

The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry (Matt. 4:12–25)

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When Jesus defeated Satan's temptations, Jesus bound that strong man in order to begin plundering his house (Matt. 12:29). Satan succeeded in binding Adam and Eve (and all their descendants after them), but Jesus turned the tables to bind Satan. Now that Jesus has been qualified and hailed as king, baptized and anointed as Christ, and established victorious as a conqueror, he begins the public phase of his rescue mission. The second half of Matthew 4 offers a summary of Jesus' message, mandate, and ministry that is marked by discipleship. Here, we see the blueprints for Jesus' building of his kingdom. Here, we see the initial overview of how *Jesus came to make disciples of all nations*.

The Message of Discipleship (Matt. 4:12–17)

Matthew 4:12 marks a significant transition in the Gospel of Matthew on three major fronts. First, we read that John the Baptist has been “arrested” (παρεδόθη; *paredothē*; v. 12a). The specific word Matthew uses here very literally describes the “giving over” of someone, so that this is the same word that will later describe the “betrayal” of Jesus by Judas.¹ Here, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Matthew is linking the suffering of John with the ultimate suffering of Jesus, by foreshadowing Jesus' betrayal and suffering at the cross.² We do not know the precise timing of what this verse describes, since the Gospel of John suggests that the ministry of Jesus and John the Baptist overlapped (see John 3:22–24). This is not a conflict between the two accounts, for “Matthew offers no connection in time between the temptation and the present account.”³

Second, when Jesus hears about what has happened to John, he “withdrew into Galilee” (v. 12b). Galilee will be the primary location of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Matthew from here until Jesus begins to turn his attention southward toward Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21), and then actually Jesus travels south to Judea (Matt. 19:1) to make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1) for one climactic week of ministry.⁴ Third, Jesus' withdrawal to Galilee launches the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Everything we have seen so far in the Gospel of Matthew—Jesus' royal lineage through

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 79.

² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 72.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 162.

⁴ “The narrative from 16:21 to 28:15 will be cast in the form of a single journey from north to south, culminating in a single week in Jerusalem. In contrast, the Galilean section of the gospel has no clearly defined framework of time and movement (although in some sections a coherent itinerary can be discerned) but is rather an anthology of events and teaching designed to convey an overall impression of an undefined period of largely public activity in the north.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 137.)

David from a virgin birth and his adoption by Joseph, his recognition as king by the wise men from the east, his flight to Egypt and his exodus out of Egypt, his upbringing in obscurity in despised Nazareth, his baptism at the hands of John, and his temptation in the wilderness—all this has been preparatory for what Jesus is about to do: “The preparation for, and inauguration of, the work which the Father gave Jesus to do is ended....Therefore, nothing now prevents him from carrying forward the task assigned to, and voluntarily assumed by, him.”⁵

Matthew marks the significance of this transition to Galilee with another declaration of how Jesus fulfilled Scripture—in this case, a prophecy from Isaiah 9:1–2.⁶ Within the context of Matthew's Gospel, the phrase “Galilee of the nations” is significant in foreshadowing the Great Commission, when Jesus will instruct his own disciples to make new disciples of “all nations” (Matt. 28:19)—an instruction that Jesus will give in Galilee (Matt. 28:16).⁷ Jesus, of course, is the “great light” who breaks into the darkness in Galilee (Matt. 4:16), although Matthew does not make much use of the “light” motif (except during Jesus' transfiguration).⁸ Of this light, Matthew's quotation of Isaiah depicts this light as the sun: “on them a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:16b). John Calvin may go a bit beyond what Matthew explicitly states, but not beyond the spirit of Matthew's Gospel, when he suggests that John the Baptist's now-completed ministry functioned as the first beams of light in the morning: “when the dawn was passed, the sun arose.”⁹ From another angle, we should perhaps connect this imagery of the rising of the sun with the way the wise men came in response to the rising of the star (Matt. 2:2).¹⁰

The nature of the “darkness,” though, is worth further consideration. In Isaiah's day, the darkness of Galilee was multifaceted. To begin, Galilee was directly in the path of the invasions of Syria and (more ominously) the empire of Assyria.¹¹ Ultimately, the northern nation of Israel would fall to the military conquest of the Assyrians and be carried off into captivity.¹² Nevertheless, the Old Testament is very clear that this was not simply because of the superior military power of Assyria, but because of the spiritual darkness as the northern ten tribes of Israel fell into deep apostasy and idolatry, because they attempted to imitate the practices of the surrounding “nations.”¹³ Thus, the “darkness” in Isaiah 9 refers to the entirety the spiritual, political, economic, and military situation of the nation, just before the Assyrians conquered them.¹⁴ To cite this verse in reference to Jesus is to recognize that, while the Assyrian empire has long since passed away, the people residing in Galilee

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 240.

