

PROMISES KEPT

# THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

**MARK DEVER**

FOREWORD BY JOHN MACARTHUR

“Here is a vigorous, juicy, engaging, life-centered, God-honoring set of sermons, brilliantly over-viewing the entire New Testament: a truly rich resource from which to benefit and borrow. Dever is a Puritan in twenty-first-century clothing, and it shows.”

J. I. PACKER

Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

“Dever knows that Christians cannot be powerfully influenced by the Bibles they do not know. So here is the antidote: a biblical flyover that reveals the contours and glories of the New Testament landscape so that it becomes familiar geography to the soul. This book will grace many lives.”

R. KENT HUGHES

Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“In our transient age, one of the pressing responsibilities of the faithful expository preacher is to, within a reasonably short span of years, walk his congregation through the whole canon of Scripture. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through preaching one-sermon whole-Bible-book overviews. Mark Dever is a master at this, and his gifts (first given to his own flock) are now here made available to preachers and congregants everywhere who want a thorough survey of the New Testament literature, not in the form of a scholarly introduction, but instead as a pastoral overview from the heart of a preacher who wants his people to know and live the truth. These expositions are theologically rich, biblically faithful, loaded with superb introductions, illustrations, and applications, and a model for how to preach didactically, practically, apologetically, and evangelistically all at once.”

J. LIGON DUNCAN III

Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Whether you are a pastor seeking to preach the ‘whole counsel of God’ or simply an individual wanting to understand your whole Bible, this unique and invaluable resource provides a wealth of insight that will serve you for years to come. We can never know our Bibles too well or preach them too fully. This wonderful book will help individual Christians and pastors do both.”

C. J. MAHANEY

Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville

“This outstanding series of bird’s-eye studies of the New Testament books will enable all Christians to feed deeper from God’s Word and equip teachers to feed others. They expand the mind, warm the heart, and challenge the will.”

VAUGHAN ROBERTS

Rector, St. Ebbe’s Church, Oxford, England

author, *God’s Big Picture*

“Is biblical exposition a lost art? Not if this book is any indication. Dr. Mark E. Dever is a masterful expositor who combines stellar scholarship with a tremendous ability to communicate God’s revealed truth. These sermons and essays represent more than brief introductions to the books of the New Testament. Mark Dever helps draw the reader into the text and texture of each book, while providing a constant frame of reference that sees the New Testament not only as a collection of books but as a book in itself—telling the Christian story and grounding the church in God’s truth. This book is a gem and it belongs on every Christian’s bookshelf.”

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Many Bible readers know individual verses and sometimes even chapters but often do not see the message of books as a whole. They are familiar with individual trees while failing to see the forest. They are in great danger of misinterpreting the parts of the Bible they read because they do not see the entire structure of a Gospel like John or an epistle like Ephesians. Mark Dever fills a gaping need with his sermons on each of the individual books. Readers will be given a vision of the landscape of each of the New Testament books. Pastors will see the importance of preaching sermons that cover an entire book. All will be strengthened by the biblical truth, the insightful introductions, and the relevant application found in this work.”

THOMAS R. SCHREINER

James Buchanan Harrison Professor

of New Testament Interpretation,

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The heart of biblical preaching is exposition: explaining what the text of Scripture is saying and applying it. But sometimes this approach is allowed to degenerate into laborious verse-by-verse expositions in which the larger view of the forest easily becomes lost to the minute details of the trees. This book provides an encouragement for another way which complements the systematic exposition of whole units of the biblical literature. Mark Dever’s approach is thematic without ignoring the literary and theological structure of the books and is thus a stimulus to doctrinal preaching. This is not only a book for preachers but a challenging read for all who listen to sermons.”

GRAEME GOLDSWORTHY

Former Lecturer in Old Testament,

Moore Theological College

**THE MESSAGE OF  
THE NEW TESTAMENT**

OTHER CROSSWAY BOOKS BY MARK DEVER

*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*  
(2000, 2004)

*The Deliberate Church*  
(with Paul Alexander, 2005)

# **THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**P R O M I S E S   K E P T**

**MARK DEVER**

**FOREWORD BY  
JOHN MACARTHUR**

*The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept*

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To my collaborators in the gospel

MATT SCHMUCKER,

BRUCE KEISLING,

and AARON MENIKOFF,

*who, like Phoebe, have*

*“been a great help to many people, including me”*

R O M A N S 16:2





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# FOREWORD

**THERE IS, OF COURSE,** more than one valid approach to biblical exposition. When the preacher surveys a long section of biblical text, he is able to expound on large ideas and present the grand flow of biblical logic in a panoramic way. When he deals with smaller sections in more careful detail, he can home in on specific issues and explain them in greater depth. There are advantages and disadvantages to both styles. Both methods have a legitimate place in biblical preaching.

From time to time, I have done surveys of large passages of Scripture. I once preached through the entire New Testament in six day-long sessions in one week for a group of Russian pastors. On other occasions, I have surveyed whole chapters, groups of chapters, or entire books of Scripture in a single sermon. (One of the most popular sermons I have preached was a single message covering the whole book of Revelation, titled “A Jet Tour Through Revelation.”)

Yet these types of overviews have been the rare exceptions to my normal approach. For most of my ministry, as I have preached through the New Testament, I have given careful attention to words, phrases, and verses, usually devoting whole sermons to a select phrase from a single verse. That is how I have worked my way systematically through book after book of Scripture: phrase by phrase, verse by verse, line upon line, precept upon precept. By that method, it has taken me thirty-five years to cover most of the New Testament, and I am not yet finished.

In stark contrast, Mark Dever used twenty-eight sermons in the early years of his ministry at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. to preach through the entire New Testament—one sermon for each of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and one extra sermon that surveys the whole New Testament. He is uniquely and supremely gifted to teach in this manner.

Fortunately for us, Pastor Dever’s sermons on the whole New Testament have been collected in this book, and I think it will give you a new and deep appreciation for how valuable the overview approach can be. This is a won-

derful survey of the entire New Testament, unfolding its big picture—and the central themes of each book—with amazing clarity and accuracy. I found the book hard to put down.

Having done relatively little of this type of survey-style exposition, I know how difficult it is to do well. Mark Dever does it superbly. He covers a broad range of topics, always succinctly, accurately, and with remarkable care and clarity. He is very good at seeing the big picture, which is not always an easy thing to do. But he makes it look easy, and the result is a valuable tool that I know will help thousands to understand the New Testament more accurately.

I am grateful for Mark Dever's obvious love for God's Word, his commitment to handling Scripture carefully, his willingness to take the truth of the Bible seriously, and his ability to teach it so clearly. All of that comes through powerfully in this book. My prayer is that the Lord will bless these pages to the hearts of thousands of readers.

—John MacArthur  
Pastor, Grace Community Church,  
Sun Valley, California  
President, The Master's College and Seminary

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**RICHARD SIBBES** once observed, “what the heart liketh best, the mind studieth most.”<sup>1</sup> When I realized how large this volume was going to be, I wondered who would read it. Regardless of who belongs to that company, I know that I have been helped by many others to understand and present the truth of the Bible through these sermons.

Four groups of people especially require my thanks for helping me with these sermons. First and most immediately are the editors, and chief among them is Jonathan Leeman. After many friends had transcribed these sermons, it fell to Jonathan to spend months comparing those transcripts to my own manuscripts. Jonathan—a friend and brother in the ministry—has used his own understanding of the Bible, his theological education, and his experience as an editor to make these sermons tighter, clearer, more accessible, and better for you the reader. You owe him more than you know!

But these sermons had a long life before Jonathan ever saw them, and that brings me to another group of people that require my thanks: the congregation and especially the elders of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church with whom I have been privileged to serve. The congregation as a whole has been a wonderful family to preach to. And each one of my brother elders has had a careful and loving influence on me and my preaching. Chief among those who have affected my preaching would have to be Bill Behrens, and this for two reasons: first, he has given his time Saturday after Saturday for years now to sit down and make my sermons better; second, it was Bill who encouraged me to make sure the gospel was in every sermon. If the gospel is clearly present in my preaching, it was not the schools I attended who made it so. No, Bill was the human instrument God used in this.

Another group of people that God used to encourage me were those teachers who—through their books—taught me to look at the great sweep of biblical history. Chief among these authors would have to be Graeme

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, Works, I.89.

Goldsworthy and Bill Dumbrell. Along with Don Carson, they have helped supply whatever biblical theology informs these sermons.

Finally and most profoundly, I must thank my family. Sermons for me happen at inconvenient times, and Connie, Annie, and Nathan have surely been inconvenienced most. In eternity, I pray that all of us will feel that the inconveniences were worthwhile and the time well spent. In the meantime, I express my love and thanks.

Many others deserve thanks. A special thanks to Duncan Rein, who first showed enthusiasm and gave time and effort to get my sermons into print. Bill Deckard and the good folks at Crossway have believed in this project and shepherded it through to completion. Various friends have encouraged me. I could go on thanking others who have contributed, but the responsibility for these sermons lies finally with me. Credit for good I happily and rightly share with others; fault for what is amiss truly must be my own. They are now offered to you with the prayer that your heart will “best like” God and so your mind will most be given to studying his Word.

—Mark Dever  
Capitol Hill Baptist Church  
Washington, D.C.  
June 2005

# INTRODUCTION: GETTING A WINDOW SEAT

**SOME THINGS CAN BE** seen only from a great height. Go to the highest point in a city and what do you see? Sweeping vistas that both delight and inform. “Wow, look how far the city stretches out.” “Oh, that’s how the street system works.”

