

Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

Concerning the Gospel of Matthew one commentator writes, “This Gospel has been called ‘the most important book in the world’ (Renan), another the most successful book ever written (Goodspeed). Besides being important and successful it is also truly beautiful. Reading it from beginning to end at one sitting is a thrilling experience. The book is simply irresistible.”¹

I have certainly found that statement to be true in my own life. Time and again in my Christian walk I have been drawn back to the majesty of this book. I have read and reread it and spent more time in it than in any other book of the Bible. In particular, I have plunged the depths of chapters 5-7 again and again, never tiring of the Lord’s exquisite Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel according to Matthew is to me like clean summer air on the peaks of the Rockies. Everywhere you turn there is a refreshing glory.

Jesus Christ is the King of glory. He is the theme of Scripture from start to finish. The record given in the word of God is the true and divinely inspired record of the true God who became flesh and dwelt among us. I have written this work to exult and revel in the wonder of this truth. This is for me an act of worship; and my sincere hope is that you will journey with me through this work with a heart of worship.

Who do we worship? Who is this King of glory. It is Jesus, the Worthy One, to whom belongs power and glory and wisdom and strength and honor and blessing and dominion forever and ever. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, powerful, majestic, awesome and deadly. And yet, He is the Lamb of God, meek and humble, serving, loving, gentle, the one who died. Jesus is both the Lion, the Slayer of sinners, and the Lamb, who was slain for sinners. He has purchased those of us who believe and trust in Him. He has purchased us from sin and death with His own blood, that we might rejoice together and worship Him.

Let me begin by giving you a very brief overview of the Gospel of Matthew. The author is, of course, Matthew, the apostle who walked personally with the Lord Jesus, a Jewish man who was also called Levi. All ancient writers, witnesses, and manuscripts attribute the work to him. The evidence and testimony is perfectly uniform and there has never been a legitimate reason or argument given to doubt this fact. As one commentator writes, there is “no...cogent reason to deny the uniform early church tradition. Were the Gospel not written by him, the church surely chose a rather strange individual (in light of his unscrupulous past by Jewish standards) as a candidate for authorship.”²

¹ Hendricksen, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, in New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973, p. 79.

² Blomberg, Craig L. *Matthew* (New American Commentary). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992, p. 44.

Indeed, it would have been very strange and counterintuitive to choose Matthew, the most scandalous apostle, to write what essentially amounted to the Magna Carta of the church for the first centuries of its existence. But it was not a human choice, it was a divinely inspired choice; and this is not a simple human work, it is the written revelation of God the Spirit. The very authorship of this Gospel, therefore, testifies to its unique and divine nature. “‘For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, Nor *are* your ways My ways,’ says the LORD” (Is. 55:8).

Matthew was a tax collector for the conquering and occupying Roman government, when the Lord Jesus called him to be one of the twelve disciples. Thus, he would have been ostracized as a traitor and an outcast from Judaism, cast out of their synagogues because of his chosen profession and loyalties. He would have been seen almost universally as a thief, extortioner, and terrible sinner, who obtained wealth and status by defrauding his own countrymen. There was undoubtedly some truth to this view of his character before he met the Lord. When he invited Jesus over to his house to eat, the friends that he invited were a group of notorious sinners along with himself, probably other tax collectors, drunks, prostitutes and the like.

And yet, Matthew was befriended, loved, forgiven, accepted, called out of that life and saved by the Lord Jesus. The name of Matthew, the traitor, will appear on one of the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14). And Matthew was the man chosen by the Holy Spirit to author the first Gospel, which served as the most basic and fundamental document for the New Testament church, identifying it, expressing its beliefs, guarding it from heresy, giving it purpose, vision and mission, and serving as a solid foundation for the scattered believers.

This Gospel, then, is the work of a personal eye witness, a man radically transformed by the majesty of the risen Christ. The best evidence as to the date of the Gospel, both internally and externally, in the opinion of this author, is that it was the first Gospel written, probably within 20 years of the death and resurrection of Christ. Again this represents the uniform patristic testimony and there is no good reason to question the validity of their statements here.³

The Gospel of Matthew is all about “Immanuel,” God with us, The King. The Lord is introduced with this name in chapter 1, verse 23, “‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’” Throughout the Gospel we see His sovereign authority and power demonstrated in bold, striking colors. He is the One worshiped by the magi. He is the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. He is the One who overcomes all temptation. He is the One who fulfills all righteousness, the

³ I make this statement after extensive study in this area and in no small part as a result of my training as a trial attorney. If the reader is curious about the testimony of the fathers, and the historical origins of the Gospels, I recommend David Alan Black’s book *Why Four Gospels?* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001, which is a very accessible book for any reader. It clearly lays out the evidence and the arguments both for and against this view. Dr. Black’s evaluation of Markan priority and summation of the seemingly insurmountable difficulties of that rather “fantastic” hypothesis are excellent.

law and the prophets. He is the One who teaches with authority. He is the One who heals leprosy and commands the wind and waves. He is the One with power to forgive sins and the power to restore life. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the great Teacher despised and rejected by the world but transfigured on the mountain. He is the One coming again, as “the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west,” to rule and reign over all. He is the One who has “all authority in heaven and on earth.” And at the end of the Gospel He is again “God with us” who promises, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The purpose of this Gospel, then, is to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth is our Sovereign Ruler, the promised Messiah, the Son of David who died for our sin and is destined to sit on the throne of the coming kingdom. He is the One to whom we all owe our undivided loyalty, the King who is Immanuel, God with us.

