his very personal spiritual presence (28:20). When we see people in need, it is by prayer that we bring the need to Jesus. Our “hearing”

his command to feed them comes from reading his words and being part of the community of praying believers who collectively listen, seeking to discern Jesus' will in order to do it. As he did in Galilee, Jesus still does great things today, and he does them through us and with us who are his disciples, his apprentices, his assistant coworkers.

Many illustrations of this phenomenon are available in our world, but I will select the story of Habitat for Humanity. The movement began with three families living in the American South who had been thinking seriously about partnering with the Lord and each other. They had begun to share Jesus' compassion for the many people nearby who were living miserably in leaking shacks that they could not even afford to own. The three families pulled together a dozen friends to meet for intensive prayer, taking to Jesus the human need they perceived. They came to the conclusion that the Savior was directing them, "*You* build them homes." The three families together owned a patch of farmland. A couple of them knew some basics about building. The group of praying friends contacted some more friends, and the money came in to build the first houses. Followers of Jesus contributed their labor, joined by the grateful shack-dwellers themselves, whose new homes they were building. The houses were sold to them for no profit, with long-term payment schedules, at no interest. Those payments in turn went into building more houses. Within a few years (though not without some problems, including some persecution), twenty-seven houses had been built. Then the question arose, "Might the Lord bless a project like this among the poor in Africa?" Millard and Linda Fuller, two of the original partners in Georgia, were soon at work with new partners multiplying houses in a village in Zaire. Then the question was, "Could we build by this pattern wherever in the world people need housing?"<sup>1</sup> Over half a million houses have now been built worldwide, housing two and a half million people.

Who housed all these people? Clearly, Jesus did. Those involved with Habitat for Humanity from the beginning will testify that

apart from Jesus, such results were unthinkable. The living Savior motivated, guided, empowered, and supplied his followers. At the same time, clearly, it was Jesus' modern-day disciples who housed all those people. They sensed his heart and opened themselves to partnering with him. In prayer, they pointed to the need and they brought him what they had—their equivalent of five loaves and two fish. Jesus blessed it, and before long, they provided abundantly for a multitude.

In Matthew's story about the feeding of the thousands, the role of a disciple is fundamentally *active*. It is true that the disciples in the story get to eat bread themselves, but they are fed as they are involved in feeding others. Theirs is not merely the essentially passive role of receiving and eating, but the active role of praying (bringing the problem to Jesus), obeying, and distributing. The kingdom of heaven that Jesus has come to inaugurate is dynamic and active, and the Christian life, the life of being Jesus' disciples, involves entering into that activity of God through cooperating with Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew as a whole serves as a guidebook in which Jesus teaches and demonstrates what disciples are to do. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the point for Christians today: the Christian life is intentional involvement with Jesus in what he is doing.

In both the story about Jesus' healing and feeding the crowds and the example of Habitat for Humanity, the acts of compassion focus on people's physical needs. I recently heard a public radio interview with a poor man about the dire circumstances in his country that sometimes prevent him from eating for days at a time. He said, "Our only hope is that Jesus of Nazareth will feed us." Jesus of Nazareth continues to rescue the hungry, and he does it most often by the hands of his disciples who see the need and bring to him what they have. The good news is that God loves human beings at the level of our bodies, and we distort the gospel if we limit the good news to spiritual realities. The life of discipleship is not an otherworldly spirituality that ignores the down-to-earth needs of

people. Jesus' command to give the hungry people something to eat is, first of all, to be taken literally.

To make the opposite error would also distort the gospel. Jesus' concern is much broader than people's physical needs. It is interesting that the next mention of bread in Matthew treats the word metaphorically. In the story of the Canaanite woman whose daughter is tormented by a demon (15:21–28), Jesus speaks of bread and the woman speaks of bread crumbs. Both refer to what the daughter needs, which is a spiritual healing. Jesus has come to relieve everything in life that is dark and miserable. His mission is to overcome hunger and hurt of all kinds, and so in a comprehensive way, his saving action brings people the equivalent of a full and satisfied stomach. When Jesus says to his disciples, "You give them something to eat," he is drawing them into a partnership with him to bring relief and life to people at every level of what it means to be alive. In Matthew, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven (the active reign of God) has come on the scene where people live; that is, God is about to establish his good and beneficial will in a hurting world. Jesus saves people out of darkness in all its forms, and he employs disciples to help convey that salvation. We enter into this relationship of attachment to Jesus—living with him, conversing with him, imitating him, going with him where he goes, doing what he says to do—so that we can share in his mission. We have the opportunity as disciples to work out how every aspect of our lives, careers, and relationships will fit into this grand and good thing God is doing.

