

# OneBook.

DAILY-WEEKLY

## The Gospel of Matthew

Ben Witherington III



AN EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

**OneBook.**

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DAILY - WEEKLY

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Ben Witherington III



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# WELCOME TO ONEBOOK DAILY-WEEKLY

John Wesley, in a letter to one of his leaders, penned the following:

O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether.

Rarely are our lives most shaped by our biggest ambitions and highest aspirations. Rather, our lives are most shaped, for better or for worse, by those small things we do every single day.

At Seedbed, our biggest ambition and highest aspiration is to resource the followers of Jesus to become lovers and doers of the Word of God every single day, to become people of One Book.

To that end, we have created the OneBook Daily-Weekly. First, it's important to understand what this is not: warm, fuzzy, sentimental devotions. If you engage the Daily-Weekly for any length of time, you will learn the Word of God. You will grow profoundly in your love for God, and you will become a passionate lover of people.

## **How Does the Daily-Weekly Work?**

*Daily.* As the name implies, every day invites a short but substantive engagement with the Bible. Five days a week you will read a passage of scripture followed by a short segment of teaching and closing with questions for reflection and self-examination. On the sixth day, you will review and reflect on the previous five days.

*Weekly.* Each week, on the seventh day, find a way to gather with at least one other person doing the study. Pursue the weekly guidance for gathering. Share learning, insight, encouragement, and most important, how the Holy Spirit is working in your lives.

## Welcome to OneBook Daily-Weekly

That's it. Depending on the length of the study, when the eight or twelve weeks are done, we will be ready with the next study. On an ongoing basis, we will release new editions of the Daily-Weekly. Over time, those who pursue this course of learning will develop a rich library of Bible learning resources for the long haul.

OneBook Daily-Weekly will develop eight- and twelve-week studies that cover the entire Old and New Testaments. Seedbed will publish new studies regularly so that an ongoing supply of group lessons will be available. All titles will remain accessible, which means they can be used in any order that fits your needs or the needs of your group.

If you are looking for a substantive study to learn scripture through a steadfast method, look no further.



# WEEK ONE

Matthew 1–4

## You Shall Call Him Immanuel\*

ONE

### Introduction

**Key Observation.** This Gospel’s distinctive portrait of Jesus focuses on Jesus as God’s Wisdom come in person (Immanuel) and as a wise teacher.

**Understanding the Word.** The Gospel of Matthew was the most popular of the four Gospels in the first few centuries of Christianity. It was written for Jewish Christians who were familiar with the Old Testament and especially with Jewish Wisdom Literature (for example, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach). The First Evangelist seeks to present Jesus as both a wise man and as God’s wisdom incarnate, God come in person to his people, Immanuel (which means “God with us”). Thus, we have six blocks of teaching in this Gospel, beginning with Matthew 5–7, which depict Jesus as one even greater than Moses or Solomon, whose teaching is the definitive revelation of God’s will for his people. Not surprisingly, it was this Gospel that was used repeatedly in the early church for discipling new Christians, teaching them what they should believe, how they should behave, and how to practice their faith in terms of prayer, fasting and feasting, almsgiving, worship, and much more.

This Gospel was written in the form of an ancient biography, which did not have the same form as modern biographies. For one thing, sheer limitations of

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\*For those wanting much more on this Gospel, see Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006).

length meant that it had to be much more selective in the material it included. The ancients believed that a person was born with a certain personality and that while it was revealed over time, it was not developed over time. Thus, there was no need to focus on someone's youth or growth into adulthood. In short, it was an adult-oriented culture.

Just as the origins of a person were believed to reveal much about who a person was, so also it was believed that how a person died most revealed their character. In the case of Jesus, this was problematic since he died in the most shameful way imaginable in antiquity—on a Roman cross. It is for this reason that the Gospel writers spend about one-third of their total account on the last week of Jesus' life. This shocking end to the life of a person who had been admired by many for his teaching and miracles had to be explained in detail, and for Jewish Christians, it had to be explained in terms of scripture, showing that it was part of God's plan all along.

