

Notes on Matthew 1–12

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Introduction

The New Testament's first four books all have the name of Gospel although only *Mark* begins his book with that introduction. It is fitting to call them such, not because they are the final form of the gospel message — this required the coming of the Spirit — but because nothing can replace knowing that he was sent by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do many good works. It is essential to know that he was crucified by those who had the opportunity to receive him and that God raised him up again (Acts 10:36–43).

Matthew, with the other Gospels, is the proclamation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Matt. 4:3, 6; 14:33; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54), but written by a converted Jew and with Jews in mind. He quotes often from the Old Testament to show that Jesus fulfils the Jewish hope, but clearly shows that what necessarily began as a word to Israel (10:5–6) became a word for all nations. All the things that he taught anticipated the day when his Spirit would be poured out and so we read them now as his word to us who have been baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

Chapter 1

Jesus came to fulfil promises made to Abraham (the father of the nation) and to David (the beginning of Israel's monarchy). Both of these men had been promised that a son of theirs would be God's means of blessing or saving the world, and they looked forward to his day. This son would be God's chosen one, anointed with oil for his task. (*Messiah* or *Christ* means anointed one.) Jesus was descended from these two men.

People familiar with the story of Israel would realise that this (abbreviated) genealogy included the sordid story of Judah and Tamar, the sad but wonderful story of Boaz and Ruth, the shameful of David's affair with Uriah's wife and the failure of all Israel leading to its deportation to Babylon. Through all these events, God had never changed his purpose to give the world a Saviour.

The story begins with Mary's apparent unfaithfulness to her fiancée, Joseph (betrothal was a legal bond under Jewish law). But the child was the work of the Holy Spirit. In days when Israel was far from trusting in God, God had given a sign that God was with them — a young child called 'Immanuel' (Isa. 7:10–16). Now, in Mary's

womb, God was with his people. The name 'Jesus', meaning 'saviour', was given to this child because he would (in a way that David could never do) save his people from their sins. Joseph was told not to fear the step of taking Mary as his wife. He showed his righteousness, not in maintaining appearances, but in obeying the messenger of God. He allowed the work of God to proceed without his compromising it. So Jesus was born.

Prayer

Father, we give thanks to you that you have never allowed us to be swallowed up by our own wrong doing. Your promises to Abraham and to David showed that you would save us, and now, their son, who is your own Son, has come. Through him, we have been saved, not just from harm but from our sins, and from bondage to false powers and from enmity to you. Thanks be to God for so great a salvation through the gift of Christ! Amen.

Chapter 2

How these astrologers knew from a star that a Jewish king had been born is a mystery. Their arrival at Jerusalem is no mystery however — where else would they go to find a king? In this way, God showed that the nations were ready to come to the light of Israel's Messiah (Isa. 60:1–7), and, he had given official notice to Israel of his Son's arrival. This should have been a time of great joy for the whole nation.

Israel's scholars had to go to the Scripture to locate the place of Messiah's birth (Micah 5:1–7). Reading this text gave them opportunity to rise up to this great thing God was doing among them. A king had arisen who would 'feed his flock in the strength of the Lord'. The time for the renewal of their nation had come. Their Messiah had been born.

Again, how these wise men recognised a star as standing over the place where the child was is a mystery. But their joy was exceedingly great (cf. the joy at the resurrection — 28:8). In contrast, Herod's malice and fear was also exceedingly great and the nation was diverted from its calling of receiving its Messiah. Joseph, who had begun living by the word of God rather than the fear of man, was now guided through the stages of his care of this Son by an angel.

The identity and history of this Jesus had been anticipated in the prophecies given to Israel, including the tragedy of Herod's jealous rage. The nation as a whole did not heed them, but the few prepared by God would have been led on in faith to see all that God would do.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that the light has shone on Israel, and so, on us all. Now your Son reigns at your right hand and the jealousy of the nations who wish to rule themselves cannot crush the joy of your people. Lead us this day, and may your word ever direct us to the fulfilment of all your purpose. Hear us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 3

John the Baptist was to prepare the way of the Lord (Isa. 40:1–5). It was 'the Lord' who was coming, and coming to establish his rule (kingdom) in Israel, and then, the world. He was coming, especially, to comfort his people. John's appearance was like

Elijah's (II Kings 1:8), and in many respects, his ministry had a similar purpose and would follow a similar course (Matt. 11:14; 17:12–13). A prophet had not appeared for a long time, but John was recognised as one, and many went out to hear him. Baptism was understood as a purification rite and many wanted to be right with God and ready for his coming.