If you are anything like me, you love these views. When out-of-town friends visit, I like to take them to the roof of our church building. Looking out, we can see the Capitol Hill neighborhood as well as numerous landmarks of both Capitol Hill and the city of Washington. The view reminds me of the unusual community God has placed us in. And by this view we are thrilled and challenged and inspired.

Back in college, I enjoyed reading my Bible and praying out on a dormitory fire-escape that had a good view of the campus.

The window seat on an airplane is also a must for me. “That’s Chicago!” “Look at the Grand Canyon!” “Did you have any idea this area had so many lakes?”

I remember the first time I flew back to America with my family after living in England for a few years. Once the airplane was over the American landscape, I peered out the window and was reminded of how vast and unpeopled the American continent is, especially compared to the quilt-work cultivation you see when you glance out the window over Great Britain. Seeing the two landscapes from a great height put them into a different perspective and gave me a far richer understanding of them.

That is what I hoped these “overview sermons” would do for my congregation, and what I hope they will do for you.

When you compare these sermons to most sermons you have heard, I think you will find them unusual. Sermons typically come in a couple of varieties. Some people preach *topical* sermons, which focus on a particular topic such



as money, parenting, heaven, or repentance. The sermons in this book are not topical in that sense.

Other people preach *expositional* sermons. An expositional sermon takes a portion of Scripture, explains it, and then applies it to the life of the congregation. The sermon text might be something like “Honor your father and mother” or “Jesus wept” or Ephesians 2:1-10 or Psalm 23.

The sermons in this book are more expositional than topical, but they are expositional with a difference. Rather than looking at particular Scripture passages through a microscope, we are looking down from an airplane.

Some expositional preachers may feel that their seriousness in preaching God’s Word shows itself in how many years they spend in one particular book. Maybe you have heard someone say, “Our church just spent eighteen weeks in Jude!” or a pastor testifying, “When I arrived at the church two-and-a-half years ago, I began in Matthew chapter 1, and we are just now getting to the Sermon on the Mount.” Then, of course, there are the Puritan ministers like Joseph Caryl or William Gouge, who spent several decades in Job and Hebrews, respectively! Can you imagine being in Job on Sunday morning for decades?

Do not misunderstand me. God’s Word is inspired and worth a lifetime of study. We can legitimately preach for decades on any book of the Bible. God’s Word contains beauties to be seen through careful consideration that the more impatient among us will never see. I do worry that such preaching runs the danger of becoming topical preaching under the guise of expositional preaching. It can also deprive people of learning about all the different parts of God’s Word.

There is another kind of expositional preaching that is, I think, more rare, but that also serves the church well. This is what I call an “overview sermon,” like the ones contained in this volume. An overview sermon attempts to give the burden of one particular Bible book in a single message. If a typical expositional sermon makes the point of the biblical text the point of the sermon, an overview sermon simply makes the point of a whole book the point of the sermon. I have preached these sermons based on the conviction that aspects of God and his plans can be seen most clearly not only when studying the microscopic structure of one phrase in one verse but when examining a book as a whole.

Now, preparing these sermons is more difficult than preparing a sermon on smaller portions of Scripture. But like an invigorating hike up a mountain, they provide views that are rarely seen, views breathtaking in their beauty and stunning in their usefulness.

I cannot remember when I first thought of preaching sermons like this. It

may have been when I was discipling a recent Muslim convert and asked him to teach me the book of Hebrews in three meetings (I thought he would learn it better by teaching me). At each meeting, I would read a sentence or two from Hebrews and ask him where the verse fit into the book's argument. I did not so much care if he could tell me chapter and verse references; I was more concerned about whether he understood the overall flow of the book, and how any one idea from the book fit into that flow.

As we worked through Hebrews this way, I found that an overview was beneficial not just for my friend but also for me as a pastor. When I preach a passage like Ephesians 2, do I approach the chapter in context? That is, am I using chapter 2 in the same way Paul uses chapter 2 within his larger argument as it unfolds in Ephesians?

The Hebrews overview also got me to thinking about my congregation. I want the members of my church to become so familiar with the books of the Bible that they know how to turn there as easily as they turn to popular Christian books. So when members of the church struggle with conflict, I will encourage them to read the book on conflict resolution by Ken Sande, but I also want them to have been trained by an overview sermon to immediately ask themselves, "I wonder what James says about this situation?" When members want to learn about the Christian life, let them read C. S. Lewis and J. I. Packer; but let them also think to read 1 Peter and 1 John! When people struggle with discouragement, by all means read Ed Welch on depression; but also read Revelation! When people worry they are slipping into legalism, I hope they know to reach for Martin Luther or C. J. Mahaney on the cross-centered life; but I also hope they know to reach for Galatians. I am even happy for the congregation to read Dever on the church, but I would prefer for them to know Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians.

Obviously, I can preach this kind of sermon in my own church only sixty-six times. This volume presents the twenty-seven sermons I preached on the twenty-seven books of the New Testament (with one more sermon thrown in that I preached on the New Testament as a whole). Hopefully, these sermons are not just dry lectures; nor, hopefully, are they just random thoughts on my favorite verses from each book. Rather, I preached each of these sermons with the conviction that they were genuine expositions of God's Word—except that the passages were a little larger than the passages I normally expound. In each sermon, I attempted to present the weight and balance of the Bible book, with applications that represent the original thrust of the book but that also applied to our congregation at the time I first preached the sermon. In recognition of how time-bound the sermons are, we have included the date on which each sermon was first preached at the beginning of every chapter. Yet in recognition

of the continuing relevance of God's Word, these sermons are offered for your consideration as well.

I hope you are encouraged by how the various Gospels hold up the life of Jesus Christ, or how Paul presents the church in 1 Corinthians, or what Peter says is normal for Christian lives in 1 Peter, or what the elderly prisoner John perceives in his triumphant vision of God's sovereignty over the world in Revelation.

What a benefit I have known in my own life from preparing these studies! How they have familiarized me with the arguments of the various books, so that I understand each of their parts more in context! How I pray they have blessed our own congregation!

Now, we commit them to you, with our prayers and wishes that you, too, will be surprised, delighted, and edified as long-familiar books take on new aspects of coherence and power and conviction.

—Mark Dever  
Capitol Hill Baptist Church  
Washington, D.C.  
May 2005



## **THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: PROMISES KEPT**

PROMISES KEPT

CHRIST

COVENANT PEOPLE

CREATION

CONCLUSION

# THE MESSAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: PROMISES KEPT

## PROMISES KEPT<sup>1</sup>

In 1858, the Illinois legislature elected Stephen A. Douglas to the office of U.S. senator instead of Abraham Lincoln. Afterward, a sympathetic friend asked Lincoln how he felt, to which he responded, “Well, a little bit like the boy who stubbed his toe; I am too big to cry and too badly hurt to laugh.” As a pastor on Capitol Hill, I am struck every election season by how one person’s political victory is someone else’s political loss. No matter who wins an election, a vast number of people—up to half—are disappointed. People become so involved in partisan politics that election seasons can be a time of great hope for some and, just as surely, great disappointment for others.

Sometimes we can bear disappointment well. Some people are so given over to disappointment they actually seem to thrive on it. Like the character Eeyore in the Winnie-the-Pooh tales, they take comfort in looking for the dark cloud around every silver lining. For most of us, however, disappointment can feel like a sharp thrust to the heart. We do what we can just to get by.

Did you ever see the movie *Shadowlands*—the story about C. S. Lewis’s late-in-life marriage to Joy Davidman? In an opening scene of the movie, Lewis is sitting amid several of his students at Oxford and he refers to a piece of poetry that mentions the image of a perfect rosebud. Lewis asks what the image of the bud represents. One of the students responds, “Love?”

“What kind of love?” says Lewis impatiently.

“Untouched,” says a student.

“Unopened, like a bud?” says another student.

“Yes, more?”

Another student says anxiously, “Perfect love.”

“What makes it perfect?” says Lewis, “Come on, wake up.”

“Is it the courtly ideal of love?”

Now, that is a little inside Lewis joke, because Lewis had written a thesis

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally preached on September 6, 1996, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

on the courtly ideal of love. Still, Lewis replies, “Okay, what is that, though? What is the courtly ideal’s one essential quality?”

The students are quiet. They don’t know the answer. So Lewis himself answers: “Unattainability. The most intense joy lies not in the having, but in the desiring. The delight that never fades. Bliss that is eternal is only yours when what you most desire is just out of reach.”

Well, is that true? It sounds fine as an artistic and romantic ideal, but is life like that? Is the only lasting bliss the bliss of desire rather than fulfillment? If so, how can we have hope without the possibility of actually attaining that for which we hope? After all, the pain of disappointment is acute because the object of our desires comes close and then we miss it. Whether it is a lost election, a collapsed business scheme, a disproved theory, a canceled vacation, a piece of defeated legislation, a failed job prospect, or a departed loved one, we understand what the writer of the proverb means when he says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick!” (Prov. 13:12). In other words, we cannot overlook what our hearts are set upon.

What do you set your hopes upon? If you cannot answer that question, you may not be able to benefit from the rest of this study. It is crucial for you and me both to answer that question: What are our hopes set upon? Many of our problems come from attaching our hopes to things that were not made to bear them. Some things hold out great promise but they prove to be passing fancies as life goes on. Other things are actually dangerous and destructive. In this old world, it is not only in politics that promises made are not necessarily promises kept.