⁶ Richard Beaton, “Isaiah in Matthew's Gospel,” in *Isaiah in the New Testament: The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 67.

⁷ “...even though for the time being Jesus' ministry will be largely (but not entirely: 8:5–13, 28–34; 15:21–39) focused on the Jewish population of Galilee—a principle which will be explicitly stated in 10:5–6; 15:24, but breached in practice in the latter pericope.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 143.)

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 174.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:224.

¹⁰ Beaton, “Isaiah in Matthew's Gospel,” 68.

¹¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 243.

¹² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 174.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 244.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 166.

still languished in darkness as they desperately awaited the coming of their Savior.

Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 9 also subtly reminds us of the great messianic prophecy only a few verses later in that same chapter:¹⁵ "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Is. 9:6–7). Remarkably, while this passage is such a triumphant and clear prophecy about Christ, it is never directly cited in the entire New Testament.¹⁶ Matthew's citation here is the closest reference.

Matthew makes no secret of the nature of this light: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (v. 17). The light is Jesus himself, but also his preaching about the kingdom of heaven and the need for forgiveness. The summary of Jesus' preaching here is verbatim to the summary of John the Baptist's preaching from Matthew 3:2. In both cases, the preaching emphasizes two points that John Calvin summarizes well: "*repentance*, and the announcement of grace and salvation. He exhorts the Jews to conversion, because *the kingdom of God is at hand*: that is, because God undertakes to govern his people, which is true and perfect happiness."¹⁷ These two elements cannot be separated: "if the kingdom of God is near, then clearly people cannot be complacent. They must prepare for that kingdom, and that means repenting of their sins. Jesus calls on them to realize that they are unfit for the kingdom of heaven and to repent accordingly."¹⁸ By this proclamation, the public ministry of Jesus is underway.

The Mandate of Discipleship (Matt. 4:18–22)

The two stories in this section of the calling of Peter and Andrew, and then James and John, function as "a sample account" to give us a flavor for Jesus' calling of his disciples.¹⁹ After this, we will read only one more specific account of Jesus' calling of his disciples (Matt. 9:9–13) before coming across the general summary account of Jesus' calling the remainder of his disciples (Matt. 10:1–4). Out of Jesus' twelve disciples, we read the specific story of how Jesus called them to follow him for only five. Nevertheless, Matthew has an "intense interest in discipleship" (see Matt. 4:16–16:20), which is reflected in this account.²⁰ Against the backdrop of Jesus' proclamation of a divine kingdom breaking into the world (v. 17), the idea that these four fishermen would be the kingdom's first appointed representatives is jarring.²¹

Jesus, then, approaches Simon (called Peter) and Andrew, Peter's brother. The word for "net" described here is "a net with weights at the edges is thrown onto the surface and encloses fish as it

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 174.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 142.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:224.

¹⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 83.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 84.

²⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 90.

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 146.

sinks through the water and its weighted edges come together.”²² Jesus’ instruction is smoothed over into the English, “follow me,” and it might more literally be translated, “Here, after me.”²³ There are other ways to say “follow me” (cf. 10:38; Lk 9:23; 14:27), but they all presuppose a physical “following” during Jesus’ ministry. His “followers” were not just “hearers”; they actually followed their Master around (As students then did) and became, as it were, trainees.²⁴ The response is immediate, as they leave behind their nets to follow him (v. 20). The same events play out when Jesus calls James and John, who were mending their nets when Jesus called them (v. 21). Peter and Andrew left their nets, while James and John left their boat and their father (v. 22).

These descriptions are simple, but Matthew is driving at the total cost of following Jesus: “Leaving their nets in the case of Peter and Andrew and the boat in the case of James and John is only artistic distribution (both pairs had both nets and boat), but leaving their father adds the dimension of family disruption to the cost of discipleship.”²⁵ D. A. Carson observes that we should not understate (as sometimes happens) the poor condition and situation of these disciples before Jesus calls them: “Mark’s remark [Mark 1:20] that hired men were left with Zebedee when his sons followed Jesus reminds us that we must not exaggerate the ignorance and poverty of Jesus’ first followers. While they were not trained scribes or rabbis, they were not illiterate, stupid, or destitute. Indeed, Peter’s protest in [Matthew] 19:27 implies that many or all of the Twelve had given up much to follow Jesus.”²⁶

The Ministry of Discipleship (Matt. 4:23–25)

