

2 The king's commission (Matthew 3–4)

We saw how Matthew 1 placed Jesus in the Jewish story, and Matthew 2 placed Jesus on the global stage. Now we learn who Jesus is according to heaven (Matthew 3), and how he restores heaven's reign to the earth (Matthew 4).

Do you have any comments or questions you'd like us to consider on Matthew 1–4?

For example, you might like to consider these questions on Chapter 3:

1. What does the quotation from Isaiah 40 have to do with John the Baptist?
2. If John's baptism was a cleansing ritual where people confessed their sins, why was Jesus baptized?
3. John said Jesus would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire." What's that?
4. What was God saying when he declared, "This is my Son whom I love"?

2.1 Jesus according to heaven (Matthew 3)

John's prophetic testimony (3:1-12)

In the remote places along the Jordan River to the east of Jerusalem, a voice began announcing that God's reign was close to being restored. John the Baptizer was calling people to turn back to God, to make ready for God to reign over them again.

Matthew 3:3 connects John's message with Isaiah 40. It's a major turning point in Isaiah. Previously they'd lived as God's kingdom, but Isaiah 39:6 announced the exile: *everything ... will be carried off to Babylon.*

Isaiah 40 then comes as a word of comfort. The exile isn't the end. They'll return through the desert, and God will reign over them again:

Isaiah 40:3–10 (NIV)

³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness **prepare** the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." ...

⁹ You who bring **good news** to Zion, go up on a high mountain.

You who bring **good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "**Here is your God!**"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he **rules** with a mighty arm.



Baptism in the Jordan River today. Photo by Allen Browne, 2017.

So, who was John the Baptist? He was God's prophetic "voice" in the wild places, while they were still under foreign rule. The voice was preparing them. God's reign was close (3:2). The time had come, for *God-with-us* (1:23) had arrived.

Among the crowd that came to hear John were participants from two religious groups:

- **Pharisees** were popular local leaders who called their communities to be more obedient to the Torah, so that God would restore his reign (Deuteronomy 30).
- **Sadducees** were the more elite group who controlled the temple. Anyone who offered a cleansing ritual apart from the temple was suspect.

"*A nest of snakes,*" John called them. He said they'd lose their power when God reigned, for their agendas were not God's (3:7-10). God's Messiah would have such authority to set things right that even John would feel unfit to welcome him (remove his sandals).

The Anointed ruler would finally sort out all that had been wrong in Israel, everything that prevented the kingdom being restored for 600 years, all the self-serving attitudes of the temple leaders who were not serving God. God would sever them from his tree like dead branches to be burnt. At the same time, he would immerse his people with his Holy Spirit, empowering them to live as his holy nation (3:10-12).

In Pentecostal circles today, *baptism with the Holy Spirit* is understood as a second experience that Christians can have after salvation, personally receiving the Spirit. Others see it as a term for salvation, like being born of the Spirit. I'm not convinced that John was talking about an individual Christian experience.

John was describing the difference between his ministry and Christ's. Prior to Christ, the Holy Spirit was poured out on only a few leaders. But when God's Anointed came, he would pour out his anointing on the entire community, transforming us all to function as servants of the king in ways that the community prior to Christ could never know. John wasn't promising a personal experience; he was describing the communal transformation of the Spirit-empowered kingdom in Christ the king.

The chosen Son anointed by heaven (3:13-17)

Why would Jesus join the queue of people coming to John for baptism and confessing their sins (as verse 6 said)? If Jesus is the Messiah as John believed (compare John 1:30), that request didn't make sense to John.

But Jesus isn't requesting baptism because of wrong-doings against God. He's requesting baptism as an act of submission to God—not as a sign that he has done wrong, but as a sign that he wants to do right: *to fulfil all righteousness* (verse 15).

The king is fulfilling the requirements of God's Torah for his people (explained in 5:17).

This is the moment heaven reveals Jesus as the Messiah, affirming John's testimony:

Matthew 3:16–17 (NIV)

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

A few hundred years after Matthew wrote his Gospel, the church defined the **trinity** as the eternal relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—one God, yet all present here in this moment at the baptism. That's right, but Matthew was not setting out a theology of trinitarian relationships. Matthew was spelling out Jesus' identity as the Christ, the king elect, the person chosen and anointed by heaven to restore heaven's reign (the kingdom of heaven) to the earth.

If the word *Christ* means *Anointed*, this is the moment he was "Christed"—visibly anointed as the heaven-sent king for God's people.

What would Matthew's audience have made of these verses? They might recall Davids anointing:

1 Samuel 16:12–13 (NIV)

¹² Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and **anointed** him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on **the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David**.