Of course, this is where God comes in. As the one who made us, he knows how we work best. He knows what we should hope for, and he has set those very things in the Bible so that we can fix our hopes upon them. In the companion to this volume, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made*,<sup>2</sup> we looked at the “big picture” of the Old Testament. Now we will do a similar overview of the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, we saw that God created the earth and then patiently bore with a people who rebelled against him. Beginning with Abraham, he chose a special people of his own. Those people, the nation of Israel, waxed and waned for almost two millennia until their once high hopes almost vanished when their nation was crushed a final time by an alien invader—the mighty Roman Empire. When this final defeat occurred, they felt disappointed to the point of heartsickness and despair. Would their deliverer never come? Would they never be restored to the fellowship with God for which they longed? Would the world never be put right?

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006).

The New Testament tells the story of how all the promises made in the Old Testament were actually kept. And as we understand what God is doing in the grand scheme of history, our own disappointments and hopes will begin to fall into perspective.

In order to view the whole New Testament, we will look first at *Christ*, then at God's *covenant people*, and finally at the renewal of all of *creation*. Think of three concentric circles. First, we focus on Christ; then we expand outward to the new covenant people; and, finally, we take in all creation.

## CHRIST

The first question that must be addressed concerning the New Testament is, did the deliverer whom God promised in the Old Testament actually come? The New Testament answers that Old Testament question with a resounding yes! And he is not just an ordinary human deliverer, he is God come in the flesh. The one and only Son, Jesus, perfectly displayed the Father, so that God's people might know him and be delivered from their sins. The New Testament squarely focuses on Christ. He is the heart of it all. He is the center of its message.

God has always had a plan for creation. Before history even began, the New Testament teaches, God planned to send his Son as a human to die for the sins of his people. After God created the universe and humankind, Adam and Eve rebelled against God's rightful rule. God then called a special people to himself in Abraham. Through Abraham's descendent Jacob, or Israel, the family grew to be a great nation. The majority of this nation was then destroyed by invading armies because of its sin, while the survivors were taken captive, exiled, dispersed, and only partly regathered from exile. Yet God's plan remained firmly in place through all of this. In this tattered remnant would be found the coming deliverer, the anointed one—in Hebrew, the "Messiah"; in Greek, the "Christ."

The collection of twenty-seven books that comprise the New Testament begins with four accounts of the life of this Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. Look at the contents page in your Bible. Under the New Testament heading you will see four books at the top of the list—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Following these four is a fifth—Acts. All five of these books argue that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. These books are documentaries, as it were, of Jesus' life, and they make the case for his Messiahship. They presented to their readers the tremendous news that the promised deliverer had actually come! The one for whom God's people were waiting had come! Where Adam and Israel had failed and been unfaithful, Jesus proved faithful. He survived the temptations. He lived a life without sin. Furthermore, Jesus fulfilled God's



promise to Moses of a coming prophet (Deut. 18:15, 18-19). Jesus fulfilled God's promise to David of a coming king (2 Sam. 7:12-13). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the divine Son of Man witnessed by Daniel (Dan. 7:13-14). All of these promises and more were fulfilled, say these four Gospels, in Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, according to John chapter 1, Jesus was the Word of God made flesh—God himself living in human form.

Turning to these Gospels individually, we note that Matthew was probably written for a Jewish community. He stresses Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, such as the many prophecies about his birth. Matthew includes five major teaching sections, each of which shows Jesus to be the great prophet promised by Moses.

Mark chronicles, perhaps, the apostle Peter's recollections. The book does not say that but various things in the book make us think Mark compiled Peter's recollections about Jesus for the Roman Christians, maybe around the time Peter was killed for being a Christian. Seeing the first apostles killed, the church may have wanted to commit these things to writing. Mark's account is the shortest of all the Gospels and it may be the oldest.

Luke, the third Gospel, is sometimes called the Gospel to the Gentiles. Luke stresses that the Messiah has come not just for the Jewish people but for all the nations of the world, and he puts to good use the Old Testament prophecies that make this promise. Luke also wrote a second volume, the book of Acts. Acts is "part two" of Luke's work. It shows how Jesus actively expanded his church through his Spirit. So even after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, his work continued as the church grew and as God established this new society. Luke concluded his narrative with Paul imprisoned—but still ministering—in Rome.

The fourth book is the Gospel of John, which may be the most beloved of the Gospels. It is different from the other three Gospels in some ways. It does not teach a different theology but it has an especially clear emphasis on both Jesus' identity as the Messiah and the fact that the Messiah is God himself. John explicitly states this purpose for his Gospel in chapter 20: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [that is, the Messiah], the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

These are the four Gospels and the book of Acts. They begin the New Testament by showing us that the promises made about the Messiah in the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Christ.<sup>3</sup> They proclaim the good news that God has kept his promises to deliver not just his Old Testament people

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<sup>3</sup> Among many other designations, Jesus is also described as the New Adam (2 Cor. 15:45-47); the Righteous One (2 Pet. 2:15; Acts 3:14; 1 John 2:1); greater than Moses (John 1:17; 5:45-46; Heb. 3:1-6); and greater than David (Matt. 22:41-45; Acts 2:29-36). Abraham also rejoiced to see his day (John. 8:56-58).

but you and me as well, if we repent of our sins and follow his Son. If the collection of the Gospels and Acts strikes you as just a few more musty old history books, you have not read them very well. Read them again. I think you will find there is more than you suspect, even as I did when I began reading them carefully as an agnostic. The Gospels show that Jesus the Messiah is not just the Lord of people who lived two thousand years ago but is the Lord that you need in your life.

## **COVENANT PEOPLE**

This brings us to our second concentric circle for understanding the overall message of the New Testament. Christ is at the heart of the New Testament's message, and then we move outward to his special covenant people. Glimpses of Christ's work among his people can be seen in the Gospels, especially among the disciples. Yet it really picks up momentum in the book of Acts and then in the New Testament Epistles. God himself took on human form in order to display his image in Jesus Christ, as we will consider in the Gospels. Yet the Old Testament teaches that God made human beings—all of us—in his image to display his image to creation. So as we read along in the New Testament, the transforming, image-clarity work of Christ among his special covenant people emerges as a second dominant theme.

Now, I know the word “covenant” is not used very often these days. If anything, it sounds like a legal term. In our study of the Old Testament, we thought about the “covenant” language used in ancient Israel and we found that it is not cold, legal language; it is the language of relationship. Then in the Gospels, Jesus used the language of covenant when he shared the Last Supper with his disciples: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). Covenants are used to form new relationships, which is why Jesus came: to make a new relationship for his people with God, because that relationship had been destroyed by sin.

Jesus said very strangely, toward the beginning of John, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). At the time, he was standing in the temple in Jerusalem; but then he told his disciples he was talking about his body (2:21-22). He himself was the temple that would be destroyed and rebuilt. He would be the new meeting place for God and his people, just as the temple in Jerusalem had been in former days. He would be the mediator between God and man. As we have already considered, Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament promise that the Messiah would come as a prophet and a king. But in order to deliver his people from their sin and establish his new covenant, Jesus also fulfilled the promise that the Messiah would come as

a priest. Like the Levitical priests of the Old Testament, he would intercede between God and man with a blood sacrifice. The rescue needed by God's people, ultimately, was a rescue from their sins.

The Old Testament temple, priests, and sacrifices could not effectually accomplish (and were never intended to accomplish) that work of intercession and reconciliation, which brings us to the riddle of the Old Testament. In Exodus 34 God revealed himself as the Lord who "forgives wickedness" (see 34:7). Then in the same sentence, he said he "will not leave the guilty unpunished." The riddle is this: how can God "forgive wickedness" and yet "not leave the guilty unpunished"? The Levitical priests could not solve the riddle by sacrificing bulls and goats (Heb. 10:4). The answer is found, of course, in Jesus. Jesus came as priest, sacrifice, temple, and substitute, in order to intercede between God and man by taking upon his body God's punishment for sin. God could then forgive the wickedness of his people and yet ensure that their wickedness is punished. The New Testament provides the answer to the riddle posed in the Old. Jesus' death on the cross allowed God to both forgive and punish. Christ forms the new covenant—he reestablishes a relationship between God and his people—with his blood.

Not that the Old Testament did not foresee this. Through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD promised,

Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4-6).

Isaiah said these things centuries before the birth of Christ. Yet that is exactly what God did for us in Christ! It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus had meditated on the Isaiah passage and knew he would fulfill those very prophecies. So he taught his disciples, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). After his resurrection, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." He also told them,

“This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:27, 46-47).

Christ did not come for himself. He came for his people. As you read through the whole New Testament, you will not only find that Jesus is the Messiah, you will find what this means for you. As Paul wrote, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). Christ came to make a people for himself.

One of the New Testament’s most amazing passages is Revelation 5. The apostle John is given a vision of the great throne room of God in heaven. As John looks, God’s decrees for the rest of history are brought into the room on a scroll. John desperately wants to know what history contains. What has God decreed? But the scroll is sealed, so he begins to weep. An elder approaches John and says, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5). John looks up to see this lion of the tribe of Judah, this mighty king of the beasts, but what does he see? “Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne” (5:6). The ferocious lion that God sends to devour his enemies is a Lamb that he sends to be slain. It is not the way you or I would have rescued a people. If we had been made director and producer of the Messianic coming, we would have sent somebody who would clean up in the polls, who would win all his battles, and who would bring everything our flesh desired. But that is not the way God did it. The enemy to be devoured is sin. So he sent a sacrifice to die on our behalf. The lion of the tribe of Judah is the Lamb that was slain.

