

Matthew 3-4 Gospel of the Kingdom

Introduction

The Gospel of the Kingdom. Gospel is good news. What is this good news of the Kingdom that Jesus Christ has begun to proclaim? Matthew gives us, right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the most famous of all the extended discourses we get from Jesus. That's the topic of our current study.

We are tackling the thought and structure of this most famous sermon. To do that well, we need to first backup and establish the context of the sermon. In our last lesson, we considered the prologue of Matthew in chapters 1 and 2. Those chapters cover the origin of Jesus. In this lesson, we are considering the introduction of Matthew in chapters 3 and 4. These chapters address the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

In our overview of all four chapters, Matthew 1-4, we're focusing on three thematic questions addressed by Matthew.

1. Who is Jesus?
2. What did Jesus come to do?
3. Is there continuity in God's sovereign plan between Jesus and the teaching of the Old Covenant?

Section after section of our first two chapters affirmed the answer to the third question. Yes, there is continuity! Matthew gave us prophecy after prophecy pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah come to save. Jesus does not replace the Old Covenant plan. Jesus fulfills the Old Covenant plan.

Matthew emphasized an exodus theme, which is not always about the Exodus. The later Old Testament prophets used the Exodus language to speak of Israel's return from exile in Assyria and Babylon. The exile in terms of Exodus is a rich motif. Matthew can draw parallels between Jesus and Moses from the time of the Egyptian exodus, and he can present Jesus as the king who redeems Israel from the time of the Babylonian exile. Jesus as the fulfillment of such a long history is made possible by God's sovereign participation in the redemption of humankind. All of Matthew's Old Testament allusions show us a continuity from Abraham, to Moses, to David, to Jesus that must be attributed to the guiding hand of God.

Matthew is going to continue to affirm that continuity from Old Covenant to Jesus in our present chapters 3-4.

Matthew's first two chapters also gave us a lot of information about who Jesus is, our first question. Jesus is presented as king, both through His genealogy and through the story of His birth. He is the anointed son of David. But He is not only the Son of David, Israel's king. Matthew highlights two curious tensions that go along with that. This Jesus seems to be more than simply a human son of David. He is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. He is to be named, "Jesus," which means, "Yahweh saves." He is called, "Immanuel," which means, "God with us." He is worshiped by wise men from the East, showing us that He is somehow divine. And that is our first tension. Jesus is human, son of David, but also something more.

Those worshipping wise men also help create the second tension. He is king of the Israel, but He did not come only for Jews. The gentile women in His lineage suggests an invitation to all peoples, especially when we remember that God's covenant with Abraham included the promise that his seed would bless all nations. And that's how the Gospel is going to end. "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit and teaching them all I have commanded you." This is the second tension. He is king of the Jews, but His authority and blessing covers all peoples.

Matthew has stated up front in this two-chapter prologue who Jesus is, and two of the critical tensions inherent to His nature. Matthew will continue to develop this idea of Jesus as Messianic King throughout his Gospel.

So now, just as the prologue of Jesus's origins in chapters 1 and 2 addresses all three of our introductory questions, so does the introduction of Jesus' ministry in chapters 3 and 4. Though there is a difference. While the prologue gives us more emphasis to the first question, "Who is Jesus?", we are going to see that the introduction gives more emphasis to the second question, "What did Jesus come to do?" And both affirm continuity in salvation history from the old to the new. This is the information Matthew sets us up with before we hear the Sermon on the Mount. This is the context of that sermon.

Chapters 1 and 2 had six sections. Chapters 3 and 4 also have six sections. And again, we are going to consider how Matthew addresses our three questions in each section. He begins his introduction of Jesus' public ministry with Jesus' forerunner. The first section is Matthew 3:1-12. We'll start with the first six verses.

The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry (Matthew 3-4)

Ministry of John the Baptist (3:1-12)

¹ Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!' " ⁴ Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; ⁶ and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

All four gospels introduce the ministry of Jesus with John the Baptist. All four include this quote from Isaiah 40:3, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord...'" They all recognize John as a link from the Old Covenant to the New. John fulfills Isaiah's prophecy that a forerunner will announce the coming of the Lord. At the same time, he fulfills the last words of Malachi, the last of the prophetic books,

⁵ "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. ⁶ "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse (Malachi 4:5-6)."

Dressed like Elijah, preaching in the wilderness like Elijah, John bridges the old and the new. He is an Old Covenant-style prophet announcing the coming of the New Covenant King.

