

Day One

Introduction to Matthew

Today, as we begin at the beginning, take a breath. A deep one. Pause. Admit to God that the biblical world you're about to enter is very different from your own in terms of geography, customs, and assumptions. Now invite God to bring clarity to your mind and eagerness to your heart as we start ninety days together. Good. Let's start.

How to Begin?

How can we begin this beginning Gospel? How can we bridge the great distance in time, values, and culture between Matthew's world and ours? Maybe more than anything, how can we ensure that our encounter with this Gospel moves from mere words on a page to the Spirit invading our heart? Well, the answers to those questions begin with addressing these: Who was Matthew? What was his Gospel? When did he write? And ultimately, why did he take the time and make the effort to compose this story?

Who?

Matthew is wonderfully sly in placing himself within Jesus' story. We learn in Matthew 9:9 that our author was a tax collector for the Romans—which makes him a traitor to his own people—before Jesus called him to be one of the Twelve. Upon that call, Matthew left his previous life behind but took his pen with him and became a masterful recorder and reporter of all that Jesus said and did. Think of the contrast embedded within Matthew's very person: a Roman citizen and so highly educated; yet also Hebrew born and bred and so adept at keeping records. As the story begins, he must have been

a man at odds with himself: Jew, yet traitor; Roman, yet outsider; disciple, yet so vulnerable to forgetting the same faith that defined him. The transformation of the characters in the book must mimic that which happened in the author himself.

What?

Well, what is a *Gospel*? As many of you know, *gospel* means “good news,” and the four New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life are certainly that. Yet there’s more, as the Gospels comprise their own unique literary form. If they’re *biography*, they’re frustratingly slim on details that interest us: “*What did Jesus look like?*” “*What were his early years like?*” “*Who were his heroes?*” “*Did he fight with his brothers?*” “*What kind of report cards did he get?*” The Gospels are silent on all those matters. If they are merely *proclamation*, they give us a great deal of narrative before leaving us with a message. What shall we say then? A working definition is this: the four Gospels are biographical sketches written for the purpose of proclamation leading to decision.

With that mostly settled, what sets Matthew’s Gospel apart? How is it similar to and different from its three first cousins? Matthew’s Gospel follows much the same story line as Mark’s. (Luke has significant distinction from Matthew and Mark, while John is a different animal altogether.) So, the question remains: Is Matthew a version of Mark on steroids, or is Mark a *Reader’s Digest* condensed version of Matthew? No certain answer exists, though most experts believe that Mark was written first, and Matthew had access to that material and added more *meat* to the *skin and bones* of Mark. What type of *meat* does Matthew add that Mark omits? A casual look at a “Red Letter” Bible—one that prints Jesus’ words in red in contrast to the rest of the text in black—will quickly answer this question. In Matthew, Jesus is a man of words, while in Mark, he is a man of action. For example, Matthew’s version contains the “Sermon on the

Mount”—three straight chapters of solid red (Matthew 5–7)—while Mark’s has no such sermon at all.

Finally, a word about how this Gospel functioned with its original audience. Like all biblical books, Matthew was *not* written to be read; it was composed to be *heard*. Matthew writes for the ear and not the eye. Why is this so? Because the majority of people in ancient Israel were illiterate; when they gathered as the church, the few educated ones among them would read the text publicly. This is why Paul says “faith comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17) when many of us might think it comes by reading. To get the most out of many sections of Matthew, you’ll want to experience them as his first audience did. In your case, it will come by reading passages out loud, even to yourself.

When?

The Gospel of Matthew was likely written between AD 50 and 70, within fifteen or twenty years of the events it describes. We know the early church told and retold and re-retold the stories of Jesus to itself. We also know the church equipped its people through letters that were both corrective (1 Corinthians) and instructive (James). We further know from 1 Thessalonians 4 that as the early church dealt with death among its ranks—some due to martyrdom and others because of natural causes—these first believers wanted to ensure that a permanent record existed of Jesus’ life and the responses to it. Finally, in God’s wisdom, Matthew is one of the men selected to collect the dots of Jesus’ life and teaching so the church could later connect those same dots in the Gospel.

Why?

Each Gospel has a slightly different twist and purpose. Together they form a micro-library, the Bible’s unique biography section,

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within the larger biblical library, and the four give us a much fuller, more compelling picture of Jesus and his first followers than any single volume could. From the beginning, Matthew sets out to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of the story of Israel, the King of the Jews, the arrival of the much-anticipated Messiah. Matthew's audience is made up primarily of followers of Jesus who are of Jewish descent. Matthew pays attention to Jewish customs and scriptures in a way that John, for example, would not. The Gospel authors use different strategies to reach different audiences. This is not cause for alarm but for celebration, as it underscores that the Bible is inspired, eternal, and true in ways that thrill us and mold us.

Day Two

Matthew 1:1-17

Matthew reveals his purpose in his very first sentence: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Jesus wasn’t literally David’s son, and David wasn’t literally Abraham’s son. Yet Jesus is in the line of both ancestors and completes their standing as representative of Israel: Abraham as the *father* of the nation and David as its ideal king.

Now, why in the world would anyone start a biography with a genealogy? If storytellers need to grab their audience’s attention from the opening words, why this sleep-inducing list of names and begats? Why begin with an extended trip through Jesus’ family graveyard?

To answer that, you have to remember that you are not Matthew’s intended audience. His Gospel was written to first-century Jews, and it was graciously preserved for you. His audience would have been mesmerized with this genealogy, as they would have heard the names of some of the most famous figures in the history of Israel. Remember as well that this book wasn’t written to be read but to be heard; Matthew crafts his words together so they have maximum aural punch.

Two items of particular note in this genealogy give us important information about Jesus’ identity:

1. By tracing Jesus’ ancestry through Abraham, Matthew underscores how the Messiah fulfills everything God ever intended for Israel. When Luke writes Jesus’ genealogy, he traces his lineage of Jesus through Adam, reinforcing his contention that Jesus is the Savior of all people.
2. Matthew goes to great lengths to include people in Jesus’ family tree that most of his contemporaries would have preferred to leave out. First, he includes four women,

and that fact alone goes against the customary “ancestry. com” of the ancient world. At each mention of the women involved, the listening audience would have raised their eyebrows and perked their ears: “He included her? And her?” Look at Matthew 1:3: “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.” The sordid tale of Tamar’s impregnation at the hands of her father-in-law, Judah, is in Genesis 38, and—miracle of miracles—she is the heroine of the story!

Then in verse 5, we read: “Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.” What is Rahab’s *nickname*? Rahab the harlot. That’s right. A prostitute is part of the genealogy of the Messiah. At the beginning, Matthew lets us know that nothing in your background or on your résumé disqualifies you for a role in kingdom significance. The next part of verse 5 reads as follows: “Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.” This is the same Ruth, of course, who has an Old Testament book named after her. And she is a Moabite: an outsider, a foreigner, a stranger. She, too, has a place in the Messiah’s family tree. And finally in verse 6: “David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife.” In other words, Bathsheba. She is the victim of David’s whims. Uriah is the victim of David’s power. Yet God massages something good out of that adulterous and murderous beginning. So, while the genealogy highlights many of Israel’s heroes, it also spotlights some of its warts . . . and that’s precisely the point. Our Messiah is here to redeem.

From the beginning, then, Matthew tells, not just history, but history with a purpose: Jesus fulfills every hope of Israel and is its eternal king.

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From the beginning, the Gospel brings outsiders in. That includes you, for this Gospel is the story of not just Israel’s king but your Messiah.
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