God would be completely justified to leave us all eternally separated from him in hell under the penalty of our sin, yet in his great love, God has not done that. He sent his Son, who came and lived a perfect life and who therefore deserved no wrath or punishment for sin. Christ died on the cross specifically to take the place of everyone who turns and trusts in him. In exchange for our sinfulness, we are given his holiness. In Christ, then, we are declared holy before God and are brought into a reconciled, everlasting relationship with him!

The very thing the letter of Hebrews says never happened in the Old Testament has now come to pass in the New. In the Old Testament, God’s people were only ceremonially clean. The covenant in the Old Testament was real, but partial. The prophets knew this and promised that a new covenant would come. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God said,

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their forefathers  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant,  
though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.  
“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel  
after that time,” declares the LORD.  
“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be my people. . . .  
For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:31-33, 34b).

Now, in the New Testament, God finally has a people who are not just ceremonially clean; the guilt of their sins has actually been removed because of Christ’s death on the cross.

As Christians, we are counted as completely righteous in Christ, and we are being made holy in our lives *today*, as attested to by our manner of living and interactions with one another. We are not perfect by any means. If you have any doubt about that, get a mirror. Nevertheless, we are growing and improving with the help of God, dealing with life in a way that brings him glory and honor, not pretending we have no disappointments, but knowing where to turn in those disappointments and where to set our hopes. God is making us his own, and we wait for the completion of his work. For on that day, we will be fully, finally, and personally holy in the way that we are now holy in Christ.

In all this, a Christian’s salvation is past, present, and future. So Paul can tell the Ephesian Christians they have been saved (Eph. 2:8-9), the Corinthian Christians they are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18), and the Roman Christians they shall be saved (Rom. 5:9). This accomplished, ongoing, and promised salvation distinguishes the covenanted people of God from the rest of humanity.

What all this means occupies almost the rest of the New Testament. If you look back at the table of contents for the New Testament, you will see the first four Gospels. Following these is the book of Acts, which is really the transition from these Gospels to the books about living as God’s people. In Acts, the

gospel expands outward from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and, with Paul's three missionary journeys, to the ends of the world. After Acts, the rest of the New Testament books are letters written to early Christians about what it means to live as the special covenant people of God, who are distinct from the rest of the world.

The first thirteen letters were written by the apostle Paul, a former rabbi and Pharisee who was remarkably converted by God while traveling to persecute some Christians "to their death," as he puts it (Acts 22:4). His letters are ordered in the New Testament from longest to shortest—first letters to churches and then letters to individuals. In his first letter, Romans, Paul explains that God has been faithful to his covenant through Christ. Through Christ, God has provided a righteousness for his people, which is accounted to us by faith, as was the case with Abraham.

Then 1 and 2 Corinthians were written to a church with a lot of troubles. The church lived within a very secular society, so Paul tried to help them sort out how to live holy, special, distinct lives in an unholy culture. You will find a lot of very interesting parts in these two letters, such as a famous chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13). In the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul passionately defends his own ministry.

If you want just the sharp edge of Paul's teaching, Galatians is a good summary. He is clear about what he is saying, and he is clear about what he is not saying.

Then in Ephesians Paul writes about the church God is creating. God had always planned to create the church, and it is a new society calling together both Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

Philippians—often called the happiest book in the New Testament because Paul does not seem to have a cross word to say—encourages its readers to rejoice in the Lord. It includes that beautiful hymn in chapter 2 describing how Christ, though being equal with God, made himself nothing and gave himself to die on the cross (Phil. 2:6-11).

Colossians is about Christ's supremacy over all, and some implications this has for our lives.

First and Second Thessalonians are two of Paul's earliest letters. Apparently, a number of people in Thessalonica had heard about Christ's second coming and, misunderstanding it, had quit their jobs. They were just hanging around like fanatics, waiting for God to do something. So Paul writes and tells them to get a job.

Next are Paul's personal letters, written to his individual friends. Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to Timothy, a young minister he disciplined and trained.

The letters were intended to encourage this young associate in his work as an elder. Second Timothy is probably the last letter Paul ever wrote.

The letter to Titus was written to a ministerial friend Paul left on the island of Crete to establish elders in the new churches and to complete other unfinished business.

Finally, Paul wrote a very short letter to Philemon, which you could easily read in the next five minutes. Philemon was the owner of an escaped slave who had found Paul and become a believer. It is interesting to see how Paul deals with a slave owner.

The rest of the New Testament is comprised of a second set of letters, none of which were written by Paul. There are nine of them, and again they are basically in order of length. The author of the first letter in this second set, Hebrews, is unknown. Hebrews helps us understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as well as what it means for us to be the new covenant people of God. Evidently some Christians were considering going back to some version of the older covenant God had made with Moses. After all, these plain Christian assemblies meeting in people's homes, devoid of any great ceremony, felt unimpressive. Back in the temple in Jerusalem, there was incense, sacrifices, fancy garments, great horns, and so forth. All that felt special, maybe even religiously satisfying. So people were beginning to turn back. The author of Hebrews responded by saying, "Look very carefully. Under the old covenant, you have priests who died because of their own sin. And their endless sacrifices of bulls and goats only made people ceremonially clean. But look at what you have in Christ! The eternal, sinless Son of God gave himself once forever to make his people truly clean and holy. The blood of the former sacrifices merely points to him."

James is a very practical letter. He describes how to live the Christian life with a practical concern for others.

First and Second Peter are relevant for the church today because they were written to Christians who were beginning to undergo difficulties for being Christians. This confused them. I think they were assuming, "If I am living rightly, won't life go well?" Peter responded, "Actually, if you look at the life of Jesus, you will see this is not a good assumption. In fact, living rightly can mean life does not go well, at least not in this world." Both of these letters encourage Christians to persevere in the faith, with Christ as their example. The second letter also warns about the danger of false teachers.

First, Second, and Third John are three brief letters written to encourage Christians in their lives of love and faithful obedience to the Lord.

Jude is a brief letter, similar to 2 Peter, warning against false and immoral teachers.

These are the New Testament's instructions for us about what it means to be the covenant people of God. In the New Testament, the promises made to the holy people in the Old Testament are kept in God's new covenant people. If we are Christians, they are kept in us today.

## **CREATION**

In many church services, you will hear the prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Have you ever wondered what that means? It falls off our tongues so easily. Many of us have said it since childhood.

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Consider for a moment the kind of people who carefully tend their hearts because they want to avoid hurt or disappointment. The only hopes they allow themselves are the hopes they are able to make happen. The only promises they hear or make to themselves are the promises they have the power to keep. Yet limiting your hopes in this fashion is the complete opposite of Christianity. If you tend your heart in this way, I encourage you to look at the gospel. As Christians, Peter says, "we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13), and this is entirely beyond our power to effect. No elected party, no economic scheme, no job promotion, and no successful relationship can bring about the great thing we as Christians wait for. We wait for the fulfillment of our first and final hope: the whole world being put right, as God's plan in the New Testament extends from Christ to his covenant people to the outermost circle—his whole creation. In other words, we wait for his kingdom to come and his will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

This is what we find at the end of the New Testament in the book of Revelation. It is a letter too, but it is an unusual letter in which the apostle John describes a number of visions God gave him. In certain respects, John's apocalyptic letter picks up on the Old Testament prophetic tradition by focusing on great events that lie in store for the earth's inhabitants. More specifically, Revelation describes the consummation of God's people, in God's place, in right relationship to him. The church militant becomes the church triumphant—the victorious church in heaven. And the whole heavens and earth are re-created forever (see Rev. 21:1-4; 21:22-22:5).

The Bible does not present Christians as Platonists or Gnostics—people who think this world and material things do not matter, that only the spiritual afterlife matters. Throughout the book of Revelation and the whole New Testament, the biblical authors stress the bodily nature of the resurrection. Jesus was bodily resurrected, and his resurrection is called "the firstfruits." It



begins what we will experience in the final resurrection from the dead. We will be taken up to be with God forever, but that is no world-denying proposition. God's plan for the world does not exist on some ethereal plain, far away from concrete reality. There is an interesting verse in Revelation that reads, "The nations will walk by [Christ's] light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into" the city of heaven (Rev. 21:24). In the final consummation of creation, the kings of the earth will present their splendors and all the cultural grandeur of the world before the gathered heavenly assembly; and all these things will display God's glory as we discover what he meant for creation. Not only what Mark the preacher or Mary the Sunday school teacher brings will be counted worthwhile. Rather, the things you and I do in our daily lives in business, education, government, health care, or our families—if we have done them unto the Lord—will be presented and appear on the last day as adding to the luster of God's glory. These things are part of God's plan for the world. And here at the end, the holiness of God's people will finally be complete, as they are at home with him. John wrote in his first letter, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The end will be like the beginning, only better. The Garden of Eden, in some sense, will be restored. God will dwell with his people. The whole heavenly city is presented in Revelation as a perfect cube, which recalls the Most Holy Place in the Old Testament temple. The Most Holy Place, which represented the presence of God on earth, was also in the shape of a cube. Only now, this heavenly cube is not restricted to the high priests once a year, as in ancient Israel; all the children of God will enter his presence, and we will live there with him forever! That is how the book called the New Testament ends.

It is a good way for the New Testament to end, I think. It gives us as Christians great news to offer the world. We presently live in a time of waiting, but we wait with God and we wait for God. After all, Revelation was written by a man in his nineties who had been exiled on an island by the mightiest power on earth, the Roman Empire. At the time, Christians were being killed for their faith. He was utterly desperate and dependent upon God. Yet he was full of hope because his hope did not rest on external circumstances. It rested on the sovereign God who ruled above the Roman emperors. That's when the curtain of the New Testament drops.