John taught that God's kingdom would be established by the one coming after him, the Messiah. This would be a time for cleansing the nation. John knew what the Pharisees and Sadducees were. They had their eye to the praise of man and political power respectively, and John warned them severely. They could not presume on their heritage. And if people thought John's ministry was decisive, what of the ministry of him who was to come, baptizing the nation in the Holy Spirit and fire? Clearly, no evil would remain when he had finished his work.

Jesus insisted on being baptized by John, his older cousin (as we learn from Luke). We do not know how much John realised (from the stories within his family) about who Jesus was. At least he knew that Jesus was a better man than himself. Jesus knew his Father wanted him to be one with these people who were confessing their sins and preparing for the reign of God. For him, this was righteousness (cf. Jer. 23:5–6).

It is this Son who was identified now by the Father himself, visually and audibly, by the Spirit of God alighting on him, and by the Father speaking about him to all who were there. He was identified as God's Son who would rule the nations (Ps. 2:7; cf. Gen. 22:2), the Servant of the Lord whom God loved (as in Isa. 42:1; also Matt. 12:18). He would establish justice in the earth.

Prayer

Father, together with John, we are awed by the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ. You have declared him to us yourself. You have acknowledged him as your Beloved, ruler of the nations and bringer of comfort to those who mourn. You have entrusted to him the cleansing and healing of the nations. And he has known that it was your righteousness to be joined to us, to confess our sins in our place, and so to bear them. Mighty God, we honour you for the Son you have given, and give thanks that this Christ is ours forever. Hear our prayer, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 4

Jesus came out of Egypt as Israel had done (Matt. 2:14–15). Now Jesus was led into a wilderness as Israel had been — to be tested (cf. Deut. 8:2). It was the Spirit who led him, because the Spirit was eager for the mission and the victory of this newly acknowledged Messiah to begin.

As head of the new covenant, he fasted for forty days, as Moses had done as covenant head of Israel (Deut. 9:9, 18). The battle with evil powers, to secure a people who would love their God freely, was coming to its climax.

Jesus was also reliving and reconstituting the history of his people as God's son. Israel had failed in their faith and calling, but now, Jesus, as the Fountainhead of the new Israel, showed what sonship was about. The first two trials confronted this Father-Son relationship directly: 'If you are the Son of God . . .'.

The Son said he lived by every word from his Father's mouth and refused to accept that his life or the life of his people consisted in just being fed (cf. Deut. 8:3). Satan quoted Psalm 91:11–12, but Jesus refused to understand Sonship as obliging his Father to save him with a persuasive demonstration of power (cf. Deut. 6:16). Satan showed Jesus what he could give him, trying to outdo the inheritance God had shown Moses (Deut. 34:1–4), but Jesus knew any inheritance that put Satan over him would be no inheritance for him or for the people of God; he and his people would worship only the Lord (Deut. 6:13).

Everything for the Messiah and his people would be from the Father (by every word), under the Father (don't tempt) and to the Father (worship God alone). The kingdom first introduced by the Serpent in Eden relied on things being 'good for food, . . . a delight to the eyes, and . . . desired to make one wise' (Gen. 3:6). Jesus had come to destroy this kingdom ruled by 'the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life' because it was 'not of the Father' (John 2:16). He would destroy this false reign and draw people to himself and to the Father by the death he would die (John 12:31–33).

The trial being over, angels came and ministered to Jesus. Psalm 91:11 was still true.

The first excitement of John the Baptist's ministry was over. Political leaders had jailed him. Jesus took this as his cue to retire to Galilee where the revelation of his person and work could go on in a less contested way. He chose, not his home town, but the site nominated by Isaiah as the place where a great light would shine, and where relief from enemies would be given to Israel (Isa. 9:1–2). Isaiah had gone on to say that this relief would come by a child with the name 'Wonderful Counsellor . . .' who would reign as king and establish peace (Isa. 9:6–7).

Jesus immediately began to fulfil the prophecy by proclaiming the coming of this kingdom and the need to repent from all that he had just rejected in his temptations. He began to gather those who would help him. They would fish for men now. He travelled broadly in these Northern regions with his message of the kingdom, and demonstrated the intention of that kingdom with his healings. Matthew is eager to tell us what Jesus had to say, but first tells us how decisively and broadly his work was received and how he began to enlist servants of the kingdom.