Scholars are divided over whether Matthew was a source for this Gospel (perhaps its unique material, perhaps also its collection of six blocks of teaching material) or the final author/editor. In either case, the Gospel reflects a person like Matthew the tax collector, who indeed would have been literate and presumably able to organize source material quite readily.

The structure of the Gospel, which, broadly speaking, follows a chronological outline (birth, baptism, temptation and ministry, climactic final week of life, resurrection, and appearances to disciples), also alternates between the actions of Jesus and the teachings of Jesus. In other words, the Evangelist himself has organized the material in this way within the larger framework of the ministry of Jesus. This was not unusual in an ancient biography. Following a strict chronology of events and activities was not required. The main thing was to be selective and include that material that best revealed the character of the person about whom the biography was written.

1. What features of Matthew's Gospel made it popular from the early church until today?
2. Why do all the Gospel writers, and Matthew in particular, spend so little time on Jesus' birth and early life and focus so heavily on his final days?

## TWO

# Ancestry and Divine Origins

**Matthew 1:1–25 ESV** *The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

<sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, <sup>4</sup>and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, <sup>7</sup>and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, <sup>8</sup>and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, <sup>9</sup>and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, <sup>10</sup>and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, <sup>11</sup>and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

<sup>12</sup>And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup>and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup>and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup>and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

<sup>17</sup>So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

<sup>18</sup>Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But as he

*considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup>but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

**Key Observation.** While human ancestry matters, what matters more is being born of God.

**Understanding the Word.** Without question, the genealogy in Matthew 1 is one of the strangest genealogies you’ll encounter. First, this is Joseph’s genealogy rather than Mary’s. Yet, Joseph had exactly nothing to do with the conception of Jesus—he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. So why do we have Joseph’s genealogy here, and how is it that Jesus is a “son of David”? The answer comes from studying the historical context. In early Judaism, if a Jewish man adopted a child, he was not only entitled to whatever inheritance his father left him in a will, he was entitled to claim his stepfather’s ancestry too!

Second, this is a male genealogy, but there are some women included! This was unusual in an ancient patriarchal culture. These women all had irregularities in their story, to say the least. Tamar, the wife of Judah, was actually a Canaanite. Rahab was a woman who ran a bordello in Jericho and was also not a Hebrew. Ruth, like Rahab, was non-Jewish—she was a Moabitess who became the wife of Boaz. Uriah’s wife (a.k.a. Bathsheba) was only David’s wife through an act of adultery, and she had previously been married to a Hittite. What these women all share in common are irregular unions with Jewish men. Had our writer wanted to emphasize miraculous conceptions, he might have mentioned Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, but he did not. I suspect that our author includes these women in the genealogy to indicate something about the irregular or out-of-the-ordinary ways God fulfills his mission. If God can use even these women and these means to create the lineage of the Jewish Messiah, then the divine irregularity in Mary’s life in regard to the conception of Jesus shouldn’t come as a total

shock. What might seem scandalous from a pious human point of view was not scandalous from God's point of view.

Third, the genealogy is incomplete. In other words, it leaves not only individual names out, as a careful study of Old Testament genealogies would show, but whole generations, especially toward the latter part of the genealogy. As it turns out, this genealogy is not like the kind you might come up with by consulting [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com). In fact, especially with royal genealogies, it was not unusual to schematize the whole of it, and leave out some of the less honorable skeletons in the closet. Matthew does not so much do that (otherwise, why mention Rahab?) as he is keen to make clear that Jesus is the seventh son of the seventh son of King David. Seven, in early Jewish ways of thinking, was the number of perfection, and so the whole point of the form of the genealogy was to make clear that Jesus was the perfect king, the perfect heir of King David, the true and genuine Messiah. While this sort of selective and scandalous genealogy might seem odd to us, it would convincingly make the theological points Matthew wants to make with his Jewish Christian audience.

We now shift to Matthew 1:18–25. According to Jewish customs, a couple would become engaged and legally married for a full year before the wedding ceremony and the consummation of the marriage. Thus, we should not be surprised when we hear about Joseph resolving to *divorce* his fiancée. They had already gone through the first legal portion of the marriage contract. So it was a true shock for Joseph to discover Mary's pregnancy before the consummation of the marriage. Young Jewish women were absolutely expected to be virgins prior to the consummation of the marriage. To not be a virgin was considered very shameful. Jewish girls were usually engaged just after puberty, so at an age of twelve or thirteen. The men, who came to puberty a bit later, would be a bit older.

Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 in order to indicate that this divine irregularity was part of God's plan, but we need to understand that early Jews did not read Isaiah 7:14 as a reference to a miraculous conception in a virgin's womb. The Hebrew simply says, "a young nubile woman of marriageable age will conceive." The Greek translation of that verse, however, uses the word *parthenos* ("virgin"), which places special emphasis on the woman's virginity, something which is only implied by the Hebrew. My point is that it is not that prophecy that led to the making up of a fictitious story about a virginal conception. No, it was the actual shocking event in Mary's life, the unexpected

miracle, that led later Christian writers like Matthew to search the Scriptures to see if such a thing had been foretold.

Matthew 1:25 reports that Joseph did not know her until after she conceived and gave birth to Jesus. This implies that he went on to have normal sexual relationships with Mary thereafter, and thus explains later references to Jesus' brothers and sisters. Since the miracle occurred at conception and not at Jesus' birth, we should speak of the virginal conception, not the virgin birth.

Joseph named the child "Jesus," which means "Yahweh saves." In that culture, names were meant to connote something about the nature or origins of the person. This raises the expectation of Jesus' identity as we begin his story.

1. What is odd about the genealogy in Matthew 1, and how do we explain its peculiar features?
2. Why was it important for Jesus to be born of a virgin?

## THREE

### Wise Men Still Seek Him

**Matthew 2:1–23 ESV** *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."<sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"*

*<sup>7</sup>Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."<sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup>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.<sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

*<sup>13</sup>Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”<sup>14</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt<sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

*<sup>16</sup>Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.<sup>17</sup> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:<sup>18</sup> “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

*<sup>19</sup>But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,<sup>20</sup> saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”<sup>21</sup> And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.<sup>22</sup> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.<sup>23</sup> 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.*

**Key Observation.** The traditional Christmas story needs an extreme make-over if it is to be in agreement with what Matthew and Luke actually say happened.

**Understanding the Word.** Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 come at the story of Jesus’ origins from different angles, with Luke focusing more on the story of Mary, and Matthew focusing more on Joseph. One of the problems with our over familiarity with the Christmas story is that we tend to blend together in our minds Luke 1–2 and Matthew 1–2. It is important that we allow Matthew’s account to speak for itself.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the ruler of Judea was Herod the Great. He was only partially Jewish. He also was Idumean, which is to say from Edom, the sworn enemy of Israel in antiquity. He was a ruthless dictator who had won the kingship by force. Herod built fortresses for his protection and even executed members of his own family whose existence threatened his reign. These facts make it clear that the slaughter of the innocents was totally possible given his reputation. Additionally, Herod died somewhere between 4 and 2 BC. This means that Jesus was actually born somewhere between 6 and 4 BC while Herod was still alive.

This narrative introduces us to astrologers, possibly from Persia. Unlike modern astrology, the ancients actually believed the stars were beings, the heavenly host, moving across the sky foreshadowing things to come. Here the astrologers are quite properly called magi, a word from which we get the word “magician.” They were not kings, though they often served kings. Nor were there necessarily three magi. This number comes from their three kinds of gifts. They were looking for the birth of a miracle child. These events happen after the birth of Jesus as Herod is killing sons.

When the magi locate Jesus, Mary and Joseph are at home, which is to say, in a house, not in a barn and not in a cave. Since Joseph had relatives in Bethlehem, they probably stayed in the family home with relatives.

The prophecy about a birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem comes from Micah 5:2, but the wise men do not know this prophecy until Herod consults with the priests and scholars. Both Herod and Jerusalem are disturbed by this revelation and caught unaware. There is some irony that foreigners are more spiritually in tune with God’s plan than the current ruler and his Jewish counselors in Jerusalem.