God promises in Scripture that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of his glory, and the promise is certain to be kept in his new creation.

Promises made; promises kept.

## CONCLUSION

Of course, some disappointments have their uses. The ruins of our own cherished plans often become the steps we take toward the true good that God has waiting for us. Some of the very things you hope for right now are what God in his great love wants to pry from your fingers, so that you can receive what is better from him. Paul learned that when he prayed three times for God to remove the thorn from his flesh. God told Paul that his strength would be made perfect in Paul's weakness. So Paul rejoiced to become weak for the glory of God. And this is what we find in our own lives. When we cling to the world with all our might, we soon realize we cannot hold on. As Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36). God has something even better than the whole world for his children.

In the last paragraph of the last book of C. S. Lewis's series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis captures something of the nature of Christian hope. He writes, "And as Aslan spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."<sup>4</sup>

After considering the mysteries of God, his mercies to us in Christ, and the hope we have as his covenant children, Paul dissolves into doxology and says, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33).

So I hope I have been clear: the *point* of the New Testament, indeed, the *point* of the whole Bible, is that God has made promises to us, he has kept those promises to us, and we are called to trust him because he is the keeper of promises! God has revealed himself to humanity through his promises. And that is why faith is so important. At the end of the day, the Bible does not lie on the shelf like a passive object for us to investigate. At the end of the day, it turns and looks at us and says, will you believe and trust? Or as Lady Wisdom cries out in the book of Proverbs, "Who will trust? Who will follow? Who will believe what I say?"

God gives his Word and his promises to us. He calls us to trust his Word and to believe his promises. Adam and Eve did not believe in the Garden of

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<sup>4</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Collier, 1956), 183.

Eden. Jesus believed throughout his life, and particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane. And as you and I hear and believe God's Word, we are restored to the relationship with him for which we were made. This is the hope in which we can trust, because this hope will not disappoint. This is what the Bible—Old Testament and New—is all about.

***Let us pray:***

*Lord, we praise you that you have not left us alone, even though we asked you to get out of our lives. We praise you that you sent Jesus as the Messiah, and that he came not just to display your holiness and exclude us, but to incorporate us into your holiness and to make us your people. With love, mercy, and forgiveness he has come and told us of your love by giving himself completely, so that we might be made acceptable to you. Lord God, we praise you for the love you show us in Christ and for the people you are making for yourself. We pray that you will put in our hearts a hope that compels us to live as the new people you have made us to be, trusting you and your Word. Lord, you have given yourself fully for us. We pray that you would come and take our whole lives, and use them to your glory, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

***Questions for Reflection***

1. Have you ever been given or achieved something you had sought for a long time, only to find yourself disappointed? When? Why were you disappointed? Is there anything in this world worth desiring that is *not* that way?
2. What is the main argument of the four Gospels?
3. What does "Christ" mean? What does "Messiah" mean?
4. Explain the riddle of the Old Testament. Explain how Christ alone solves that riddle.
5. As we have seen, Jesus, the lion of the tribe of Judah, came to devour the enemy, sin. How was this lion able to devour this enemy?
6. What do the New Testament Epistles, generally speaking, attempt to accomplish?
7. What does it mean to refer to Christ as our "priest"? How does he act as our priest?

8. As we have seen, Christians are counted as perfectly righteous today, even though we are by no means perfect. Is this a contradiction? How does this work?

9. Earlier, we considered the kind of people who try to protect their hearts by hoping only for things that they have the power to control or make happen. Then we saw that Christianity calls for the exact opposite. How? Why?

10. Why is it significant that the heavenly city is shaped like a cube?

11. As we have considered, some of the very things you hope for right now are what God in his great love wants to pry from your fingers, so that you can receive what is better from him. What might he want to pry from your fingers? What dream, hope, ambition, demand, expectation, possession, person are you tightly clutching that he might ask you to surrender?

12. Surrendering the things we long for requires a kind of death—the death of a desire. And willfully choosing that death is hard to do. It requires us to believe—really believe!—that what God promises is even better. Can you remember a time in your life when God proved himself faithful to his promise of something better? Do you think he would do otherwise next time?

13. The end of Lewis's *The Last Battle* is marvelous, isn't it? A stanza in John Newton's hymn *Amazing Grace* evokes a similar sentiment when it begins, "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun . . ." Take a few moments to consider, what will all the things that have seemed so important to you over this last week look like in ten thousand years? Ten thousand years from now, what do you think you will want to have done this coming week?

14. In sixty seconds or less, what's the good news of Christianity?



**PART ONE**

**THE TRUTH  
ABOUT JESUS**

## **THE MESSAGE OF MATTHEW: JESUS, THE SON OF DAVID**

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY GOSPEL ACCOUNTS?

INTRODUCING MATTHEW

WHAT DOES THIS BOOK SAY?

WAS JESUS MORE NEW OR MORE JEW?

*Jesus the New*

*Jesus the Jew*

WHO IS JESUS?

*Jesus and Old Testament Figures*

*Jesus as Son of David*

*Jesus as Messiah*

*People's Response to Jesus*

CONCLUSION

# THE MESSAGE OF MATTHEW: JESUS, THE SON OF DAVID

## WHY ARE THERE SO MANY GOSPEL ACCOUNTS?<sup>1</sup>

This month, the world population is projected to reach 6 billion people for the first time ever. Out of that 6 billion, about 14 million people claim to be Jews, 22 million claim to be Sikhs, and 350 million claim to be Buddhists. Various new religions claim around 100 million adherents, and about 250 million people are adherents of various tribal religions. There are also supposed to be about 150 million atheists. Everyone I have mentioned so far, then, totals about 900 million people.

The statisticians who compiled these figures describe about 800 million people as nonreligious. They do not explain how they compiled that category. If these particular researchers have defined mild Confucianism and Shintoism not as religions but as life customs, the great bulk of these “nonreligious” must be Chinese and Japanese.

Of those that are left, about 800 million are Hindu, a little more than one billion are Muslim, and about two billion are professing Christians.

I wonder how you react to such statistics. Those of us who are professing Christians may see something of the great challenge still before us for reaching the unreached. Some less spiritual types may feel a vague reassurance, a strangely satisfied feeling that “our team is on top!” Some may feel a despair of ever knowing the truth for themselves. Such a great variety of perceptions of ultimate reality seals their case—that the whole world is as confused and divided as they are.

An inquiring historian appearing on the scene might well ask, where did this largest of all the world’s religions come from? Perhaps knowing a bit about

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally preached on June 6, 1999, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.



religion, the historian realizes that Christianity is not a political or military movement like Islam that can expand by the sword. (The Crusades were a failed error on the part of a minority.) Nor is Christianity simply the life customs and mythology of a populous culture, emerging slowly out of the mists of common practice and lore, like Hinduism.

Christianity burst onto the scene, like Minerva emerging fully formed from Zeus's head. True, our understanding of various doctrines has developed through the church's history, but we trace them all back to our one teacher, Jesus Christ. His life and teaching, his death and his victory over death are together the exploding nucleus which has propelled this faith across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the globe. It all began in him.

It is this One, easily the most influential figure ever to live, who will be the subject for our studies in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts—the section we have called “The Truth About Jesus.” To learn this truth, we will display one of the strange riches of the Christian faith: the accounts of four men who were contemporaries of Jesus—John, the disciple; Luke, the historian friend of the apostles; Mark, the young, well-placed friend in Jerusalem; and perhaps the strangest one of the lot, Matthew, the bureaucrat, the tax-collecting, pencil-pushing scribbler. Matthew was a tortured combination—Jewish by birth and Roman by employment. More important, he was one of the twelve disciples called by Jesus.

All four authors include in their accounts the same basic themes about the mission and message of Jesus, and you will find no disagreement between them. For example, our discussion of Mark is titled “Jesus, the Son of Man,” because this is a title Jesus uses to refer to himself that is very prominent in Mark's Gospel. But we should not conclude that “Son of Man” is not used in Matthew. Indeed, it is used about thirty times in Matthew.<sup>2</sup> And just one more example: where would an experienced Bible reader guess the following verse is from? “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” An experienced Bible reader may think this sounds like John's Gospel, but it is Matthew 11:27.

These four verbal portraits of Jesus clearly present a unified picture. They are talking about the same person. And yet the Bible provides four separate accounts for a reason. The Lord did not leave just one testimony. Each Gospel writer emphasizes slightly different themes, and we can learn something fresh

<sup>2</sup> See Matt. 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41; 16:13, 27-29; 17:9, 12, 22; 19:28; 20:18, 28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64.

about Jesus from each one. Ultimately, all four will enrich our understanding of Jesus himself.

## INTRODUCING MATTHEW

We begin where the New Testament begins, with Matthew, who presents the new with an understanding of its rootedness in the past. Everyone agrees that Matthew's Gospel was written in the decades immediately following the life of Jesus. Matthew's name is at the top of the book, but nowhere is Matthew named in the text itself. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the apostle Matthew was the author. From the earliest history of the church, other writers quoting from the text cite him as the author. And nothing in the book would lead us to think he did not write it. The book is written in fairly good Greek, which a tax collector and scribal official such as Matthew would be trained in. No other name has been closely associated with the book. And, honestly, there would be little reason for an anonymous writer to ascribe anything to Matthew. Matthew's background was not prestigious. A number of books were written right after the New Testament period under the assumed identity of someone famous. But these pseudonymous writers picked Peter, or Paul, or John. Nobody would have picked Matthew.