Prayer

Father, if Jesus had not come, we may still have thought that our life arose from food, and from safety and from marshalling the kingdoms of this world to our own ends, and never have come to know you. We thank you that your Son knew both you and your purpose to bless us, that he brought your saving power to us who were distressed, and that he gave up his life to win us to you. Thanks be to you our Father, in Jesus name. Amen.

Chapter 5

Jesus was already taking up his reign as king and setting his people free (as announced in Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42). What were the disciples to make of the powerful teaching of the Pharisees who bound the consciences of their people to superficial demands? Jesus showed that he, the King, was leading his people into

true righteousness and that their humble reliance on God was the way of the kingdom. His gracious presence would enable the disciples to be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek and to hunger and thirst for righteousness. They no longer needed the pretensions of piety but could be what they were — needy sinners in the presence of a gracious God. It is they who would inherit the promises made to Israel: the kingdom, the comfort of God, the earth and true righteousness.

It is those who learned from Christ and not those who made their own righteousness who would be merciful, pure and peaceable, the qualities God truly valued (cf. Matt. 23:23). They would receive mercy, see God and be acknowledged as God's sons. So, they were highly favoured by God, both in having these qualities and in that they would certainly be acknowledged by God as his true people in the coming kingdom. They were blessed even while suffering the hatred of God's enemies, and should rejoice because they were one with the earlier prophets as God's new prophetic people.

Those who learned from Jesus would be salt to preserve the world. They would be a city on a hill which would give light to travellers. The certainty that his disciples would be this did not rely on them but on what he was about amongst them. The 'Israel' that was making its own righteousness would have to be thrown out. Christ had, figuratively speaking, set his people on a mountain top to be seen. Therefore, disciples should let this light shine. It would be so evidently a work of the Father that people would give glory to him.

Clearly, there could be no showiness in these good works because Jesus will condemn this shortly.

There are only two commands in verses 1–16: to rejoice and to let the light shine. Both are responses to what God has done in his people. Those who think the Sermon on the Mount is explaining how to live a Christian life have not understood the dynamic and gracious action of Christ being among his people as the reigning King.

Here for the first time in this Gospel, God is called Father. Jesus delighted in being the Son of his Father. He knew his Father would reveal himself as the Father of these disciples.

Having said things that were new, and powerful, Jesus countered any thought that he was opposed to Israel's law and prophets. He had come to fulfil all this, every command and every promise, and not just in himself, but in those he taught (cf. Rom. 8:4). No-one could gain credibility in this kingdom without doing and teaching what Israel already knew to be from God. No-one would even enter the kingdom without doing better than what was currently practised and expected by Israel's teachers.

God's command not to take the life of another (Exod. 20:13), for example, would be broken by anger, disrespect or scorn. Israel's courts had tried to fulfil the law through legislation but could not discern the heart or subject anyone to hell fire. Jesus said their situation was far more serious than suggested by what was legal and that they should take steps to escape their doom without delay.

God's prohibition of adultery (Exod. 20:14) should suggest to us that the removal of an eye or a hand would be preferable to lusting after a woman. The prohibition included the adultery brought about by divorce and remarriage.

The command to revere God's name (Exod. 20:7; Num. 30:2) had been abused beyond recognition. Israel thought truth came in degrees, related to that by which one swore. Jesus said that a 'Yes' or 'No' was sufficient, and that separating between heaven and earth, Jerusalem or one's head was artificial because God is over all. Abuse of this left people open to devilish practice.

The law of 'pay-back' was limited in Moses' time to strict limits; no more than the damage done could be exacted (Exod. 21:22–27). This had been interpreted as a right that took no account of the mercy of God on his people, or of what God would do through his Messiah. Jesus had come to give grace beyond human comprehension and he wished for its dynamics to be felt even now. He seems to have taught that we should allow ourselves to be abused and take no steps to restrain evil or presumption. This is what such living may appear to be, but Jesus was describing the new life of grace soon to flow freely among his people. Jesus did not let people push him over a cliff (Luke 4:28–30). His time had not yet come to give himself up to his enemies. Like him, our responses to abuse should not arise from a supposedly virtuous passivity but an active grace.

In the case of going a second mile (carrying baggage for Roman soldiers), and perhaps some court cases, there was no way of avoiding compliance. In such matters, and as regards the constant needs of the poor, Jesus showed that his followers could freely serve God in doing what was required.