The oil Samuel poured on David was a symbol that God had chosen David to reign as the representative on earth of the eternal sovereign in the heavens. Samuel's words were confirmed by what followed: they saw that God's Spirit had come powerfully on David. David was empowered to lead, protect, and care for God's nation with the wisdom and justice of heaven.

That's what's going on here. As Jesus rises out of the water to stand with the people who submitted to John's cleansing ritual and to fulfil all righteousness for them, heaven anoints Jesus with the Holy Spirit. What is poured out on him is not merely a symbol (oil) but a visible bird-like glow that descends from the heavens and rests on him. The accompanying declaration that he is the heaven-appointed king comes not just from a prophet (a spokesman for heaven) but from heaven itself.

God's decree regarding his Son changes everything on earth.

Turn to Psalm 2, a psalm used in the coronation of the kings of Judah. God had decreed that the sons of David would represent heaven's reign on earth. It says that God's authority overrules any attempt to overthrow his reign. Even if *the kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and his anointed, ... the One enthroned in the heavens laughs* at their puny attempts to take his power and his people (Psalm 2:2-4).

The incoming king and all the other rulers hear God's declaration:

I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain (Psalm 2:6).

The king elect then affirms God's declaration that he has indeed inherited the right to reign on earth from his Father, the eternal king in the heavens:

Psalm 2:7 (NIV)

I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father."

That's the declaration heaven made as Jesus rose from the cleaning ritual to fulfil all righteousness for his people. Accompanied by a visible anointing, the eternal

sovereign declared Jesus of Nazareth as the son to whom he had chosen to give the kingship: "This is my son, the one whom I have chosen, the one who pleases me."

How does this sit with you? Is that how you understand Jesus' baptism and the accompanying declaration from heaven? Discuss.

2.2 Jesus in the cosmic battle (Matthew 4)

Do you have questions you'd like us to address in Matthew 4? Suggestions:

1. Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (verse 1)? Surely God doesn't tempt us (James 1:13).
2. Why did Jesus preach *the gospel of the kingdom* (4:23; 9:35; 24:14)? What does that mean? Is that our gospel too?
3. If Jesus was the anointed king, why did he spend most of his time in the villages of Galilee rather than in Judea at the capital (Jerusalem)?

Facing the enemy for his people (4:1-11)

Jesus has just received the Spirit's anointing (3:16) and the Father's appointment (3:17). Why would the Spirit now lead him into the wild places to be tested by the devil (4:1)?

These are not random temptations: they're targeted attacks on *the Son of God* and his authority. As the God-appointed king, he must face the enemy for his people.

But who is their enemy? Herod? That issue divided Galilee, as it divides politics today:

- The **Herodians** supported Herod, treating him as God's anointed leader. Unsurprisingly, they did not want Jesus proclaimed as king (Mark 3:6; 12:13).
- The **zealots** hated Herod. In their minds, Herod was a usurper appointed by Rome. He and his minions had to die so God's people could be liberated.
- **John the Baptist** did not agree with the violence, but was critical of Herod. Herod became John's enemy when John declared him unfit to rule (14:3-5).

Jesus takes none of these stands. He treats Herod as irrelevant, giving him a wide berth (4:12; 14:1-13; 15:21; compare Luke 23:8, 11-12).

For Jesus, the enemy is not the flesh and blood rulers like David fought. Jesus faces the power behind those enemies, the power that pushed the empires to dominate God's people. Jesus addresses that force as *Šā-ṭān* (4:10). It's the Hebrew word for Adversary or Enemy.

It's not Babylon or Rome that holds God's people in *captivity* (1:17). If Jesus is to *save his people* (1:21), he must defeat the power behind the powers—the *Šā-ṭān*. That's why the Spirit who anoints the God-appointed king leads him into this conflict.

Test #1

After 40 days without food, the stones on the floor of the Judean wilderness begin to look like bread rolls. He has the power of heaven now. What would be wrong with *telling these stones to become bread?* (4:3).

Jesus sees nothing wrong with miraculously providing bread for thousands of people in the wilderness (14:19; 15:36). Their need was not as desperate as his: after 40 days without food, Jesus was at the limit of human endurance.

Didn't God already provide bread in the wilderness for 40 years? I have no doubt that Jesus' hungry stomach brought this story to mind:

Deuteronomy 8:2–3 (NIV)

² Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the **wilderness** these forty years, **to humble and test** you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. ³ He humbled you, causing you to **hunger** and then feeding you with **mana**, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, **to teach you** that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.



Judean wilderness. Photo by Allen Browne, 2014.

According to Deuteronomy, God was *testing* them: would they turn back to Pharaoh for their food? Or would they trust what God had decreed for them? Where was their allegiance when they were hungry?