Pulling down Matthew's document from the shelf of history, what do we find? What does Matthew tell us about Jesus?

Some people expect to find the religious inventor *par excellence*. Jesus, they like to imagine, really knew how to make up a religion. He discovered the key to the human psyche and could market himself, or let himself be marketed, better than anyone ever.

Other people expect to find a Horatio Alger story, some self-made hero who has pulled himself up by his own bootstraps.

But if either group were to take up Matthew's Gospel and begin reading it carefully, they would not find someone who was a religious innovator with a product to sell or a self-made man, though Jesus certainly did teach some new things. Rather, they would find someone who thought and taught—indeed, who embodied and personified—what people had been taught not just for decades or centuries, but for millennia before him. It was as if history itself had been prepared for *him*.

Matthew provides a deeply textured portrait of Christ. What does this portrait portray? Was Jesus about something new? That is what the religious leaders at the time thought. We must go back two thousand years and listen to Matthew tell us what caused this startling phenomenon of *Christ-ianity*.

Specifically, we want to ask three questions: 1) What does this book say? 2) Was Jesus more *new* or more *Jew*? 3) Who is Jesus?

## WHAT DOES THIS BOOK SAY?

First, what does this book say? When you read Matthew's Gospel, which took me two hours to read aloud, you encounter many familiar things. You find the Golden Rule and the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount and the Great Commission, the baby Jesus and Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ. You find Jesus' teaching on the church, discipline, and divorce.

Matthew presents Jesus' ministry in seven sections. The first four chapters provide an introduction. They include a genealogy and an account of Jesus' infancy, his baptism, and his preparation for ministry. The three concluding chapters in Matthew, chapters 26 to 28, recount his suffering, his death on the cross, and his resurrection.

The great bulk of the book is the middle section, chapters 5 through 25, which comprises the body of Jesus' ministry. These middle chapters easily divide into five sections. Each of these sections begins with a long teaching block, followed by narrative. Matthew is the only Gospel with this structure. We get the longest sermons of Jesus in this book.

Let me take you through those five sections. The first covers chapters 5–9, and comprises the Sermon on the Mount and accounts of a number of Jesus' healings. In this first section, Matthew appears to be establishing Jesus' authority as a teacher and healer. Jesus is someone we are supposed to hear, trust, and obey.

Chapters 10–12 make up the second section, which shows a rising opposition to Jesus' ministry. In chapter 10 Jesus prepares his disciples for this opposition, some of which they experience in chapters 11 and 12. This section is helpful for the Christian who is experiencing opposition to his or her faith.

From chapter 13 through the middle of chapter 16, this opposition leads to the formation of two camps—those who are beginning to see that Jesus is the Christ, as Peter acknowledges, and those who do not. Jesus teaches in the block of parables in chapter 13 that a polarization happens when the kingdom of heaven comes. This polarization is then acted out in the remaining chapters. This section is helpful for reorienting us outward for evangelism. God has a concern that is going to push us out even amid people who may disagree with us about who Jesus is.

The fourth section begins at what people say is the turning point in the

Gospel. The hinge of Matthew is Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, which ends the previous section. We then read,

From that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (16:21).

In the rest of chapter 16 and then throughout chapters 17 and 18, Jesus teaches about discipleship, corrects misunderstandings, and shows his disciples how to live together. The block of parables in chapter 18 does this by teaching about the church. Jesus answers questions like, How are we to deal with sin in the church? How are we to forgive one another? It is almost as if Jesus, seeing the opposition in chapters 10–12 and the division into two camps in 13 to 16, now turns and directly instructs those who have decided to follow him. This section is helpful for dealing with wrong expectations in the church.

Then there is the final, large section of Matthew's Gospel—chapters 19 to 25—that focuses on judgment. The conflict grows as the opposition to Jesus intensifies in the first half of the section, and then Jesus' promise of judgment upon Israel for rejecting the Messiah becomes obvious in a long teaching section in the second half. Here it is clear that God will judge the leaders of the people, the temple will be destroyed, and, according to Jesus' parables in chapter 25, everybody will finally be judged by God. Those words can be more difficult to hear, but they are also helpful, especially when we as Christians feel discouraged, thinking that God will never win. He doesn't seem to be winning in our life, or in the world around us. This section is a reminder from Jesus that God intends to bring the whole world into judgment. It is helpful for encouraging us even when we see no ground for hope.

There you have the five main sections in the middle: Jesus' authority in 5–9, opposition to him in 10–12, polarization concerning him in 13–16, teaching about discipleship in 16–18, and a promise of judgment on those who reject him in 19–25. Add the introductory chapters 1–4 about his birth and beginning of his ministry, and the concluding chapters 26–28 about his arrest, trial, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, and you have the story of Jesus as presented by Matthew.

All of it is laid out to bring us to the core of Matthew's message, and the core of our concern for understanding who Jesus is. Which brings us to our second question.

## WAS JESUS MORE NEW OR MORE JEW?

### *Jesus the New*

With all this opposition from the Jewish leadership, including their final rejection of him and his rejection of them, was Jesus more new or more Jew? Stepping back and looking at the whole of Matthew's Gospel, we find the tremendous story of a teacher and preacher, a rabbi, a faithful Jew, and one who knew the Old Testament and was certain it would be fulfilled in his ministry. As he taught and performed miracles, his mission caught the imagination of the Hebrew people, and they began calling him by titles close to their hearts—Son of Man, Son of David, Messiah, the Christ. This figure was not so much the founder of a new religion as he was the inheritor and interpreter of a deep, ancient stream of God's special revelation of himself to his special people.

Not that there was *nothing* new about Jesus and his ministry. Whole books have been written about what was new in the ministry of Jesus. My own Bible has a table of contrasts between the Old and New Testaments (it does not provide a table of continuities!). Certainly there is a lot of newness in Matthew. Jesus talked about new wine, new wine skins, and new treasures. In Matthew 24, Jesus taught that the temple, the gigantic building in which he was standing, was going to be destroyed. This destruction would have huge implications. Think about how the Judaism of the time would be rearranged. Animal sacrifices would end. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus described his own body as the temple, and said that he would die as the ransom for the sins of many. The vision Jesus presented was one of considerable change.

The replacement of the temple had other implications, including the end of the priesthood and a decline in the significance of the earthly city of Jerusalem. Matthew, like the other three Gospel writers, shows that Jesus worked to include people from all nations, not just Israel. This is clear from the Gospel's beginning, when Gentile wise men came to worship him, to the Gospel's end, when Jesus instructed his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations." The good news Jesus brought and proclaimed was meant for all nations. His mission had a global reach. While we will look at this more clearly in Luke's Gospel, only Matthew contains the statement that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you [ethnic Israel] and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43). Only Matthew uses the parable of the sheep and the goats to picture a universal judgment. And only Matthew records this final call of Jesus to preach the gospel to all *ethne*, all nations.

### *Jesus the Jew*

Yet having said all this, we notice from the first sentence of Matthew's Gospel how Jewish this Jesus was. You can hear the plaintive, haunting note of the *shofar*, the ram's horn, blowing as you read, "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). Mark does not begin with a sentence like this, nor does Luke or John.

Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. It was written in the first century A.D., a formative time for Judaism. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the ancient religion of Judaism was bound to change. In fact, only two main branches of Judaism survived after the Roman invasion and destruction—Rabbinic Judaism, which directly descended from the Pharisees of the New Testament Gospels, and Jewish Christianity. A century earlier, before the time of Jesus, there were many variations of Judaism. And Matthew's Gospel appears to have been written at a time when the break either loomed just ahead or had just happened. Issues of what it meant to be Jewish were both critical and problematic for those who followed Jesus. So it is no surprise that Jesus taught and Matthew recorded much about the Jews' reaction to Jesus during his ministry.

Some of those reactions were quite severe. For example, toward the end of Matthew we find what has been called the most anti-Semitic statement in the New Testament. Jesus had been handed over to the Roman governor Pilate, who was trying to find a way to let him off because he did not find anything wrong with Jesus. He certainly did not want to kill Jesus. Yet the people yelled back, "Crucify him!" When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' All the people answered, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!'" (27:23b-25). Is retelling this account anti-Semitic? When we hear the conflict recounted in Matthew between Jesus and many Jewish leaders, we can well imagine something like this being said. And if this happened, is it wrong to recount it as history just because it is unpleasant or difficult to read? Shall we not have any books on slavery or the Holocaust? Matthew is honest about the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders.

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus taught new things. But he shows that Jesus was not simply about something new. This Gospel is full of references to Old Testament Scriptures that were being fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. We read that the virgin birth of Jesus was predicted in the Old Testament (1:22-23), as was the flight from Egypt (2:15), the slaughter of the Innocents (2:17-18), the fact that Jesus was from Nazareth (2:23), and his ministry in

Galilee (4:13-16). His healings fulfilled prophecy (8:16-17), as did the fact that he did not talk much about his healings publicly (12:15-21). The people's lack of understanding was predicted (13:14), as was the fact that Jesus taught in parables (13:34-35). Jesus' riding a donkey's colt was predicted (21:4-5). Jesus also taught that his arrest and suffering had to happen so that "the Scriptures be fulfilled" (26:54) and so that "the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled" (26:56). We find that even Judas's betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver had been predicted (27:9).

Many more Old Testament prophecies are mentioned both in this Gospel and in the others. The Old Testament came to fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that he had come to fulfill the whole of the Law and the Prophets (5:17). Jesus was not an innovator, but the answer. He was not an inventor, but the fulfillment.