Love of neighbour was acknowledged in Israel, but so was hatred of enemies. Old Testament commands or testimonies that had particular relevance at the time may have been turned into an excuse for personal animosity, a hatred that allowed for no repentance in the wrong-doer (cf. Exod. 17:14; Deut. 23:3–6; 25:17–19; Ps. 41:10; 139:21–22). Doing good for enemies had been taught in Israel (Exod. 23:4–5; II Kings 6:22; Ps. 7:4–5; 35:13–14; Prov. 25:21–22) but this had been forgotten.

It is as though Jesus could restrain himself no longer. He had to talk about his Father's care for all, day after day. How could this be reflected in us other than by loving and praying for enemies? How else could Israel be God's children? Even Israel's despised tax collectors and people of other nations could keep the command in the way Israel was teaching it. Rather, those who heeded the word of Jesus would want nothing less than the love of the Father being poured out on all.

Prayer

Father, if we have lost our character as your people, if we have lost the joy of grace and forgotten your commands that we love and live in purity and truth, what shall we do? Your Son says that if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be filled. Then, Father, comfort us who mourn, recall us to the mercy first shown to us. Receive us as your children, and take us into the world with your grace, according to the word of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 6

The dynamics of the kingdom of God which Jesus had brought near were all to do with living before the Father and receiving from him. This was vastly different from what disciples had seen in their leaders. Israel's people had been profoundly interested in rewards, but while pretending to seek the reward of God, were actually

playing to a human crowd. Charity, prayers and fasts had all been corrupted in this way. Even more tragically, their faith in the Father had been corrupted.

Jesus spoke to his disciples of 'your Father'. He had not yet referred to 'my Father' (not until 7:21), but that was obviously who he was talking about. Having the same Father as Christ, how should his people live? They should give to others, hardly aware of their giving, and receive the praise of their Father. They should pray, with no audience but their Father, and find that their needs were known before their few words were spoken.

It is difficult to imagine someone giving with one hand without the other knowing what was done. Clearly, the person is not focussed on their giving (cf. Matt. 25:37–39) but on the Father whom they desire to please. It is also difficult to know why someone would pray if their needs were already known. Clearly, the few words spoken by this disciple come from the restfulness of being fully known and the expectancy of being heard. Jesus' words, phrased as exhortations, were actually awakening the disciples to a life not built up from below but received from above.

Disciples should pray as those whose only concern is for the Father's name, the Father's kingdom and will. Then, their physical needs, their guilt and their struggle with evil could all be brought and left with the Father. If their own sins were forgiven, clearly, they would freely forgive those who sinned against them.

The culture of impressing one another ran deeply, but Jesus said their fasting should be effectively invisible so that only the Father would be the witness of their serious intent. For them to maintain their usual appearance would not be hypocrisy because they would be living in the comfort of God.

Treasure in heaven is more necessary than treasure on earth, because we lack the ability to preserve what we have here but may hold eternal treasures forever. Our affection for the things of heaven is critical. What if our eye is constantly diverted from God to wealth and our whole being is consumed with that? There would be no room for the Father's caring or our neighbour's need. Jesus calls this condition deep darkness (v. 23). But if one sees and devotes oneself to the kingdom and doing God's will, one's whole life is full of light.

We are more valuable than birds or flowers, but knowledge of our Father should make our living as carefree and glorious as theirs (not as unplanned as theirs because we are more valuable and more able than birds and flowers). Gentiles had turned their life into no more than living for themselves. Would Israel's life rise no higher? The people taught by Christ could devote themselves to their God, fully persuaded that their Father would provide for all their needs. One should not live in expectation of tomorrow's troubles but simply deal with the ones that are present each day.

Prayer

Father, your Son has taught us to know you, the provider of all good things. He has revealed the bondage of living for peer approval, property concerns and petty justice. Through grace, he has trained us to trust in you as we live in this world. Father, form in us the generosity and faithfulness of your own nature that we may escape the corruption that is in the world through lusts and live to your glory. Hear us for the sake of Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter 7

Disciples should never be critical of others. How could they be if they had received mercy? They would be judged with the same standard they unmercifully applied to others. How strange and unseemly it must have seemed to Jesus to see disciples 'tidying each other up' when their own need was so great. However, children of the kingdom should not attempt to give the holy food or treasured pearls of the gospel to those who refused it, or they may find themselves needlessly antagonising them.

Later, Jesus would be more explicit about withdrawal from those who proved themselves unworthy of the gospel (Matt. 10:11–15). The analogy of dogs and pigs are used in II Peter 2:22 of those who turn away from the gospel.