Herod tells the wise men to go and find the child and come back and give him a report so “that I too may come and worship him” (v. 8). But the wise men are told in a dream that this was not Herod’s true intention, so they secretly slip away back to their homeland. But before doing that, they bring expensive gifts to the miracle child—gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These luxury items were fit for a king.

The means of divine communication in several cases in Matthew 1–2 is by dreams: (1) Joseph is told in a dream it is all right to take Mary as his wife; (2) the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod; (3) Joseph is warned in a dream to get out of the country quickly; and, finally, (4) Joseph



is warned in two dreams to return to Israel from Egypt but to avoid Judea because Herod's son Archelaus was now the ruler. Matthew 1–2 are stories full of unexpected twists and turns and surprises. Matthew is suggesting that while God's Word provides some guidance, God intervenes in dreams to convey direction and help when immediate assistance is required.

The story concludes by telling us that the holy family goes to Nazareth, and that this, too, is in fulfillment of prophecy, though we are unsure which prophecy Matthew had in mind in this case. Was Jesus like the prophet Samuel who had taken a Nazaritic vow (see 1 Samuel 1:11; cf. Numbers 6:1–21)? More certainly, there seems to have been a connection between Bethlehem and Nazareth, for the city's name means "branch town" (*netzerit*), and this is likely a metaphorical allusion to the branch or shoot of Jesse, which is to say the Messiah. In other words, it would appear that some Davidic folk had settled in Nazareth, who ultimately were from Bethlehem, hence the connection for Joseph and others between these two towns.

1. What do you make of the revelations in dreams to Joseph and the wise men in these stories? Have you ever had a dream that came true or revealed a key truth you had previously not known?
2. From the start of the story, Jesus' life seems marked by danger and even possible scandal. Since this was true for Jesus, how should we evaluate the trials and tribulations in our own lives?

## FOUR

### John the Baptizer and Jesus' First Public Appearance

**Matthew 3:1–17** *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.”*

*<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.”*

**Key Observation.** A private revelation to Jesus of his unique identity in Mark’s Gospel becomes a public declaration of that identity in Matthew at Jesus’ baptism.

**Understanding the Word.** All four Gospels introduce John the Baptizer as the forerunner of Jesus, the one who prepares the way for the Jewish Messiah. Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize this by associating John with a prophecy from Isaiah 40:3: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” This prophecy refers to a path being made in the desert. The original image was of God himself leading his people back from Babylonian exile and a herald going before God and speaking about the making of a road for that mass exodus

from Babylon. John in Matthew 3 is seen as that herald, and Jesus as that divine figure.

John is depicted as a prophet like Elijah in his garb, and perhaps in his lifestyle as well (cf. 2 Kings 1:8 and Zechariah 13:4). But it is Jesus, not John, who performs miracles like Elijah on Elijah's old turf, Galilee. And it is clear that there was confusion among the people—was John the Elijah-like figure who would prepare the way for the coming day of Yahweh, as Malachi 4:5–6 at the very end of the Old Testament predicted, or was Jesus the Elijah figure (see Matthew 16:14 when people were saying Jesus was John back from the dead or Elijah)? In any case, John is famous for his water ritual, baptizing people in the Jordan and calling them to repentance before God's judgment falls upon them.

It is instructive to compare Mark 1:1–11 to Matthew 3. In Mark's portrayal of the event, which Matthew uses as a source for his rendition, Mark depicts the revelation at the river as a private disclosure to Jesus himself, though the baptism itself is a public event in both texts. Mark is portraying the event as Jesus having an apocalyptic vision at the river. Jesus sees the sky crack open and the Spirit descending like a dove on him, and only Jesus hears a voice saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (v. 11). Then the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. In Matthew, however, we have a public announcement: "This is my Son" (v. 17), which concludes the story. And then, in Matthew 4:1, the Spirit leads, not drives, Jesus into the wilderness. Matthew makes this the first public announcement of Jesus' ministry.