In Matthew, Jesus presents himself as the key to understanding the Old Testament Scriptures. If you were to rip your Bible in half and take away the Old Testament and read it, Jesus would say to you, "You won't understand that book without me. It all serves as a pointer to me." He is the authoritative interpreter of Israel's religious writings and traditions. He explains them. From Genesis to Malachi, from teaching on marriage and divorce to the Ten Commandments and love, Jesus quotes the Old Testament and tells us what it means.

Sometimes people see Jesus' conflict with the Jewish leaders and say, "Wow, he went in there and smashed up Judaism!" Well, no, Jesus restored Judaism to its full glory. He displayed why the Law, the Prophets, the temple, and its customs were there—for the glory of God through the display of God's holiness, the conviction of human sin, and the provision of mercy in the form of a sacrifice. Ultimately, it all points to Christ who is holy God, perfect man, and merciful sacrifice. Indeed, beginning with his forty days and nights in the wilderness—mirroring Israel's forty-year Exodus wanderings—Jesus displays himself as the obedient and true Israel throughout his ministry. He is the obedient son that Jacob was supposed to be but never was.

But to finally settle the question of whether Jesus is more new or more Jew, we have to turn to our third question.

## WHO IS JESUS?

### *Jesus and Old Testament Figures*

Who is Jesus? Jesus' ministry is deeply rooted in the history and life of the nation of Israel. We see a glimmer of Old Testament figures in Jesus' ministry, as if those figures lived and ruled and prophesied for the purpose of helping us

understand Jesus more than they lived for themselves or their own times! In Jesus we see the fruition of the lives of these great men of the Old Testament.

We see Abraham, dimly in the background. He shows up first in Matthew's opening genealogy: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham." He is treated as the progenitor of the faith in chapters 3 and 8, and Jesus invokes God's own name in relation to his covenant with Abraham in chapter 22: "I am the God of Abraham . . ." (22:32). The faith that began with God's call to Abraham is brought to culmination in Jesus.

Even more clearly, the figure of Moses looms across Matthew's picture of Jesus. In 8:4, Jesus enjoined obedience to the commands given through Moses. Moses stood with Elijah at the Transfiguration, signifying the Law and the Prophets' testimony to Jesus. Moses' teaching was Christ's reference point for discussing with the Pharisees everything from divorce to the resurrection.<sup>3</sup> And many subtle parallels to the life of Moses are scattered throughout the Gospel: miracles surrounding Jesus' infancy; turmoil with the ruler of the land; a massacre of male babies his age; his journey to and from Egypt; and his forty-day sojourn in the wilderness. Jesus even begins his teaching ministry on a "Mount," subtly reminding readers of another mountain—Mount Sinai. Some have seen a parallel between the five teaching sections we have noted and the five Old Testament books of the Law. Whether Matthew intended to make this parallel or not, I do not know. But certainly Matthew intends to present Jesus as the new Moses, because Jesus appears to have understood himself as the new Lawgiver for Israel.

Beside Abraham and Moses is one other Old Testament figure: David. David was the planner of the temple, the greatest king, and the psalmist who probably wrote more of the Old Testament than anyone except Moses. Perhaps more than anyone else from the Old Testament, David prefigures Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.

One interesting feature of the Gospel is the frequent occurrence of statements of comparison, statements that quickly refute any notion that Jesus was just a humble moral teacher. He was not. Matthew writes,

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions

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<sup>3</sup> Matt. 19:7-8 and 22:24; cf. 23:2.



ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (12:1-6).

Well, that last comparison would have gotten the attention of Jesus' Jewish audience. It is unclear how exactly the Greek pronoun for "one" (in the phrase "one greater than the temple") should be translated into English, whether as "one" or as "someone." But it is very clear in the narrative to whom Jesus was referring: he was referring to himself. Here is a first-century Jew referring to himself as greater than the temple!

Yet he was not done. A few lines later we read,

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here" (12:38-41).

Again it is clear to whom he was referring with this comparison: himself. He was describing himself as greater than the prophet Jonah.

And in the next verse, we read, "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here" (12:42). Again, Jesus was referring to himself in comparison with King Solomon.

Jesus presented himself as greater than the temple, greater than the prophet Jonah, and greater than King Solomon. He was the priest, prophet, and king. Matthew's message about Jesus is no more than Jesus' own message—Jesus is the priest to end all priests, the prophet to end all prophets, and the king who will one day end all other kings. These others are mere foreshadows of him.

### *Jesus as Son of David*

This is why Jesus is referred to as "Son of David." We have seen how the Gospel begins: "A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David." Several lines later, the angel of the Lord addresses Jesus' earthly father as "Joseph son of David" (1:20), because the Messiah was supposed to be of the line of David.

It is interesting to notice who recognized Jesus as the Son of David and called him by this name. In chapter 9, two blind men shouted out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (9:27). When Jesus healed a blind, mute man in chapter 12, the people were astonished and asked each other, "Could this be the Son of David?" (12:23). In chapter 15, a Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter cried out, "Son of David" (15:22). Another two blind men called out to Jesus as "Son of David" in 20:30-31. And in chapter 21 the crowds greeted Jesus at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem with "Hosanna to the Son of David" (21:9). Evidently, in 21:15, the chief priests and teachers of the law became alarmed when children began shouting these words.

And there is this interesting exchange:

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

"The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand  
until I put your enemies  
under your feet."

If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" (22:41-45).

This is one of the most frequently quoted passages from the Old Testament in the New, and Jesus used it often to explain his ministry to people.

How do we understand this quotation? Jesus was quoting Psalm 110:1, where David wrote, "The LORD said to my Lord . . ." Since David calls someone "my Lord" who was not Yahweh, Jesus understood that David knew the Messiah would be one of his descendants. Yet David would not normally refer to a descendant as greater than himself with a title like "My Lord." David knew—and Jesus knew—that David's son would be greater than he was.

The people understood that Jesus was something more. Those who called out to Jesus as "Son of David" often did so in connection with healing. In Matthew 12:22-23 they wondered if he was the Son of David explicitly on the basis of his miraculous healings. And in 15:31 we read, "The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel." These types of miracles were associated with the great day to come, which the Israelites hoped for. And they were seeing it! So they began to wonder, is this the one?

Another shepherd had arisen in Israel, one even greater than David, or as the hymn says, “Great David’s greater son.” Matthew says of Jesus at one point, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). This Son of David was compassionate and caring. In a surprising fulfillment of David’s great psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” Peter finally realized that this shepherd he had come to know was in fact the Messiah: “You are the Christ” (16:16).

### *Jesus as Messiah*

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is the Christ (the Greek word for Messiah). Four times in the first chapter he uses this title for Jesus, indicating that he is the Anointed One for whom the people of God have waited long (1:1, 16, 17, 18). The rest of the Gospel continues this theme. When the Magi came looking for the king of the Jews in chapter 2, Herod knew they were looking for “the Christ.”

The first person Matthew quotes to give voice to this title in Jesus’ adult ministry is the imprisoned John the Baptist: “When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’” (11:2-3). John clearly knew that Jesus was special, indeed, that he was the Lamb of God. We know that from the account of his baptism of Jesus. It seems that John knew the Messiah so well from the Old Testament that he expected the Messiah’s ministry to look like Jesus’ ministry. Yet it seems he only half-recognized Jesus as the Messiah because of Christ’s teaching, preaching, and healing. Perhaps this partly explains why Jesus called John the greatest of the prophets but the least in the kingdom of God (11:11). God had not yet revealed to anyone that Jesus was the Messiah. That happened in chapter 16 with Peter. Nor had God yet given the Spirit-filled baptism of the resurrected and seated Messiah. That began to happen in Acts 2. Yet through the grace he had been given, John the Baptist so knew the Old Testament he could dimly perceive the Messiah in Jesus.

Then, of course, Matthew records in Peter’s mouth the words that everyone agrees provide the hinge of Matthew’s Gospel.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not

revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” . . . Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ (Matt. 16:13-17, 20).

Jesus accepted Peter’s statement that he was the Messiah. And Peter understood that Jesus was more than David’s son and Messiah—he was the Son of the living God. This was what the Pharisees did not understand when confronted with Psalm 110.

Interestingly, the title Messiah, or Christ, is used more sparingly in Matthew than the title Son of David. Behind this is what we call the messianic secret. Throughout the Gospels as here in Matthew 16, we find Jesus telling his disciples and others not to tell people he is the Messiah. The people had a lot of false ideas about the Messiah, mostly thinking of him in his political aspects and little more (e.g., Isa. 9:6-7). They believed this person would come and liberate them from the rule of Rome, but they did not combine the promise of Isaiah 9 with the promise of Isaiah 53. The king would also be a suffering servant, bearing the sins of his people. Other sections of prophecy were also ignored. Not wanting them to be confused by the word, Jesus did not use the title very much. But Jesus pulled these different prophecies together in his person—king and servant—as the true Messiah.

During Jesus’ trial, the high priest told him, “‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God’” (Matt. 26:63). And his response was not received well: “Then they [the chief priests] spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?’” (26:67-68). Clearly, the Jewish leadership understood who Jesus was presenting himself to be. Pilate too, though more disinterestedly, referred to Jesus by this title, almost as if to avoid unnecessarily offending frenzied partisans of Jesus who might be lurking about, a bit like addressing a deranged person as “Zerco, Lord of the universe” because the individual refers to himself that way. Or maybe that is too cynical. Maybe Pilate saw something in Jesus as well. If so, he only becomes more culpable. Matthew writes, “So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’” (27:17). Then in verse 22, “‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?’ Pilate asked. They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’”

The irony is almost unimaginable—the people asked their oppressors to kill the one who had come to liberate them more fully than they could ever imagine.

