



# MATTHEW

*A narrative so profound, everyone has a response.*



# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

First, some basics:<sup>1</sup> In terms of content, Matthew is the story of Jesus and includes large blocks of his teaching, from the announcement of his birth to the commissioning of the disciples to make disciples. The author of this Gospel (Greek: *euangelion*; English: *good news*) is technically anonymous, but early church tradition clearly attributes authorship to Matthew, the former tax collector who followed Jesus and became one of his disciples (Matthew 9:9). This is the view we hold and one that you can read much more on using the Recommended Resources listed below. We can't be completely sure of the precise date or decade Matthew was written, but most likely it was somewhere between the late 50s and early 70s A.D. It is an incredibly early account of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

Most people who have read any of the Bible will have at least some familiarity with the Gospel according to Matthew, due in part to the spot it holds in the Bible as the first book of the New Testament. Even though it was probably written after Mark, it's positioned ahead of the three other Gospel accounts (Mark, Luke, and John). Matthew also tends to be familiar because it contains some of the

<sup>1</sup> This section adapted from Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

most beloved stories, illustrations, parables, and teachings Jesus ever used. The Sermon on the Mount in particular continues to be read and reread by people of all faiths today. Though we today may express a love for the Gospel of Matthew, it is likely nothing close to the love the early Church had for it.

Matthew wrote at a time when many were feeling confused and threatened by this new and ever-growing movement of men and women claiming to be disciples of Jesus, a man from Nazareth who had been put to death on a Roman cross. These disciples had a difficult time finding their place in society because they were seen as upsetting an already delicate balance between the political and religious powers of the day. The religious powers within Judaism in particular were concerned about the implications this new movement would have on their authority and way of life. Matthew wrote his Gospel account primarily in an attempt to defend the claims being made by those professing Jesus as Lord. “[Matthew] is an extended defense, in narrative form, of the claims that a new sect within Judaism, known originally as ‘the Way’ and later as Christianity, is [in fact] authentic Judaism, the completion or fulfillment of God’s purposes for Israel and the world.”<sup>2</sup>

But Matthew wasn’t only writing a defense; he also wrote in order to bring clarity to those who had never had the opportunity to walk with and learn from Jesus firsthand as he had. Matthew, as one of the disciples, had been in a privileged position and spent years in face-to-face relationship with Jesus. He wrote in an attempt to share some of what he had seen and heard.

<sup>2</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 215.

When reading Matthew, it's important to keep in mind how different life was when it was written. Most were unable to read, and those who could would have found it extremely expensive to own any written documents. Thus, Matthew paid careful attention to the structure of his writing and the way he told stories so they could be easily remembered even by those who might hear them read out loud only once or twice.

As Matthew recorded his account of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he took great pains to show a couple of things above all others:

- 1) He wanted to make the identity of Jesus as Israel's long awaited Messiah, the Saviour of humankind, and God very clear.
- 2) He wanted to show that all people, regardless of ethnicity, religious upbringing, socioeconomic standing, or anything else, are all defined by their response to Jesus' claims and identity.

As is true with the whole Bible, Jesus is at the very centre of the gospel of Matthew.

## READING MATTHEW TODAY

The first thing we must decide when we read anything is what *kind* of literature it is. We will miss much of what is written if we approach this Gospel the way we would a newspaper or novel. Matthew and the other Gospel writers each had specific purposes in mind and thus were selective with what they included in their Gospel accounts and specific in the structure of their writing.

Matthew's purposes were *Historical* (reconstructing historical events), *Narrative* (telling a story), and *Theological* (laying a foundation of beliefs), so we must read it through those lenses.

## HISTORICAL

The book was written as an accurate account of history. Matthew included names and circumstances meant to ground his record of Jesus in a specific place and time. The importance of this is hard to overstate because the claims of Christianity rise and fall on the legitimacy of its history. If none of what the Bible tells us happened *actually* happened in a specific time and place in human history, then there would be no reason to hold to the Bible as God's Word. Matthew wanted to ensure that those who read his account of Jesus would be forced to wrestle with the events themselves and not just philosophical claims behind them.

## NARRATIVE

Throughout church history Matthew has been held up as a gifted storyteller whose Gospel is of the highest literary quality. As any good story does, this Gospel includes layer upon layer of meaning. Matthew was focused on doing all he could to draw his readers into the story of Jesus, so he structured the book into five main parts and alternated between sections of storytelling (narrative) and teaching (discourse). Each section builds upon previous ones and helps us interpret the Gospel as a whole.

## THEOLOGICAL

The historical and narrative literature found in Matthew's Gospel cannot be properly interpreted until we understand the theological motivations behind all that he wrote. Any retelling of history is influenced by the motivations and perspective of the one telling it. Thankfully, Matthew's motivations are very clear. Matthew wanted to show, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus is the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, the Saviour sent from God for all humanity, and God himself. And that every one of us is invited into God's family through the person and work of Jesus!

For these reasons, the Gospels in general and Matthew in particular are best thought of as "historical narrative motivated by theological concerns."<sup>3</sup>

Matthew, as great literature inspired by the Holy Spirit, is a Gospel one could spend a lifetime reading and rereading and still never mine its full depths.