When we read the story of the feeding of the five thousand in its wider context in Matthew, we notice that at two other suppers Jesus similarly takes bread, blesses it, and breaks it for distribution: at the feeding of the four thousand in 15:36 and, significantly, at the Lord's Supper in 26:26. That last intimate supper with his disciples illuminates the other two meals, the feedings of the multitudes.

First, at the Lord's Supper Jesus refers to the bread as being himself: "Take and eat; this is my body." Ultimately, the bread of life

that the world needs most—the bread that will most fully overcome the people’s hunger—is *Jesus*. Back at the seaside, looking beyond the multitude’s immediate situation, Jesus’ command to his disciples, “You give them something to eat,” means, give them Jesus—help people to know him and to live in nourishing, fortifying relationship with him.

Second, the passage about the Lord’s Supper shows that these extraordinary meals point forward to something greater. After giving his disciples the bread and the wine in anticipation of his body being broken and his blood poured out, he says, “I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (26:29). Jesus joyously awaits the coming day—beyond his death and resurrection—when he will return in glory and host the Great Banquet anticipated by faithful Jews. Jesus has come to gather to himself God’s people, Israel, and to fulfill the promises of blessing spoken to their ancestors. Those promises include blessings for the Gentiles as well, a multitude of whom will join in the end-of-time celebration (8:11; Isaiah 25:6).

For the thousands beside the sea, their moment of enjoying limitless bread and fish with Jesus anticipates that ultimate banquet. As the disciples serve food to the large gathering, they collaborate with Jesus in his mission to unite and bless God’s people. Disciples, then, are not a scattering of disconnected individuals, but are always part of a community. Matthew’s Gospel repeatedly stresses this indispensable “together” aspect of the Christian life.

We can say that this one episode encapsulates the Gospel’s most important themes about discipleship. Jesus invites his followers to partner with him as he works to establish God’s merciful reign on earth. It is a lopsided partnership, to be sure, for *all* the power and authority comes from him. Jesus is the King; we are the junior partners. But it is nonetheless a real partnership, and by making us his collaborators, Jesus validates us and makes our lives fruitful. It is an *intimate* collaboration: we live with Jesus, our source of

life, watching and listening, learning and praying. It is an *active* collaboration: we do not sit by passively, merely waiting to receive blessings or to pass into an afterlife. It is a *cooperative* collaboration: we serve Jesus together with others who are the family of God. And it is a *world-changing* collaboration: through our discipleship, God compassionately satisfies the hunger of the world—physically, morally, and spiritually. This is truly good news. The Gospel of Matthew is a guidebook and invitation to this adventurous life of discipleship.

*As disciples, King Jesus makes us his partners  
in his work of compassion so that he meets  
people's needs, but he does so through us and with us.*

## DAY 2

# A PLACE IN GOD'S STORY

Matthew 1-2

### ■ Matthew 1:1-17

1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David,  
the son of Abraham:

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac,  
Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron,  
Hezron the father of Ram,  
<sup>4</sup> Ram the father of Amminadab,  
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,  
<sup>5</sup> Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,  
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,  
Obed the father of Jesse,  
<sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David.  
David was the father of Solomon,  
    whose mother had been Uriah's wife,  
<sup>7</sup> Solomon the father of Rehoboam,  
Rehoboam the father of Abijah,  
Abijah the father of Asa,  
<sup>8</sup> Asa the father of Jehoshaphat,  
Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram,  
Jehoram the father of Uzziah,  
<sup>9</sup> Uzziah the father of Jotham,  
Jotham the father of Ahaz,  
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,  
<sup>10</sup> Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,  
Manasseh the father of Amon,  
Amon the father of Josiah,  
<sup>11</sup> and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers  
    at the time of the exile to Babylon.  
<sup>12</sup> After the exile to Babylon:  
Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel,  
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,  
<sup>13</sup> Zerubbabel the father of Abihud,  
Abihud the father of Eliakim,  
Eliakim the father of Azor,  
<sup>14</sup> Azor the father of Zadok,  
Zadok the father of Akim,  
Akim the father of Elihud,

<sup>15</sup> Elihud the father of Eleazar,  
 Eleazar the father of Matthan,  
 Matthan the father of Jacob,

<sup>16</sup> and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

<sup>17</sup> Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

It's not exactly a gripping beginning, is it? Today we are not very fond of genealogies. Even people who are interested in their own family tree become bored quickly when they have to read someone else's. This is because we find our public identity in things besides family—things such as job, rank, education. In the ancient Near East, though, people were known by their family ties. By means of this genealogy, Matthew identifies Jesus for us. Attaching ourselves to Jesus as his disciples is a little like getting married: we cannot fully know our partner without knowing our partner's family, and when we marry, we become part of that family.

Jesus' family is not just any family! God chose this family as his own people, gave them enduring promises, and vowed to bless all the other families of the earth through them. Jesus' family is Israel, and most of the family history that Matthew outlines was known and preserved in the Old Testament—the Hebrew Scriptures—whose authority Jesus and all the Jews trusted. Jesus' life is the most significant event in that special family's history.

Matthew is particularly interested in two ancestors, David and Abraham (verse 1). Abraham was significant because of the promises God made to him that reveal God's grand plan (Genesis 12:1–3). In order to save the world from the mess created by human sin, God's plan has been to bless Abraham and his descendants (the Jews) and then bless the rest of the world through them. This well-being that God continues to bestow on humanity includes equipping us to live righteously and justly (see Genesis 18:18–19). By tracing Jesus'

family lineage back to Abraham, Matthew is saying that Jesus has come to fulfill God's grand plan to bless the world.

And within Abraham's lineage, Jesus is "son of David." David was Israel's greatest king, the man after God's own heart, chosen to lead Israel into faithfulness toward God. God promised to establish David and his heirs in a perpetual kingship over God's people: "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me" (2 Samuel 7:16). David's anointed descendant will bring blessing not just to Israel, but to the world. "May he rule . . . to the ends of the earth. . . . May his name endure forever. . . . Then all nations will be blessed through him" (Psalm 72:8, 17; see also Isaiah 55:3–5). Matthew announces that the King descended from David has come, the heir to God's promises, and blessings for the world are sure to follow.

The third key event in the family history, however, unlike God's heartening promises to Abraham and David, was a catastrophe. The "exile to Babylon" (verses 11, 12) was the deportation of the people of Israel from the Promised Land into slavery and misery, with Jerusalem and its temple destroyed. The Old Testament prophets' message was that the exile came because God's people had abandoned him and proved unfaithful to his *covenant* with them, the marriage-like bond he had established with them through Moses at Mount Sinai. Consequently, God had withdrawn his protection for a time. Invaders from the east took away the Israelites' security and political sovereignty, which they longed to recover. Those who did return from exile lived under the control of one foreign empire after another. But the same prophets who predicted the exile also spoke of a hopeful future under the kingship of a descendant of King David. In the centuries leading to Jesus' birth, the Jews waited and speculated and hoped, yearning for the Messiah (in Greek: *Christ*), the anointed King who would fulfill God's promises to Abraham and David. Matthew asserts from the very first verse that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

So first of all, the genealogy tells us Jesus' identity: he is the promised King over God's people. The point for our discipleship is

that everything revolves around him. Jesus will press the question, “Who do you say that I am?” and will say repeatedly, “Follow me; come to me.” The decisive issue in every person’s life will be to recognize who Jesus is and come to him.