It's quite interesting to recognize that all four Gospels take this same approach of introducing the public ministry of Jesus with the ministry of John the Baptist, especially when you notice that each Gospel writer includes something unique in their description of John that Baptist that foreshadows one or two themes in their particular Gospel. So we should be asking, what's unique or different in Matthew's version? And two bits of detail really stand out. Both of these point ahead to themes in Matthew that are going to be referenced in the Sermon on the Mount.

The first bit unique to Matthew is the "Kingdom of Heaven" phrase in verse 2, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The Kingdom of Heaven is a major theme in Matthew, first mentioned here. It's particular to Matthew. Matthew doesn't use, "the Kingdom of God." He loves this phrase, "Kingdom of Heaven." The phrase is ambiguous. Is the Kingdom of Heaven a kingdom that only exists in Heaven? Or is the Kingdom of Heaven something that can exist on Earth? And if it can exist on Earth, what form will it take on Earth? The most natural way for us as Christians to think about the Kingdom of Heaven is in a spiritual sense. The most natural way for a Jew in the time of Jesus to understand the phrase is to equate it with the prophetic promise of the Kingdom of Zion, and the Kingdom of Zion was an earthly kingdom equivalent to Israel, with Jerusalem as the capital, and the Messianic son of David as the king. So they hear, "the Kingdom of Heaven," and they are think, "Heaven come down as a geopolitical reality on Earth." We will come back to this phrase in chapter 4.

A second unique aspect of Matthew's description is found in John's rebuke of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The rebuke is not unique. Luke includes the words we are about to read in his description of John the Baptist. But Luke applies these words to the Jewish people as a whole. Matthew's version uniquely singles out the Pharisees and Sadducees as the direct target of the rebuke. This is Matthew 3:7-12.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ "Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; ⁹ and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

We could be excused for not noticing that Matthew just singled out Pharisees and Sadducees, because our attention is probably caught by this strong language of judgment at the end. This is not the kind of description we are used to associating with Jesus. There is a bit in here that is included in all four Gospels, and that is John's assertion that he is not fit to remove or untie Jesus' sandals. Jesus has such high standing that John is not worthy to do for Him the work of a slave. Matthew adds that Jesus comes to baptize not only with the Holy Spirit, but also with fire. And if we want to know what the fire is, it's right there in the context. Fire here is the fire of judgment.

Jesus carries a winnowing fork. He will thresh the wheat, gathering the good fruit of the grain into the barn, and burning up the worthless chaff in unquenchable fire. Unquenchable – it never stops burning. Unquenchable fire brings to mind the language of Isaiah's very last verse. The Anointed Conqueror establishes the Kingdom of Heaven by gathering in the faithful and executing the unfaithful who lay strewn on a field of battle. That execution is more than physical death. It is eternal death. Isaiah refers to a "worm that does not die," to a fire that is not quenched. The King's redemption of his people includes the execution of judgment on his enemies.

Jesus is that King. And that a king comes to conquer and to execute wrath on his enemies is not at all surprising to a Jewish audience. What is surprising to the Jewish audience is that the respected political and religious leaders of Israel are among the objects of his wrath. This King is not just executing wrath against Gentiles. The axe is at the tree of those who do not produce fruit and he has just identified Pharisees and Sadducees as those not producing the fruit of repentance. The Sadducees belong to the traditional hierarchy of priests. They control governmental and religious positions in Jerusalem. They control the Sanhedrin – the ruling council. The Pharisees are a grass-roots movement that does include priests, it does include people in positions of power, but it also includes other Jews of all walks of life. So, the influence of the Pharisees exist throughout Judea and Galilee. They are committed to obey Biblical law as they understand and interpret it. But they also fall under John's condemnation. And this theme of hypocrisy among the generally well-respected Pharisees is going to be a theme that continues throughout Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus comes to cut down every tree that does not bear fruit. Jewish presumption is going to be challenged. One might think it enough to be of Abraham's bloodline, but God can raise up children to Abraham from the stones - yet another allusion to Gentile inclusion. Lineage is not everything. There is another way to become a child of Abraham. If that is true, we must question again, "What is this Kingdom of Heaven? Who is in? Who is out?" We're going to have to wait for the answer.

John's next act is to baptize Jesus. This is Matthew 3:13-17.

Baptism of Jesus (3:13-17)

¹³ Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan *coming* to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him. ¹⁶ After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

Once again, all four Gospels emphasize the sign of the Spirit descending as a dove accompanied by the voice of God giving witness that Jesus is the beloved Son. Who is this Jesus? The voice of God as Father; the affirmation of Jesus as Son; the presence of the Holy Spirit as a dove. Who is this Jesus to be so included with God the Father and God the Spirit? Matthew is pointing us toward Jesus as one with God and yet distinct from God the Father. There is a Trinitarian presence here at the baptism, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. And this is another one of those truths affirmed in the very last paragraph of the Gospel. The last words of Jesus, the Great Commission, "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)."