Both Matthew and Mark describe John as a preacher of repentance (Matt. 3:1; Mark 1:1–5). The description of John's garb and food is basically the same in both accounts. Mark does not have the condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducees at the river, nor the remark that they are called a brood of vipers who need to repent. This is just in Matthew's account. Both accounts tell us that John speaks of one coming after him whose sandals he is unworthy to untie, and they also both say that while John baptized with water, the Coming One would baptize with the Spirit (and Matthew adds "and fire"). There is nothing in Mark about axes laid to roots or winnowing of grain or clearing a threshing floor. Matthew clearly has the more public and also the more dramatic depiction of the wrath to come envisioned by John.

There is also one more important element to the story that is not in Mark but is added by Matthew. Why does John attempt to deter Jesus from baptism? Jesus' baptism is said "to fulfill all righteousness," but what does that mean?

John doesn't think Jesus needs a baptism of repentance, but he himself does. Probably we are meant to think that Jesus is taking on the role of lost Israel here, who does indeed need to be cleansed. Jesus is Israel gone right, and fulfilling all righteousness for Israel. But he is also much more than that—he is announced by God as his beloved Son on the same occasion.

1. What do you make of Jesus' relationship with John in Matthew's account?
2. Why did Jesus allow himself to be baptized with John's repentance baptism?

## FIVE

### Attempting to Overcome a Tempting

**Matthew 4:1–25** *Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."*

<sup>4</sup>*Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

<sup>5</sup>*Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup>"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."*

<sup>7</sup>*Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

<sup>8</sup>*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup>"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

<sup>10</sup>*Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

<sup>11</sup>*Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

<sup>12</sup>*When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.*

<sup>13</sup>*Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in*

*the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—<sup>14</sup>to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup>“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—<sup>16</sup>the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”*

*<sup>17</sup>From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

*<sup>18</sup>As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” <sup>20</sup>At once they left their nets and followed him.*

*<sup>21</sup>Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them,<sup>22</sup>and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

*<sup>23</sup>Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup>News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. <sup>25</sup>Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.*

**Key Observation.** Jesus is depicted as both human and divine right from the outset of his ministry.

**Understanding the Word.** The prelude to Jesus’ ministry is the story of his wilderness temptation. There are several important keys to understanding this story: (1) Jesus is being tempted as the divine Son of God, one who is both divine and human; (2) when the Son of God took on a human nature, he had to accept the normal limitations of human beings—limitations of time, space, knowledge, power, and mortality; (3) when Jesus was tempted, he could have called on his divine nature to deal with the problem, but instead he chose to use the two resources we all have to use to deal with temptations and problems—the Word of God and the Spirit of God; and (4) the word *peirasmos* can refer to either a tempting or a testing. Basically, a temptation is Satan’s attempt to destroy someone’s character, whereas a test from God is an attempt

to strengthen someone's good character. For this reason, when we get to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:13 we should read it: "Do not put us to the test, but rather deliver us from the Evil One." This is probably a prayer that Jesus himself, in fact, was praying while dealing with his trial in the wilderness. God tempts no one and cannot be tempted (James 1:13)!

The three temptations increase in severity—a temptation to satisfy one's hunger when one has been fasting for forty days, a temptation to demonstrate his divine identity by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and commanding angels to catch him, and finally a temptation to worship the Dark Lord, the Devil, and thereby achieve the good end of world rulership by Jesus, by entirely the wrong means. Jesus responds by citing Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13. Satan meanwhile was able to quote only a snippet of a song—Psalm 91:11–12. From a Jewish point of view, the Law had far more authority and clout than one of the songs in the Psalter, and so Satan loses the Scripture battle and his prey slips through his fingers.

According to both Mark and Matthew, Jesus' ministry doesn't really begin in earnest until after John has been arrested by Herod Antipas, and also after Jesus' baptism and temptation. In Matthew, the break with the past seems very clear because Jesus leaves his home in Nazareth and makes Capernaum by the sea his home base for his ministry (Matthew 4:13). Matthew punctuates this by quoting Isaiah 9:1–2. Jesus then proclaims initially a message much the same as John's—repent for the kingdom of God is at hand (cf. Matthew 3:2; 4:17). Matthew, however, prefers the word "heaven" to the word "God" in this phrase, though he is talking about the very same thing—the inbreaking of God's final saving activity in the ministry of Jesus. Jews like our Evangelist sought to avoid misusing the sacred name of God by using "heaven" as an indirect reference.