The final paragraph in this section gives us a general summary of Jesus’ ministry: “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (v. 23). While Jesus’ message had direct, verbatim continuity with John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2; 4:17), Jesus’ ministry breaks with John’s. Where John’s role had been primarily to announce the kingdom, and to prepare people for it, Jesus comes actually to *establish* the kingdom through word (teaching) and deed (healing). The focus of John’s ministry was more narrow, both in the geography of where he ministered (in the wilderness, at the Jordan River), and in the work of his ministry in preaching and baptizing (Matt. 3:1, 6). Jesus also preaches, but we do not ever read that he baptized (see John 4:2). Additionally, R. C. H. Lenski writes that, ordinarily, “the activity of Jesus is characterized by the word διδάσκειν [*didaskein*], ‘to teach,’ which is never used with reference to the Baptist. The latter always preached out-of-doors, Jesus very frequently in the synagogues before the audiences which gathered regularly every Sabbath day....”²⁷ Here in v. 23, we find Matthew’s very first use of the word “gospel”; however, Matthew “uses the term only four times, here and in the parallel passage 9:35 to summarize Jesus’ message, and in 24:14, 26:13 to denote the church’s proclamation about Jesus after his death; Matthew apparently

²² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 179.

²³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 85.

²⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 148.

²⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 181.

²⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 149.

²⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 173.

intends his readers to perceive a simple continuity between the message of Jesus and that of his followers.”²⁸

Furthermore, Jesus was a healer—not only for physical diseases, but also for casting out demons (v. 24). On the list in v. 24, Craig Blomberg makes an important observation: “The most striking on the list is demon possession, which Matthew carefully distinguishes from ordinary diseases, including epilepsy (‘those having seizures’). Contrary to what many today believe, the ancient world regularly and carefully distinguished between afflictions ascribed to demons and other forms of illness.”²⁹ D. A. Carson helpfully notes that “we must recognize that Jesus was an itinerant preacher and teacher, who necessarily repeated approximately the same material again and again and faced the same problems, illnesses, and needs again and again.”³⁰ Matthew also puts special emphasis on the thoroughness of Jesus’ ministry: “A thread runs from the uses of ‘whole’ and ‘every’ in v. 23 (‘the whole of Galilee’, ‘every disease and every sickness’) through the uses of ‘whole’ and ‘all’ in v. 24 (‘all those sick’, ‘the whole of Syria’) and on in v. 25 to the list of all the parts of Jewish Palestine. Matthew is concerned to create an image of comprehensiveness, clearly in the interests of asserting the scale of the significance of Jesus.”³¹

As Jesus’ “fame spread throughout all Syria” (v. 24), we read that “great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (v. 25). We are seeing something of the universal, worldwide, “all nations” (Matt. 28:19) nature of Jesus’ ministry. Nevertheless, we should not overstate what is happening here. Carson rightly warns us that, “[despite] contrary arguments, ‘follow’ does not necessarily indicate solid discipleship. It may, as here, refer to those who at some particular time followed Jesus around in his itinerant ministry and thus were loosely considered his disciples.”³² Jesus is growing in notoriety, but we are not yet seeing dramatic regeneration. That will only come in time, and will require these crowds to reject him before they will embrace him (Matt. 27:15–23; Acts 2:37–41).

Discussion Questions

1. Why is John’s being “arrested/handed over” significant here at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry? Why is it significant that Jesus withdraws to Galilee? How long does Jesus remain in Galilee, according to the Gospel of Matthew? Why is it significant that Galilee called “Galilee of the nations”? When Jesus begins his ministry, how similar is his message to what John had preached in preparation for Jesus’ coming (Matt. 3:2; 4:17)?
2. How many accounts does Matthew give us of Jesus’ calling of his disciples? What did Simon Peter and Andrew leave behind to follow Jesus? What did James and John, the sons of Zebedee, leave behind to follow Jesus? What does Jesus ask of them? How does Matthew portray their response? Why is Jesus so eager to call his disciples at this early stage of his ministry? How does this insistence

²⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 150.

²⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 92.

³⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 150.

³¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 184.

³² Carson, “Matthew,” 151.

upon discipleship inform the rest of Jesus' ministry?

3. In what ways is Jesus' ministry similar to the ministry of John the Baptist? In what ways are they different? How would you characterize or summarize the kind of ministry that Jesus did? What role does teaching play? What role does healing play? Where does Jesus go in this phase of his public ministry? From where do people come to follow him? What should we make of the crowds who are following Jesus?

4. How does this passage shape a vision for discipleship in the church? Why does Jesus place such a premium on discipleship? In what ways is the church called to follow in Jesus' footsteps as disciple-makers? What does it mean to be a disciple? What does it mean to make a disciple of someone else? What hinders you from helping others to grow as disciples of Jesus? What is one area you might step into to serve someone else to help them in their discipleship?