This leads to the genealogy’s second contribution: the idea that something long hoped for is being fulfilled. The technical term for this idea is *eschatology*, time arriving at its destination. Jesus’ coming marks the decisive moment when God dramatically intervenes to fulfill his plans. Matthew symbolizes this idea of the fullness of time by the series of fourteens at the end of the genealogy (verse 17). The ancient Near Eastern peoples attributed meaning to certain numbers, particularly the number seven, which signified completion and fullness. The generations between Abraham and David were twice seven. The same interval of two sevens separates David and the exile, and after two more sevens comes Jesus. With him, the open-ended seventh seven has begun. Israel’s long story has pointed forward to Jesus, and he is now on the scene to complete God’s plan. One of the most important ideas for understanding discipleship is that every disciple is part of this grand unfolding story that is much bigger than our own individual life story. Whatever our own agenda may have been before encountering Jesus, it is now to find our place in God’s plan. Instead of asking whether God fits into our story, we learn to ask where we fit in his.

This leads to a third emphasis, which a genealogy is ideally suited to express: Jesus comes to fulfill the destiny of a people, a family. He comes to gather Israel. His beloved people, scattered by exile, are to find home and family love in relationship with him. In the course of the Gospel, Jesus will often use family terminology to speak of his followers, describing disciples as brothers and sisters and mother and father and children. Being a disciple means finding our place in a community, a family, God’s people.

With all of this emphasis on Jesus gathering his Jewish family, what are we to make of the eventual inclusion of Gentiles

(non-Jews) in the community of Jesus? Matthew laments often in his Gospel that so many fellow Jews rejected Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus attracted large crowds of Jews. The earliest Christian churches were made up almost entirely of Jews who believed that they were carrying the torch handed to them by the faithful Jews of all previous generations. But by the time Matthew wrote this Gospel, a fair number of Gentiles were included in the churches. The early believers opened their arms to Gentile members as Jesus instructed them to do (28:19; 24:14), confident that through their invitation Jesus was fulfilling God's promises to Abraham and David that he would bless the whole world. By emphasizing Abraham and David, to whom the global promises were made, and by including in Jesus' genealogy some Gentile women, Matthew points beyond the Jewish family to the Gentiles, whom God will bless, too.

The point is that the blessing comes to a community, an inclusive family. Nothing about Jesus' message or ministry is individualistic. Christian faith is not entirely or even mostly private, because we live it out alongside others as part of a community of faith. In Matthew, Jesus uses many images to portray his ministry of bringing people together: a shepherd gathering sheep, a farmer harvesting grain, a fisherman pulling in his fishnet, a mother hen gathering her chicks, a brother drawing together family members, and a builder assembling his church (a word that means "a gathering"). In coming to Jesus, we come into his family, whom we meet wherever we find his churches. We gain a long and venerable heritage, a common identity with men and women of faith going back well before Jesus and including all his followers since, with all their glory and all their imperfections. We belong. It is amazing to have a part in something so big and important.

### ■ Matthew 1:18-2:23

<sup>18</sup> This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the

Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

<sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

<sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. <sup>25</sup> But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

**2**<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

<sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "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."

<sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

<sup>18</sup> "A voice is heard in Ramah,  
weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
and refusing to be comforted,  
because they are no more."

<sup>19</sup> After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt <sup>20</sup> and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

<sup>21</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning

in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee,<sup>23</sup> and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets that he would be called a Nazarene.

**T**he story of Jesus' birth and early childhood reinforces all three of the themes we observed in the genealogy: Jesus is identified as the great King; his birth signals God's anticipated moment for action; and his life fulfills God's plans for his people.

First, Matthew tells the story to say who Jesus is in as many ways as possible, beginning with his royal title, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about." Jesus is conceived in a virgin's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit of God. His adoptive father, Joseph, provides the royal lineage—he is "Joseph, son of David." An angel declares the baby's name, Jesus, which means "the Lord saves," for he will save his people from their sins. Quotations from the prophets exalt him: he is the Messiah, the Shepherd of Israel, God's Son, "God with us." Gentiles from a distant country come to bow in worship before the child they call "King of the Jews." The final verse uses a play on the name of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth to speak of Jesus as the "branch" (Hebrew: *netzer*) of David's family on whom the Spirit of the Lord will rest (Isaiah 11:1–2). Could more declarations about who Jesus is possibly be packed into such a brief story?