We simply cannot pass over the emphasis in this Gospel on the Kingship of Christ. All of the parables except three refer to “the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew has no fewer than thirty one passages specific to his gospel that deal with the subject of the King and the Kingdom. This has led most commentators to state with me that God’s purpose in this writing is clearly to set forth the Lord Jesus as Yahweh’s Divine Promised King.

It has long been recognized that the apostle presents his material in five major discourses of the Lord with narrative sections before, after and in between. Matthew shows us that these are important elements of his structure by writing summary statements at the end of each discourse (8:1; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; and 26:1). These unite the teachings of the Lord in each section and move the narrative along to the next portion of teaching. In addition, we see major subdivisions in the formula “From that time Jesus began to” in 4:17 and 16:21, dividing the Gospel into three major portions which could be referred to simply as the introduction, body, and conclusion.⁴ With these two structural ideas in mind, I propose the following basic outline of the book:

- I. The Coming of Immanuel (1:1-4:16).
 - A. His infancy (1:1-2:23).
 - B. His preparation for ministry (3:1-4:16).
- II. The Ministry of Immanuel (4:17-16:20).
 - A. His authority (discourse 1) (4:17-7:29).
 - B. His authority demonstrated (8:1-9:38).
 - C. His mission (discourse 2) (10:1-42).
 - D. Response to His mission (11:1-12:50).
 - E. His kingdom (discourse 3) (13:1-52).
 - F. Response to His kingdom (13:53-16:20).
- III. The Culmination of Immanuel’s Ministry (16:21-28:20).
 - A. His passion predicted (16:21-17:27).

⁴ J D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); D. R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew’s Gospel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989).

- B. His faithful (discourse 4) (18:1-35).
- C. The road to Jerusalem and the cross (19:1-23:39).
- D. His second coming and judgment (discourse 5) (24:1-25:46).
- E. His passion (26:1-27:66).
- F. His resurrection and final commission (28:1-20).

With that said, let's begin a journey together verse by verse through this marvelous life changing book. As before, each lesson or chapter is divided into five daily readings with questions stressing application of the text interspersed throughout. These questions should be answered first in individual study and then again during group Bible Study, if appropriate. At the end of the study, answers to some of the key questions have been provided along with some supplemental materials for Bible Study leaders.

All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

A Word About Scripture Memorization

Each chapter also begins with a specific memory verse from the Gospel to be worked on personally and again in small group sessions. Meditation in the Christian life, beloved, is simply non-optional. But unlike Eastern Meditation, which involves emptying the mind, biblical meditation involves filling it. Consider the command in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy -- **meditate** on these things," (emphasis added). You see how this meditation involves filling the mind and is fundamentally different from other non-Christian forms.

Scripture memorization is ***the primary means*** of fulfilling Philippians 4:8 and similar passages. It is not something simply for children in AWANA⁵; it is meant to be a vital part of every Christian's personal walk. For example: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Josh. 1:8); "Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!" (Ps. 119:11); "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom..." (Col. 3:16a).

Now, it is a well known fact that Scripture memorization is easier when it is done as a group effort. For most of us, both accountability and mutual encouragement are essential to the task; and for all of us, they are helpful. "As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Prov. 27:17). Therefore, I have included a memory verse at the beginning of each

⁵ AWANA stands for "Approved workmen are not ashamed" from 2 Timothy 2:15. It is a children's program typically used on Wednesday nights and emphasizing the memorization of Scripture.

week's lesson. These are verses from the Gospel, that I consider to be especially valuable and helpful for the Christian walk, and it is again my sincere hope that you and your Bible study group will take the time and opportunity to help and encourage one another in hiding these "pure, noble, lovely, virtuous, praiseworthy" truths in your hearts.

Don't try to memorize all at one time, or cram it into your short-term memory the night before your study, like you did in school. You may succeed in time, but the benefits will be minimal at best. Rather, begin on Monday by simply saying the verse out loud to yourself 10 times. Repeat this process on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, read it to yourself 10 times and then say it after each time without looking. On Friday, read it once to refresh yourself and then quote it without looking 10 times. Shore up the weak spots. Review it briefly on Saturday night before bed.

You will be amazed at how easy it is to memorize Scripture with less than five minutes of effort every day. Who knows, you may even start to have fun; and even if you haven't learned the verse word perfect, you will have hidden the meat of it in your heart. Take a few minutes to review previously learned verses each week.

I had a friend in seminary, whose grandmother was in her early nineties. She had followed the simple method given above and had memorized thousands of verses during the course of her life. Her mind was filled with them. They unconsciously saturated her conversation. She had a schedule and most of the verses she only needed to review once every six months to keep them fresh. And the wonderful thing, my friend's grandmother was still learning new verses every week. My friend said her mind was sharper and far more insightful in her nineties than his was in his thirties; and I often wondered if it wasn't the direct result of her consistent, persevering, God-glorifying commitment to biblical meditation.