So Matthew and the Magi, John the Baptist and Peter, the priests and Pilate all gave some recognition that Jesus was or claimed to be the Messiah. But did Jesus call himself the Messiah? The answer is a clear yes. In chapter 16, he basi-

cally admitted it to his disciples after Peter's confession: "Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ" (16:20). And in chapter 22, Jesus asked the Pharisees whose son the Christ would be. "'The son of David,' they replied" (22:42). They understood something about his human descent, but they did not see that he was something more. So Jesus took them to Psalm 110:1 to show them the truth about the Messiah.

Jesus also taught that there is only one true Messiah: "Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ" (23:10). False messiahs would abound: "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ' and will deceive many" (24:5). And again, "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it" (24:23). Finally, when the high priest directly asked Jesus, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God," Jesus answered clearly and unambiguously, "Yes, it is as you say" (26:63-64).

Jesus of Nazareth taught that he was the Christ, the Messiah. He knew he was the one who God had promised would fulfill his age-old plan to have a people for himself.

### *People's Response to Jesus*

Not that everyone understood that, or does today!

One of the most interesting parts of these Gospels, and one thing that inspires our confidence in them, is their honesty with details that are not very neat. Consider how slowly the disciples came to belief. Small-in-faith Peter sunk into the Sea of Galilee (14:30). A group of the disciples unwittingly threatened to bog Jesus down with the worry that "the Pharisees were offended" by his teaching (15:12). Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, and then told this Messiah his plans were wrong (16:22). The disciples failed to heal an epileptic boy for lack of belief (17:16-17). I could go on, but the point is clear. The disciples—who had become the leaders of the church by the time Matthew wrote this account—were faith-midgets during the ministry of Jesus. They did not seem to understand him.

Who did understand Jesus? A strange assortment of people.

In chapter 11 Jesus prayed, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (11:25).

There were only two people in Matthew's Gospel whose faith evoked a positive reaction—even astonishment—from Jesus: a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman, representing two groups with whom the Jews were at particular enmity. The centurion said to Jesus,

“Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (8:8-9).

Jesus was astonished at how well this Roman occupier understood Jesus’ own authority. He also praised the Canaanite woman, whom he first rebuffed by calling her a dog—to which she replied, “‘Yes, Lord, . . . but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’” (15:27). Both of these Gentiles accepted without question Jesus’ authority and mission as he defined it. And they were certain he could meet their need because they saw him for who he really was: one who had authority over all and a concern for all.

Rightly, then, we find people worshipping Jesus throughout this Gospel. The Magi worshiped him at the beginning (2:2-11). Jesus told Satan that God alone is to be worshiped (4:10) and then he accepted worship three times: from the disciples in the boat who had seen him walk on water (14:33), from the woman at the tomb after his resurrection (28:9), and from the disciples who saw the resurrected Jesus (28:17). “But,” the always-honest Matthew writes, “some doubted.”

The message of Matthew is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of David, and the long-predicted Messiah.

## CONCLUSION

In the last twenty-five years, there has been a scientific theory gaining ground called the “anthropic principle” (after *anthropos*, the Greek word for man). Named at a conference in 1973 by Cambridge astrophysicist Brandon Carter, this principle says that “the seemingly unrelated constants in physics have one strange thing in common—these are precisely the values you need if you want to have a universe capable of producing life. In essence, the anthropic principle came down to the observation that all the myriad laws of physics were fine-tuned from the very beginning of the universe for the creation of man—that the universe we inhabit appeared to be expressly designed for the emergence of human beings.”<sup>4</sup> This is not coming from a Christian group or even individual scientists who are Christians; increasingly it is coming from nonbelieving scientists. A good book on this is Patrick Glynn’s *God: The Evidence*, particularly the first chapter.<sup>5</sup> The “anthropic principle” relates to phenomena such as the exact strength of gravity, the nuclear force, the difference in mass between a proton and a neutron, and how all of these attributes are necessary

<sup>4</sup>Patrick Glynn, *God: The Evidence: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World* (Rocklin, Calif.: Forum, 1997), 22-23.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

for a world like ours to exist and, particularly, for human life to exist. Scientists give striking examples of how the slightest change of some force in the universe would make everyone flat or make stars explode or otherwise make life unsustainable. Everything is here for a purpose, it seems, from the synthesis of carbon to the weight of ice versus water.

For Christians, of course, the existence of such an intelligent, purposeful designer comes as no surprise. It is his work we perceive not just in chemistry, biology, physics, and astronomy but also in history. We think there is an anthropic principle at work through history too. Through history, God has worked purposely in Israel. He had a purpose in calling Israel, and he sovereignly disposed her history to that end. According to Jesus, that end was Jesus himself. Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, Jonah and Elijah, John the Baptist and even Judas were all there for him.

And why is he here? Why did Christ come? For us!

This message is clear in Matthew. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. And if you want one verse for practical application, do not take a verse on mercy or humility. Consider why Jesus said he came: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20:28).

Matthew teaches that you and I have sinned. We have separated ourselves from God. And now we are under his just judgment. Every single one of us. But Christ has come in love to take the punishment for our sins on himself and to rise in victory over death. And then he has come to us, calling us to repent and believe, to trust in him, to turn from our sins, and to have a new life in him.

You cannot understand Jesus finally without understanding something of yourself. In chapter 9 of his Gospel, Matthew recounts his own calling by Jesus, and the celebration dinner he threw for his tax collector friends and Jesus:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”

On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (9:10-12, 13b).

What a beautifully economical, self-interpreting response! A person’s heart is revealed through the person’s ears, how he or she hears—just as your response to this sermon is revealing something about you right now, about what you love or long for, about what bores you or simply does not concern you.

Jesus is so straightforward and unaffected in this passage. “The sick,” he says. “Sinners,” he says. That is whom the doctor comes for. Righteous, healthy people are not his immediate concern. If you think you are pretty righ-

teous and healthy before God, then in a funny way you are not his immediate concern. No, Jesus has come for the sinners.

Who were the sinners in the room that day? Were they only those tax collectors?

I wonder, when Jesus said to the Pharisees, “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners,” did these Pharisees consider, just for a moment, that *they* might be sick, that *they* might be sinners? Or did they simply think, “Good answer, Rabbi. Those people are pretty bad off,” and walk away self-satisfied?

I wonder about us: Are you among the sinners? Are you among the sick? Are you among the spiritually needy?

I promise you this. You will finally realize who Jesus is only when you realize who you are. You will understand his fullness only when you come to see your own need.

### ***Let us pray:***

*Lord God, we praise you for your love shown by coming and taking on our frail flesh. By suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. By agreeing to death, even death on a cross, to be the ransom for us. We praise you as the one who so loves the church that you laid down your life for her. O God, we pray that your Holy Spirit would require our hearts to give up ourselves to you in worship. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.*

### ***Questions for Reflection***

1. Why does the New Testament present four different accounts of the life of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)? This chapter mentions a few possible answers. Find them and then reflect further on your own.
2. What are some of the ways people today characterize who Jesus is? On what authority do they typically base their opinions?
3. Who do you say Jesus Christ is?
4. If you belong to a church, who does your church teach Jesus Christ is? How often and in what ways does it teach this? If someone who has never heard of Christianity spent a Sunday at your church, would they be able to say who Jesus is? If you are an ordinary (non-staff) member of a congregation, what role do you see yourself playing within your church (reading Galatians 1:6-9 might help you answer this last question)?



5. According to the Gospel of Matthew, can we just rip our Bibles in half and walk away with just the New Testament in our hands? Why not?

6. Matthew clearly emphasizes the Jewish heritage of Jesus Christ and, we might say, of Christianity generally. Abraham, Moses, and David all point to Jesus! Why did God not simply begin the Bible with Jesus, or even place him shortly after the Fall? What did God use all of this history to teach us about himself? About ourselves? How does Jesus Christ then *complete* or *fulfill* what we can learn about God and ourselves from the Old Testament?

7. Matthew also teaches that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament role of prophet (who brings God's word to God's people), priest (who intercedes before God on behalf of God's people), and king (who exercises God's rule over God's people). How does Jesus fulfill the role of prophet? Priest? King?

8. We have seen that Matthew paints the deeply ironic picture of the Jewish people asking their oppressors to kill the very one who came to liberate, or free, them more fully than they could ever imagine. What did Jesus really come to liberate them from? What liberation do we all ultimately need?

9. What are some other areas of life in which we seek liberation, or freedom? How can these ambitions deceive us from recognizing the true liberation that we need?

10. Did Peter and the disciples understand right away who Jesus was? What does this teach us about the growth of faith in individuals' lives? What implications does this have for how we disciple others, whether our own children or other members of our church?

11. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. . . . I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:10-12, 13b). Do you perceive yourself as among the spiritually sick? How does this show itself in how you interact with your family? With members of your church? With non-Christians?



God intends to display the glory of His beauty, perfection, and love through the church.

Imagine what this would look like in our local congregations:

- God's name exalted in song and sermon.
- Relationships tied together by love and service.
- Marriages and families built for endurance.
- Christ's sacrifice pictured in the lives of sinful but repenting people!

At 9Marks, we believe that there is no better **evangelistic tool**, **missions strategy**, or **counseling program** than the image of God displayed through His gathering of imperfect but transforming people. As we learn more about Him, we look more and more like Him.

Neighborhoods and nations will look with wonder. As will the heavenly host!

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