Second, Matthew expresses Jesus' significance by saying repeatedly, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet." Jesus' coming is Israel's long-awaited event, the crucial moment in their family story. And third, the event is great because God is fulfilling his plans for his chosen people. Jesus relives the nation's pivotal episodes and personally embodies what it means to be God's chosen people. Like Israel of old, he goes down to Egypt and returns. Like exiled Israel, he is targeted for

death by a hostile ruler. He has come to “save his people from their sins” and to shepherd his people Israel. All who become his followers (Jews first, but eventually Gentiles as well) are the sheep he gathers and serves.

So the decisive moment has arrived. Israel’s long-awaited Shepherd King has come. How will the people respond? Matthew points to a sharp contrast. Jesus’ coming is an intrusion to some but a joy to others. King Herod and the residents of Jerusalem are “disturbed”—troubled, upset, scared—by news about a king of the Jews. By contrast, some strangers from the east joyfully open their hearts and their treasures to the child born to be King and Savior. Ironically, it is these outsiders who model the right way to respond to Jesus’ arrival. They recognize that something momentous is happening, and so they pursue him and kneel before him and offer him what they value most.

How much do these men really understand about God or Jesus? After all, they are pagan astrologers. Yet they sense that someone of surpassing importance has come, and they take action. They leave all that is familiar, all their comfort and safety, and press forward tenaciously to come to him and honor him. Their determination to pay tribute to the King of the Jews leads to a dramatic, thrilling venture with God, who guides them and fills them with joy.

We are drawn also to Joseph, a good man who responds admirably as his life is turned upside down by Jesus’ coming. When he receives the angelic word regarding his fiancée, which shakes up his previous view of the world (a pregnant virgin!) and requires him to endure public embarrassment, he weds Mary, as the Lord commands him. Then, when living with Jesus forces ever more disruptions, detours, and dangers into his life, Joseph adjusts faithfully. (Luke tells us that Mary, too, adjusted admirably.) This capacity to change course in order to cooperate with what God is doing is one of the key marks of a disciple.

So even in Matthew’s stories of Jesus’ childhood we see models of how to respond to his arrival. Joseph and the Magi from

the East recognize—they do not fully understand yet, but they recognize—that Jesus is the most important person they could possibly imagine. God’s moment has arrived, so they adjust their lives, grasping that the time for action is now. They sense that a new future is dawning for God’s people. Altogether, the first two chapters are a wake-up call for every reader of Matthew’s Gospel. God is with us as never before. Jesus the Shepherd King has come to gather his people; get ready to respond!

*Because the King has come, we adjust our lives,  
seeking our role in God’s story and our  
roots in his family.*

**DAY**  
**3**

## MORAL PREPARATION

Matthew 3

### ■ Matthew 3:1-12

**3**<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea <sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup> This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup> John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

**M**atthew's call to be ready, sounded in his first two chapters, now intensifies. Centuries of waiting have come to an end, and God's moment for action has arrived. John the Baptist, the last of Israel's great prophets (11:13), comes on the scene to cry out, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Dressed in rough clothes reminiscent of the prophet Elijah, John announces that the anticipated Day of the Lord has come (see 2 Kings 1:7–8; Malachi 4:5). God's appointed time to judge rebels and restore his people has arrived. John calls his audience to repent, to turn away from their sins, indeed to change their whole way of thinking and living in readiness for the any-day-now arrival of the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John's announcement of the kingdom of heaven comes as good news. God had always been king—this is a recurring theme in the

Old Testament psalms and the prophets—but the Jews’ hard experience seemed to suggest otherwise. *Human* kings appeared to be in charge century after century—oppressive foreigners with their fearsome armies: Assyrians, then Babylonians, then Persians, then Greeks, now Romans. The crowds likely understood John the Baptist’s message to mean that God was about to overturn those worldly authorities and restore possession of the land to his people. John’s choice of the Jordan River for his preaching and baptizing is full of symbolism. After their ancient Exodus from slavery in Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites had entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan. Later, during the exile, Israel found itself back in the wilderness again. John now stations himself at the river, the gateway into the homeland, to announce an end to the gloom of being powerless and lost. As he preaches and baptizes, the people of Israel flow to him and open their hearts.

