



First Things First

Bible Reading Plan for the Gospel of Matthew

Welcome to the First Things First Initiative of Greater New Missionary Baptist Church. Our hope is that every member of our church family would grow in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ by dedicating the first 15 minutes of everyday to prayer and bible reading. This reading plan provides suggested Scripture reading for each day of the week. On the weekends, we suggest that you re-read the Scripture passages that you have been working through during the past week.

Introduction to Matthew

The gospel of Matthew is attributed to a tax collector named Matthew; in fact, he's the same tax collector who Jesus calls to follow Him in Matthew 9:9. Matthew was a Jew from Galilee whose life was forever changed on the fateful day when he met Christ. Because he was a tax collector, he would have been trained to write and had the abilities to record this firsthand account of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Matthew's focus in his gospel shows us Jesus as the true King of the Jews, the One who came to fulfill the messianic prophecies of old. Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy tracking Jesus' lineage back to both David and Abraham, reminding us of Christ's Jewish roots. But even as he traces back, he also points forward to the story of a new King, Jesus, who has come to save His people from their sin. As we continue to read in Matthew, we will begin to understand that "His people" doesn't just refer to the lost sheep of Israel, the Jews, but will expand to include the Gentiles, the nations.

Thus, Matthew's gospel speaks to the Jew, beseeching him to trust in Christ as the true Messiah, while also speaking to the Gentiles proclaiming the good news of the gospel, that salvation is offered to all who believe, regardless of ethnicity.

WEEK ONE: MATTHEW 1-4

Monday, January 7 | Matthew 1

“What’s In A Name?”

Names are important today, primarily because they give us ways to identify one another. Watch new parents and see how much they agonize over getting the “right” name. Much is at stake when it comes to naming a newborn.

In the Bible days, names were even more important because of how they also served as a way for the parents to convey their hopes for the newborn child. Parents didn’t name their children based on how the name sounded; parents named their children based on what the name meant. Names conveyed promise and hope.

We see that factor in play in the birth of Jesus. Because Matthew was writing predominantly for an audience that was Jewish in makeup, he begins his account of the Jesus story with a lengthy genealogy that traces Jesus’ family ties to Abraham, the original father of God’s covenant people, and through David, father of the Messianic promise. As you will see in your reading of this gospel, Matthew’s primary aim is to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s messianic hopes and the one in whom God’s covenant promises find completion.

What’s unusual about Jesus’ birth narratives in Matthew is that they tell us how Joseph, the husband of Mary, fits in the picture. When Joseph discovers that Mary, his betrothed, is great with child, he plans on divorcing her, because he is a righteous man and he has the Law of Moses on his side. But when the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and assures him that this pregnancy is God’s doing, he also gives Joseph specific instructions on what the child is to be named. “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus (which means ‘God is our salvation’), because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Joseph then awakens from his dream and does precisely what he has been told. Clearly, God chose a righteous man in Joseph to participate in His act of redemption. While Mary “gave” birth to the Christ child, Joseph “gave” him a name, and a name that is above all other names (Acts 4:12).

As you begin your reading of the gospel, don’t miss the manner in which no part of God’s redemptive plan is left to chance. Marvel at the details of the Jesus story, beginning with His

covenant lineage and extending on to His obedient earthly father, one who could bring Jesus up to appreciate the necessity of doing what God gives one to do. Most of all, find comfort in your confession that Jesus is the promised Messiah, whom God indeed sent to be the means to our salvation, and be certain that, as the old hymn puts it, there is indeed something about that name.

Tuesday, January 8 | Matthew 2

“Evil Is Not King, Jesus Is”

The birth of Jesus did not happen in a vacuum. There were already powers in place that were not open to sharing their authority. In Rome was Caesar and in Judea was his puppet king Herod.

From all accounts Herod was a basket case. His paranoia was legendary, especially given the fact that he had several of his sons murdered to head off any power grab by a potential heir. As many Jews would say, “It would be better to be Herod’s pig (an unclean animal for the Jews) than it would to be his son.”

It’s understandable then that when word reached Herod from the magi from the east about a “newborn king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2), he “was disturbed.” That’s putting it mildly. Herod was most likely beside himself at their inquiry about the new king’s location.

A quick search of the Scriptures by the chief priests and teachers of the law (soon to be antagonists of Jesus themselves!) revealed that Bethlehem was the promised birthplace. Herod then dispatched the magi to check out the possibilities and report back to him so that he too might go and worship the newborn king (Matthew 2:8). But after locating the Christ child and acknowledging Him with gifts fit for royalty, they returned to their country by another way and did not follow up with Herod.

When Herod learned that the magi had deceived him, he took matters into his own hands, issuing an edict that would result in the killing of all boys in Bethlehem two years of age and under. Granted, Bethlehem was not a large place at the time and the number of such boys would

have been small, but regardless of the number, the rage of Herod shows the inexcusable brutality of the times.

Fortunately, Joseph had been warned in a second dream to take Mary and Jesus and escape into Egypt until Herod no longer ruled the land. This departure sets the stage for an important theme in Matthew's gospel: Jesus is a "new Moses," and as Moses emerged from Egypt to deliver God's people from a brutal Pharaoh, so Jesus would come from the same country to redeem his people in similar fashion.