Every believer faces that test. We make it worse if we try to convert people by promising, "Life will be so much better if you just add Jesus." (That's not the gospel; it's a sales pitch.) Many today are turning away from faith, disillusioned by promises that never *came out of the mouth of the LORD*, promises that they could name and claim whatever they wanted out of God.

But what would be wrong with Jesus using his God-given power to save himself? How can he save his people if he doesn't save himself?

Jesus recognizes what's wrong. When leaders use the power entrusted to them to benefit themselves, we're all in trouble. It's why the kingdom fell. None of the kings could handle the power God gave them: Saul (1 Samuel 13:9-14), David (2 Samuel 12:1:10), Solomon (1 Kings 11:11:29-37), Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:1-21), ... until God announced that the kingdom would fall (2 Kings 17, 21).

Even before there were kings, judges like Samson were using the power God gave them for their own benefit. It goes all the way back to the first humans—taking the food reserved for God so they could have God-power for themselves (Genesis 3:1-5). And they were in a garden, not a barren wilderness!

The trial teaches God's Anointed a crucial lesson: he will not use God's power to save himself (compare 27:42).

Test #2

The next phrase is really scary: *Then the devil took him ...* (verse 5).

It's probably a visionary experience rather than a bodily transportation to the temple, but what Jesus considers is frightening. Jumping off the high point of the temple is not misusing his own power; it's forcing God to intervene.

The devil quoted a Psalm that was popular in 2020 because it promises deliverance from *deadly pestilence* (91:3). It also promised protection from *the terror of the night* (91:5). Jewish exorcists said that meant demons. They often quoted it to the devil.

The Psalm says God protects his people. It does not say that no individual will suffer. Jesus was genuinely vulnerable.

The devil misquoted God's promise. Psalm 91:11 says: *He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways*. There's a big difference between trusting God as you travel versus jumping off the temple!



The western wall of the Jerusalem temple complex today. Photo by Allen Browne, 2017.

Satan must have feared how the Psalm ends: *You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent* (Psalm 91:13). The "old serpent" has been trying to take God's power since the beginning (Revelation 12:9).

Test #3

All the kingdoms of the world! (4:8) This is what the conflict between the God-appointed king and the usurper is all about.

The devil claims to rule them. In a twisted sense he does. In the beginning, God established earth as a kingdom of heaven (Genesis 1:1, 14-18). But by deceiving the nations to turn from God's authority and grasp power for themselves, the devil has enslaved the world to evil.

He offers the Son the same path to power. All Jesus has to do is recognize the Enemy's right to rule, and they'll be on the same side.

Jesus' answer is, "Get lost, *Śā-ṭān!*" (4:10). Jesus refuses to recognize the Enemy's right to rule.

God's people bow to only one sovereign and serve only one ruler. His name is the *LORD* (Deuteronomy 6:13). The anointed Son recognizes and serves no other authority.

Jesus' loyalty is clear. Heavenly messengers arrive to support the faithful Son who is demonstrably true to his Father's throne over all the earth (4:11).

Good news for the land that had been lost (4:12-17)



Zondervan Atlas of the Bible, (Zondervan, 2010), 212

Jesus won that battle, but the war isn't over. The rulers of this world are in power for what they can get for themselves, so anyone who announces God's reign is a threat. That's why Herod Antipas imprisoned John (4:12).

But if Jesus believed he was the God-anointed king, why leave Judea (the region around the capital)? Why go to Galilee? No, he wasn't just going home to Nazareth. He moved to a small fishing village named **Capernaum**.

When the Land was originally settled, Judah controlled the south, with Ephraim and Manasseh controlling the central region (Samaria). Zebulun and Naphtali were small tribes in the north (Galilee), with Dan just north of them. When the empires from the north attacked, these northern tribes were the most vulnerable.

Assyria captured the northern kingdom in 722 BC. Galilee was lost first, but God never gave up on Galilee. God promised to restore them as his kingdom:

Isaiah 9:1–6 (NIV)

¹ There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour **Galilee of the nations**, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

God has given the Son authority to save his people from their captivity (Matthew 1).

He was “born, king of the Jews” (Matthew 2). The government was placed on his shoulders with the Spirit's anointing and the Father's proclamation (Matthew 3).

The Son has repelled the Enemy's attack and proved faithful to his Father. Now he's arrived in the region that went dark first, and he's calling to everyone, “Turn back, for the kingdom of heaven has arrived” (4:17).

What is “the kingdom of heaven”?

John had the same message (3:2). Neither John nor Jesus meant “going to heaven when you die.” They were announcing the return of heaven's reign to earth. The people who'd been oppressed so long would once again be ruled by God—under heaven's government.

The arrival of God's Christ signalled the arrival of God's government. The kingdom of heaven had come to earth because the heaven-sent king had come.