Jesus is much more than a Son of David. John hesitates, "Why do you come to me? I should be baptized by you!" But if Jesus is more than human, why does He submit to a baptism of repentance? Of what sin does He need to repent?

Jesus' response to John is carefully worded. "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus does not say He needs to repent in order to fulfill righteousness. He is the Son with whom God is well-pleased. How, then, does Jesus' baptism fulfill righteousness?

We cannot say - yet, not here at the start of the Gospel. It appears to have something to do with Jesus' identifying with human sinners. We saw a similar connection in the genealogy. Jesus is something more, but He is not born of a holy line. His mother is not sinless. The people in His line are not sinless. They are normal human beings. Some were quite awful human beings; some were pretty decent human beings; they are all sinful human beings. The genealogy connects Jesus with humanity. His baptism seems to, also, be an identification with sinful humanity. He is willing to humbly submit to a ritual of repentance as though He were a sinner, even though He is not a sinner. He takes on the ritual role of the sinner. And that really is what He has come to do: to take the place of sinners; to let the wrath of God fall on Him, though He Himself is without sin. This is the only way righteousness can be fulfilled. There is no way for human beings to enter into relationship with God - no righteous way - unless Jesus takes our place. That's what's not explained here. But like so much else in these introductory chapters, Matthew sets up concepts to be developed later in this Gospel, or even later by the apostolic writings of Jesus' chosen followers.

The third section shifts from John the Baptist to Jesus, though not yet to the active ministry of Jesus. Jesus' baptism by John was preparatory, so is the temptation in the wilderness. And as you listen to the temptation account, what connections to the Exodus story come to mind? This is Matthew 4:1-11.

Temptation of Jesus (4:1-11)

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." ⁴ But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'" ⁵ Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU'; and 'ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" ⁷ Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; ⁹ and

he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Go, Satan! For it is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and *began* to minister to Him.

The reference to forty days and forty nights could remind us of several different 40s in the Old Testament. The reference to the wilderness brings foremost to mind Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Since they lived on manna during that time, the reference to not living "by bread alone" also makes us think of the Exodus. The main connection to the Exodus is in the Scripture Jesus is quoting to rebuke Satan. All three responses come from the book of Deuteronomy. The big challenge of Deuteronomy is aimed at the second generation out of Egypt. Their parents' generation was unfaithful, refusing to enter the Promised Land, and so they found themselves stuck in the wilderness for 40 years. Will this second generation be faithful? Will they enter the Promised Land? They do, but with problems from the start. Israel never succeeds in being completely faithful. Jesus will succeed where Israel has failed. He never falls to temptation. He rebukes the Devil and the Devil leaves.

The placement of the story gives us a narrative confirmation that Jesus is not being baptized to repent of sin. What sin? Jesus does not fall to temptation. He is the Son with whom God is well pleased. In the fourth section, the active ministry of Jesus begins. This is Matthew 4:12-17.

Jesus Begins to Preach (4:12-17)

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; ¹³ and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴ *This was* to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: ¹⁵ "THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES— ¹⁶ "THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED." ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

As he so often did in chapters 1-2, Matthew again shows Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. He is the great light of Isaiah 9:1-2 risen in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. Good Jews would remember that Isaiah chapter 9 moves from the announcement of this great light to an announcement just four verses later, of a baby boy, "a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us... there will be no end to the increase of his government or of peace on the throne of David and over his kingdom" (Isaiah 9:6a, 7a). The great light is connected to this child and He is no ordinary son of David, "his name will be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, eternal father, prince of peace" (Isaiah 9:6b). The context is of the light is Messianic. The beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the traditional home of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, adds one more prophetic proof to the claim that Jesus is the long awaited King, the Son, the child that was promised.

Matthew summarizes his initial message this way, "From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" It's the same message of John the Baptist or, more correctly, we should say that John the Baptist was announcing ahead of time the message of Jesus.

And again we wonder, what does it mean that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand? How would the Jews have understood that? What would they think Jesus had come to do?

For us, the language of repentance and redemption is focused solely on spiritual redemption from sin. The contemporaries of Jesus would make no distinction between spiritual redemption from sin and national redemption from foreign oppressors. The two go together. They would not be surprised by the need of repentance and cleansing. They would expect the need for spiritual preparation as a necessary step to political freedom under a Jewish king. Elijah sought to bring the people of Israel back to God with the hope of reunifying the Kingdom of Israel in the North with the Kingdom of Judah in the South.