When Herod died, Joseph and Mary returned to Israel, only not back to Bethlehem because of angelic counsel in yet another dream, but this time to Nazareth, which would become the hometown of Jesus. Joseph's obedience to God's direction plays no small part in Jesus being able to escape despotic clutches until He grows up and is physically and spiritually prepared to take them on as God will empower Him to do.

What may seem to be evil's intent to frustrate God's redemptive purposes utterly fails. Joseph's obedience makes it possible for good to prevail. As we consider God's direction in our own lives, may we see how our obedience might also stymie evil's aims in our day and extend God's redemptive purposes in the same way.

Wednesday, January 9 | Matthew 3:1-17

"The Baptism of Jesus"

Arguably one of the most powerful passages of scripture in the word. I have often pondered why Jesus needed to be baptized. He was after all, without sin, so it seemed strange to me that He would need to be baptized. Almost to the point of disbelief. So as I prayed over this scripture and asked God to show me something new and reveal to me the truth of this message I was delighted that he did just that, showed me something new.

The prevailing message of Jesus' ministry is "Follow me.", "Do as I do.", "I will go before you on this very narrow road." God reveals to us through Matthew 3, that everything Christ did embodied, God with us, Emmanuel. He himself experienced life to its fullness as a

human. He was Divine and yet still one of us, relatable, tangible, and real. So, of course he would be baptized.

The most powerful part of this scripture then becomes the moment when God speaks. “This is my son whom I love.” When you ponder this, you realize that this moment is the very first time in all of scripture that the concept of Grace is declared and made known to us. The words were not just to signify the inauguration of Christ’s 3-year ministry but also to usher in a new relationship with God. It was the revelation of the nature of God which had not been seen before and all who were witness to this moment heard it. He was saying, I am doing a new thing. This is the very beginning of living in grace and not under the law. In that moment God declared His eternal love for mankind and became approachable. No longer just an entity to be feared. At the moment of Jesus’ baptism God’s love for us is made clear.

So each time you recall your baptism, let the truth of Matthew 3:1-17 wash over you as a renewal of your own baptism. The grime, the dirt, the pain, the shame, the sin and pain, washed away and a new creation a new covenant declared over you. Hear God saying, “This is my son; this is my daughter whom I love.” Through Jesus’ baptism God says to us, “Watch me. I will show you the way.” First surrender, then repentance, then following along the narrow road. Do this daily, surrender, repent, follow.

Matthew 3 is the beginning of grace. God is saying, I love you, I am pleased with you, now let us begin.

Thursday, January 10 | Matthew 4:1-17

“Temptations Come to All, Even Jesus”

As Herod’s story showed us, evil never gives up without a fight. Even Jesus, as He prepared for His public ministry, faced times of testing, which challenged His spirit and at the same time prepared Him for the ministry to which God had called Him.

The temptations Jesus faced were all designed to have Him question God's calling. Each was prefaced with the phrase, "If you are God's Son." Satan no doubt wanted to sow seeds of mistrust in Jesus' heart, but Jesus was able to reject them by appealing to Scripture and the promise that God would return Jesus' faithfulness with His own.

We may think that life would be easier if we didn't have to encounter temptation, and perhaps it would. But Jesus' temptations formed Him for the work God had called Him to do and His obedience to each of them made Him spiritually stronger. The same could happen for us if we too would cling to the promises of God's Word. Then instead of being seasons of distress that weaken our spirits, they could become opportunities for us to join Jesus in growing our faith so that we too might be readier for the work God has for us to do.

Friday, January 11 | Matthew 4:18-25

"The Ministry Begins"

Most of Jesus' early ministry took place in Galilee, a backwoods part of the Holy Land, but one that the prophet Isaiah had prophesied would be the locus of God's activity in fulfilling His redemptive promises. (By the way, Isaiah is the prophet quoted more times in the New Testament than any other.)

But not only does Jesus follow God's calling in His preaching and teaching ministry by Himself, He calls disciples, whom He will train to carry on His mission at the appropriate time. Notice the composition of the group. They are ordinary fishermen, not religious types. It is an indication of how Jesus will lean on regular people to live into a holy calling and do things they never dreamed they would be able to do.

Jesus' ministry focused on the "kingdom of heaven," a means by which God's rule might become more apparent on earth, regardless of the Herods and the Caesars who always assume they are in control. Only Jesus is able to give people what they really need – healing and wholeness.

It's that sort of work to which we are called today. We are not called to any new ministry; our calling is to carry on what God began in Jesus. When we do, God's kingdom comes and His will continues to be done, on earth as it always is in heaven.

You don't have to be special to participate in that work. You just have to be obedient. From Joseph to John the Baptist, to the first disciples, and to me and you, that's all God requires. He will do the rest.

Saturday, January 12-Sunday, January 13 | Matthew 1-4

Reread Matthew 1-4 over the weekend. Reflect on all that God has been saying to you through His word this week.