Other Gospels use *kingdom of God* where Matthew uses *kingdom of heaven*, e.g.

Matthew 13:31 (NIV)

He told them another parable: “The *kingdom of heaven* is like a mustard seed”

Mark 4:30–31 (NIV)

“What shall we say the *kingdom of God* is like? ... It is like a mustard seed”

Luke 13:18–19 (NIV)

“What is the *kingdom of God* like? ... It is like a mustard seed”

Both phrases mean the same thing: heaven's reign is God's reign. Matthew focuses on the relationship between heaven and earth: earth belongs under heaven's reign.

The kingdom is the relationship between king and people. Earth's people belong under our heavenly sovereign, whether Jews or gentiles. That's the authority heaven gives to the king of the Jews by the end of Matthew's Gospel (28:18).

Christians have struggled to understand the term *kingdom of God* in recent centuries:

- Some think the kingdom of God is already here because God's king is here.
- Others think the kingdom will be here only after Christ returns.

Is it **present or future**? Most Bible scholars now recognize it's both:

- The kingdom is here because King Jesus is already seated at the right hand of the majesty on high, ruling and reigning over everyone and everything.
- The kingdom is not fully here, because not everyone recognizes the king yet.

One day every knee will bow and every tongue will give allegiance to Christ the king. The kingdom is already here, but not yet fully here.

Servants of the king (4:18-22)

Fishing was a good family business in the 15 man-made harbours around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus called four fishermen to leave their nets and follow him (4:18-22). They already knew of Jesus (compare John 1:40-42). But it's not like Jesus was a recognized Rabbi that they would be privileged to follow. Rabbis in that formal sense did not rise to significance until after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Following Jesus meant leaving their homes and secure business. Instead of gathering fish with their nets, they'll be **gathering people** with their king (4:19).

Why was the king gathering people?

Ever since the kingdom fell (586 BC), God's people had been scattered all over the Mediterranean. Without a king, they'd scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Now the king had come, and he called followers to help gather God's flock back into his leadership—as the kingdom of the heaven-sent king.

John the Baptist had talked about the Messiah gathering God's people like a harvest (3:12). It's a metaphor that features often in Jesus' teaching (12:30; 13:30; 22:10; 23:37; 24:31; 25:24-26, 32; 26:31).

The king's message and ministry (4:23-25)

Supported by these followers, Jesus announces and enacts his message:

Matthew 4:23 (NIV)

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming **the good news of the kingdom**, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

That's the first time we've seen the word *gospel* (*euangelion*) in the New Testament. Jesus' *gospel* was not, "You're a sinner who needs to get saved." The gospel Jesus proclaimed was the restoration of God's reign (God's kingdom) to a world that has been oppressed by evil. We really need to get back to proclaiming Jesus' gospel!

Note that Jesus proclaims God's kingship, not his own. He explains what things are like when God's reign is restored (the kingdom of heaven). He never proclaims himself as king: that would be evil (compare 2 Samuel 15:1-10). It's up to God to reveal who his king is. Jesus waits another three years before somebody gets that revelation (Matthew 16:16-17).

Jesus' gospel was *the gospel of the kingdom*. His good news was the restoration of earth as a kingdom of heaven.

But Jesus isn't just discussing restoration. He's bringing it into reality. The healings are evidence of God is restoring his suffering people in his Christ.

2.3 Conclusion

What have we learned about Jesus' identity and mission?

- **Identity:** Jesus is the king announced by John and anointed by heaven to restore his Father's reign to the earth (Matthew 3).
- **Mission:** Jesus defeats the power behind the powers, proclaiming and enacting the gospel of heaven's reign being restored to the earth (Matthew 4).

We're called to follow the king. Following him also means we're gathering people back to his leadership. So many people have been damaged by all the evil and affliction in the world, but everyone belongs under his governance.

That's the gospel we proclaim and enact as the community under his leadership.

For further commentary on these two chapters, see:

Mat 3:1-6	A voice in the wild
Mat 3:7-12	A king announced by a prophet
Mat 3:11-12	What is baptism with the Holy Spirit?
Mat 3:13-16	Jesus' priestly purification
Mat 3:16	Where did baptism come from?
Mat 3:17	Heaven's proclamation of Jesus
Mat 4:1	The Spirit led Jesus to be tested?
Mat 4:2-4	When power is tempting
Mat 4:8-11	All the kingdoms of the world
Mat 4:12-17	Light in dark places
Mat 4:18-22	The people of the kingdom
Mat 4:23-25	Jesus' kingdom agenda

Those links are from <https://allenbrowne.blog/scriptureindex/>

Next time we hear from the king himself, as he sets out life under his leadership so we know how to live as the kingdom of God.

Inspire your imagination by reading Matthew 5–6.