John the Baptist is the new Elijah. He has issued a call of repentance. He has announced the coming Messiah. He has preached that the Kingdom is near. Jesus has come. Jesus is preaching the same message, “Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

The spiritual and political are wrapped up together in the Jewish mind. Their most recent success bears witness to that fact. Just about 200 hundred years before Jesus came preaching in Galilee, the Syrian Empire of the Seleucids controlled Israel. Antiochus Epiphanes IV repressed Jewish religion and ordered a pig to be sacrificed to Zeus in the Temple. Many connected that act to the “abomination of desolation” prophesied in the book of Daniel.

The Maccabee family, a family of priests, led a rebellion whose first aim was to cleanse the Temple, and whose second aim was to throw off Seleucid rule – “let’s get rid of our Syrian overlords!” Worldly Jews not committed to the law of Moses were seen as a barrier to God’s support of Jewish victory. The army gathering around the Maccabees was very aware that there’s a need for spiritual repentance to get God on our side, or to make sure we are on God’s side. The Jews committed to religious purity and military resistance succeeded in taking Jerusalem. The Jewish feast of Hannukah commemorates the cleansing and re-dedication of the Temple after Antioch’s desecration. Following that, after years of conflict, the spiritually focused army of the Maccabees completed the liberation of Israel, achieving autonomous rule. And this autonomous kingdom lasted all the way down to the year 37 BC, when Herod the Great seized the throne as a client king of Rome.

This vision of autonomy under a Jewish king has been experienced only a couple of generations before. Two things seem to be necessary to establish lasting autonomy for the Kingdom of Israel. The true Messiah must come to lead. None of the Maccabees was this Messiah. And along with the Messiah, we need a spiritually pure multitude dedicated to Old Testament law that will follow his leadership; that will be his people; that will be his army. Is this what Jesus had come to do? It certainly seems to be what the prophets had preached.

All the Jews are expecting the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth – the Kingdom of Zion with Jerusalem as the capital. The language of repentance and forgiveness of sin would indicate to no one that this Kingdom of Heaven was to exist only in a spiritual form and not in a geopolitical form. Spiritual redemption and national redemption go together in the first-century worldview.

So, what are the people supposed to think when Jesus begins to call men to follow Him? This is in section five, Matthew 4:18-22.

Calling the First Disciples (4:18-22)

¹⁸ Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. ²¹ Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the *son* of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

Jesus acts as one with authority, as one whose agenda precludes the agendas of these men, of their vocation, of their family. When Satan speaks, resist. When Jesus speaks, follow Him.

We are now ready for Matthew to set the final scene before we get to Sermon on the Mount. This is section 6 of the introduction, Matthew 4:23-25.

Multitudes Begin to Follow Him (4:23-25)

²³ Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. ²⁴ The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds followed Him from Galilee and *the* Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and *from* beyond the Jordan.

Jesus was going throughout all of Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.

He is teaching in the Jewish synagogues. Not in the very center of Jewish power, not in Jerusalem, but in Galilee. The light is rising in Galilee. Still, He does take His message to the heart of the Jewish community, teaching in their synagogues.

He is not only teaching. Jesus does not come with just words. He comes with power; power over the physical world and over the spiritual world. He is healing and casting out demons. He cannot be ignored. News about Him spreads beyond Galilee north, throughout all of Gentile Syria.

So the people, the large crowds gathering around Him are not just Jews. They're from Galilee, which is primarily Jewish but also the Decapolis, which are ten Gentile cities. They're from Jerusalem and Judea. So they are from the very center of Jewish power but then they're also from beyond the Jordan. These people are not primarily coming because they believe Jesus is the Messiah. They do not come because they want to hear His religious teaching. That's probably mixed up in it. But the primary reason they are coming is that He can heal them. He can heal their loved ones. He is touching their greatest, present felt need. "The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them."

So having come, they are experiencing His healing power. He is touching their lives in a very real way and they are going to begin to ask questions. "Who is this Jesus?" "What has He come to do?" "How are we to understand His relationship to Jerusalem and the long history of the Jews? How does He fit into the story?"

They are poised to hear what Jesus has to say. And Matthew has prepared us to hear what Jesus has to say. We have more information than these crowds gathered around Jesus. We have heard from Matthew about the origin of Jesus as the King. We have heard about all the prophetic connections of how Jesus has come to fulfill the old story. We have heard about the beginning of His ministry, that He proclaims a Gospel of the Kingdom. What is this Gospel? What good news does Jesus proclaim? What has He come to do?

Conclusion

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² He opened His mouth and *began* to teach them, saying...

Now we're ready to begin our study of the Sermon on the Mount.