There is no more crucial idea in Matthew than John’s phrase, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” John’s message in 3:2 will be Jesus’ message in 4:17, and then it will be Jesus’ followers’ message when he sends them out in 10:7. What does it mean? The key word is *kingdom*. God, who is heavenly (that is, a personal spiritual being), is truly the king of the world, and he is acting now to consolidate his kingship (his sovereignty, his reign) by overcoming all sources of evil and misery. The kingdom of heaven is *God’s reign as king*. We misunderstand the phrase when we make *heaven* the key word and think that John and Jesus are talking about a place people go for life after death. Rather, the kingdom of heaven here refers to God’s beneficial action in the world to take charge as king. The concluding phrase, “has come near,” refers to the *now* of God’s action. John is announcing that the crucial moment in God’s grand story of salvation has arrived. The decisive phase in his enterprise to overcome evil with good has begun.

Precisely because God is about to combat evil in the world, John’s message sounds scary and urgent: “Who warned you to

flee from the coming wrath?” An ax is already poised to cut down the fruitless “trees.” The one coming after John will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John tells the crowds that God’s great intervention will confront not only the evil “out there” in demonic political powers, but the evil “within” their own community. The people need to depart from sin in order to “prepare the way of the Lord” who is about to act on their behalf. John provocatively insists that even those with a reputation for piety need inner cleansing. Everyone will need to regroup in light of God’s blazing holiness and his imminent action. A great sifting will soon separate the “wheat” from the “chaff.” Now is the time to decide—to repent with a lasting repentance that yields a fruitful life.

John is not particularly diplomatic! “You brood of vipers!” His words sting, but his urgent call to repentance pinpoints the reason why many new believers today fail to get a solid start in the Christian life and why many long-time believers never go very deep. The obstacle is our resistance to coming clean about how we have lived before. What vices have we justified by persuading ourselves that everyone does it? When did we disregard good moral advice? What did we do out of selfishness or malice? What are we still defensive about? When did we ignore our conscience—or what have we done so many times that our conscience no longer troubles us about it? What did we participate in but shift the blame to others?

Through Jesus’ death, God is certainly willing to forgive whatever he finds displeasing in our past or our present so that we can start fresh. But nothing can be off limits to God’s scrutiny. John is saying that the only way to prepare for God’s new action in our lives is to let go of those things. The point of repenting is that we want to cooperate with God instead of getting in his way. Only by giving God access to every corner of our hearts can we be free to partner with him.

Some may fear that if we face all those things in our personal story, we will begin to feel like a “bad person.” Fortunately, we do not need to fear discovering that our moral deficiencies go deeper

than we thought. As we will see in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is astonishingly willing to welcome people of all kinds, however bad their prior record has been, and to treat them as people of dignity and promise. It is a humbling but necessary step to realize that we truly need God's mercy and forgiveness.

Someone who has always had a reputation for being a "good person" may be especially reluctant to be inwardly honest. The Pharisees and Sadducees in this story are like that. So was I. I didn't want forgiveness; I wanted to get it right. I wanted to prove to myself that I could be a better man than those around me. Over the period of a year or so when I was a grad student, the Lord had to bring me through a series of failures in which I could no longer deny that I was becoming an irritating person. I needed forgiveness, and plenty of it, from God and the people in my life. I remember vividly the morning I just let go. "God, I'm sorry, deeply sorry, and I need all the help from you I can get." The relief was tremendous—like a huge load had been lifted from my shoulders! My whole future looked new.

The scene around John at the Jordan River is very encouraging. People with good reputations and bad are confessing their sins, receiving his baptism of restoration, and finding themselves open and ready for God's new action through Jesus.

### ■ Matthew 3:13-17

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."