The Greek word *baseleia*, too often translated "kingdom," requires some comment. In English, the word "kingdom" is a noun that always connotes a place. But the Greek word *baseleia* and the Aramaic word *malkuta* sometimes have a verbal sense referring to an activity and sometimes have a noun sense. Whenever Jesus uses this word in the present tense, he is not referring to a place, he is referring to an activity. But when he is speaking of it in a future tense, and talks about inheriting or entering the *baseleia/malkuta*, he does indeed mean a place, a place he tells the disciples will one day come on earth as it already is in heaven. In short, the word should be translated "dominion" because in English one can have dominion over someone (verbal sense), or

enter a dominion (noun sense). So when Jesus says “repent for the dominion is at hand,” he means the final divine saving activity has just invaded your space and you’d better repent!

In Matthew 4:18–22, Jesus calls four fishermen to become disciples (*mathetes* means “learners”). These are two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, and the Zebedee brothers, James and John. From the outset, Jesus announces to these fishermen that they will still be fishing, if they follow him, only they will be fishing for followers, for human beings.

According to the summary at the end of the chapter in Matthew 4:23–25, Jesus quickly gains a reputation as a teacher, preacher, and especially as a healer, for people were bringing the sick and impaired to him from all over the region—not just Galilee, but also from Syria and the Decapolis, the Greek cities which surrounded Galilee. Thus, the chapter ends describing the huge crowds Jesus was drawing, but as Matthew will emphasize, Jesus’ main ministry was teaching and preaching the good news of salvation. Healing the body was good, but giving a person the gift of everlasting life was far more important, and Jesus concentrated on the latter. His main mission was to let people know that God’s final saving activity was now happening—through him. He did this through his words and deeds.

1. How do Jesus’ temptations provide a model for dealing with temptation in our lives?
2. What were Jesus’ priorities in his ministry?

## WEEK ONE

# GATHERING DISCUSSION OUTLINE

- A. Open session in prayer. Ask that God would astonish us anew with fresh insight from his Word and transform us into the disciples that Jesus desires us to become.
- B. View video for this week's readings.
- C. What were key insights or takeaways that you gained from your reading during the week and from watching the video commentary? In particular, how did these help you to grow in your faith and understanding of Scripture? What parts of the Bible lesson or study raised questions for you?
- D. Discuss questions selected from the daily readings.
  - 1. **KEY OBSERVATION:** This Gospel's distinctive portrait of Jesus focuses on Jesus as God's Wisdom come in person (Immanuel) and as a wise teacher.  
**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Why do all the Gospel writers, and Matthew in particular, spend so little time on Jesus' birth and early life and focus so heavily on his final days?
  - 2. **KEY OBSERVATION:** While human ancestry matters, what matters more is being born of God.  
**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** What is odd about the genealogy in Matthew 1, and how do we explain its peculiar features?



3. **KEY OBSERVATION:** The traditional Christmas story needs an extreme makeover if it is to be in agreement with what Matthew and Luke actually say happened.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** From the start of the story, Jesus' life seems marked by danger and even possible scandal. Since this was true for Jesus, how should we evaluate the trials and tribulations in our own lives?

4. **KEY OBSERVATION:** A private revelation to Jesus of his unique identity in Mark's Gospel becomes a public declaration of that identity in Matthew at Jesus' baptism.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** Why did Jesus allow himself to be baptized with John's repentance baptism?

5. **KEY OBSERVATION:** Jesus is depicted as both human and divine right from the outset of his ministry.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** How do Jesus' temptations provide a model for dealing with temptation in our lives?

- E. As the study concludes, consider specific ways that this week's Bible lesson invites us to grow and calls us to change. How do this week's scriptures call us to think differently? How do they challenge us to change in order to align ourselves with God's work in the world? What specific actions should we take to apply the insights of the lesson into our daily lives? What kind of person does our Bible lesson call us to become?
- F. Close session with prayer. Emphasize God's ongoing work of transformation in our lives in preparation for loving mission and service in the world. Pray for missing class members as well as for persons whom we need to invite to join our study.