## THIS SERIES

Our hope for this series is simple. We want to hold Jesus up the way Matthew does, for the same reasons Matthew does. Matthew set out to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the hopes of ancient Israel, and we want to show that Jesus is *also* the fulfillment of *all of our* hopes! We want to show that **only in Jesus** can any of us find the life we are looking for because **only in Jesus** can any of us find the life we were made for.

<sup>3</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 29.

Our prayer, as we move through this series, is that every one of us will hear the same words of Jesus that Matthew the tax collector did, and that every one of us will respond in the exact same way.

Matthew 9:9

*As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.*

# THE ARTWORK FOR MATTHEW

*Visit [wchurch.ca/MatthewArt](http://wchurch.ca/MatthewArt) to see all of the artwork referenced in this section.*

The book of Matthew is all about the response people have when confronted with who Jesus is. Everyone who encounters Jesus in the book of Matthew responds to him in various ways, but here's the key, *everyone* does respond. Whether it be with anger and rejection, passivity and indifference or joy and surrender, the narrative of Jesus is so profound and compelling that everyone reacts in one of these ways even if it's only on a subconscious level. This is still true of us today in our response to Jesus.

Matthew 16:15

*He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"*

In the same way that we have a response to Jesus and the radical message that he came to bring, we also respond to visual art. Visual art makes us *feel* things through colours, shapes and textures. Even if you don't consider yourself an artist or you don't "get" art, you have a natural reaction to it whether you're aware of it or not. You may see a piece of art and feel joy even if you are never be able to explain *why* you feel it. This is what abstract art is all about; communicating feelings and provoking an emotional response in the viewer.

So what words would you use to describe anger? Maybe sharp, jagged, forceful, losing control, violent, burning, etc. What about joy? Maybe bright, energetic, fun, celebratory, etc. You get the idea. So if we take those words and to try to evoke them in an abstract way it would make sense to use shapes, textures and colours that reflect them.

## **ANGER & REJECTION**

The gospel can be wildly offensive to those who don't believe in Christ. The message that Jesus brought was, and is, entirely counter-cultural. It draws a hard line on what is right and wrong and how we were originally created to conduct our lives before sin entered the world. The response of many to that message is anger. It grates up against our human want to control our own lives and decide what is best for ourselves. Anger and rejection go hand in hand. Those who find the gospel offensive often choose to reject it. If Jesus actually is who he said he was, then according to the Bible, one who rejects Jesus, rejects God and separation from Him is the result.

In the anger piece, all the shapes are sharp and jagged, communicating the sharp and raw aspects of anger. In the rejection piece, the red and the back areas are made up of particles or rectangles that are separating from each other, reflecting the separation from God that happens when one rejects Jesus.

In both pieces, the red contrasted against the black background creates tension and an unsettled feeling of animosity. The colour red is most often related to the emotion of anger, but it also expresses the violence of the reality of being separated from God.

The movement of the elements upward on an angle expresses the force of both of these responses.

### **INDIFFERENCE & PASSIVITY**

Indifference and passivity speak of those outside of the church and also those inside of it, but let's focus on the indifference and passivity that many have toward Jesus inside of the church. The Bible warns against being a lukewarm Christian quite sternly, yet this is often the reaction to Jesus that we see in the North American Church. In comfort, some are lulled into a state of apathy toward Jesus and the message of the gospel. Often those who would claim Jesus' name do not live lives that reflect Him at all; in fact, their lives show no more compassion, conviction or moral uprightness than those who reject Jesus altogether. This kind of indifference to the message of Christ leads to passivity in living out the gospel that Jesus died and rose to give us.

So what do indifference and passivity look like visually? They look colourless, lifeless and uninspiring. Like the repeated pattern of the cubes, indifference is repetitive, dull and fruitless. The elements of the pattern that speak to the idea of passivity are shapeless and fluid. They have no solidarity, but instead, they reflect how passivity takes a stand in nothing at all. It neither accepts nor rejects, it just goes with the flow of whatever current it finds itself in. The variety of textures in the passivity piece also convey the idea of not really being rooted in anything specific.

## **JOY & SURRENDER**

To those who hear the message of the gospel and believe, it's good news! **Great** news in fact! When one's response is to surrender their life to Christ they gain everything and with that comes great joy, even in the face of suffering. When someone surrenders to God they take their hands off their life. They submit to God's authority and his perfect plan for their life, even when they may not see how his plan is best. In Christ, they no longer need to carry shame or guilt, because that's exactly what Jesus died and rose to pay for. Instead, they can draw near to the throne of grace with confidence. They are unconditionally loved and will never be abandoned and in this truth great joy is found.

When we think of joy we think of celebrating! The piece that conveys joy is almost like bits of confetti that have energy and movement, because joy makes us come alive. When we see yellow we think of sunlight and warmth. The surrender piece makes use of organic, sweeping, wavy lines that convey the idea of letting go and giving God control. They are reminiscent of water, which gives a feeling of renewal and comfort.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

ESV Study Bible

Dale C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretations Past and Present*, 2005.

Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 1997.

D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, 1984.

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2003.

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*, 2002.

R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, 2007.

C.E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?: Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*, 2010.

Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1999.

Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)*, 1992.

David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew: Christ-Centered Exposition*, 2013.

R.C. Sproul, *Matthew (St. Andrew's Expositional Commentary)*, 2013.

Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2007.