Disciples should ask, seek or knock and receive what they need from their Father. If a critical spirit is a defence against those who threaten, this command is needful in this context. Those who understood the presence of the kingdom in the reign of Christ could not be troubled by vulnerability. The logic of faith should tell them that a Father without evil would not so abandon them.

God's revelation and purpose (the law and the prophets) could be simply summarised: 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' By his reign, God forms his own nature in us by serving us as though we were himself.

Not many would see this as the way of life, but disciples should not be deterred. Some would teach a contrary message but the disciples should not be misled: the falseness of their message would be revealed in their living. Some would make a false claim to follow Jesus Christ, and seem to speak or act with his power, but if they did not do the will of his Father (as revealed in this teaching of Jesus), they would not be recognised by Jesus and should not be recognised by his disciples.

The 'many' and 'few' should not lead to conclusions about the proportion who would be lost or saved but warn us about following the lead of the many when we seem to be the few.

So, true wisdom would be to listen to and live by everything Jesus said. Only he could fulfill what had been revealed in the law and prophets. Everything else would fall.

Prayer

Father, forgive our restless, critical spirit. Draw us to trust in you wholly. Through Christ and your mercy to us in him, we know we have no grounds to be critical, nor to think that we could readily win others to your way. Make us patient in good works and wary of those who are not. Above all, may the word of your Son, and the sureness of your reign over all things by him, keep our hearts from all fear and cause us to stand as your people in this world. Hear our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 8

Jesus had both described the kind of life kingdom people would have and commanded his people to live in this way. Now the action of that kingdom continues.

Did Jesus want to do good for a leper? The answer was a resounding 'Yes', and Matthew emphasises that Jesus reached out to touch him. Jesus' healings were a

sign of his being Messiah (Matt. 11:5). Those on whom his grace alighted became witnesses of this to the nation (Matt. 10:18), in this case, by keeping the requirement of the law to present oneself to the authorities to verify the healing (Lev. 14:10).

The leper was excluded from Israel by disease and the centurion by race but neither were excluded by Messiah. The centurion had shown his love for Israel by building a synagogue, and now, respected their prohibition on a Jew entering a Gentile house. He believed in Messiah more than most in Israel and could not be deterred. He understood how authority worked and recognised that Jesus had authority from God to heal. His faith was acknowledged and his servant was healed.

The centurion's faith moved Jesus deeply and he spoke about the day when prophecies (eg. Mic. 4:2) that Gentiles would stream into the kingdom would be fulfilled. He added his own warning to Israel that they could find themselves excluded.

Yet another miracle was worked in Peter's home, and then, when the Sabbath was ended, many sought his help and were healed. The prophecy tells us what was really happening — the Servant of God was bearing the grief and sicknesses of his people (Isa. 53:4). There is much to come in this regard, but already, Jesus had entered into the crisis and pain of his people.

Jesus had disturbed the status quo but was being moved by his Father's purpose. Now, he needed a retreat from the constant work of healing. A scribe thought he could follow Jesus wherever he went but had to understand that Jesus would offer no security in this world. Another disciple was told that the kingdom could not be fitted in after familial responsibilities were concluded. The true disciples followed him in the boat.

The King of the kingdom was still a man and peacefully slept off his exhaustion in the boat. He was also subject to the uncertainties of this present creation stirred up by evil powers, but then, showed his authority over them. He expected the disciples to believe that the rule of God in Christ extended to protection from the elements where this was important for the progress of the kingdom. They were amazed.

Jesus rebuking the wind and sea suggests that it was more than natural elements threatening them.

Jesus had sought distance from the crowds, but could not be distant from the battle with evil powers which his presence attracted. On the far side of Lake Galilee, he subdued terrible demons in two Gadarean men. The demons knew their gruesome work would come to an end but begged Jesus for further time. The frenzy they created in the pigs brought them to a fitting judgement. Jesus confronting these powers meant loss to the Gentiles who kept the pigs, but they preferred a life without such intrusion.

Prayer

Father, your Son has entered into our griefs and sorrows, and borne in his body all that undoes us. He was resolute in overcoming the powers that stood against you and your grace towards us. Then, grant faith, hope and love to follow you into the victories you still long to bring to the peoples of this world. May no evil powers, or personal agendas prevent us from being the servants of your Son in this present world. Hear our prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 9

Here again are people who expected something when they came to Jesus. There was no doubt that Jesus would heal (Matt. 8:3) but those who would believe were limited. Here, for the first time that we know, Jesus declared a man forgiven. He had taught that we should forgive each other as we were forgiven by God (Matt. 6:14–15), but here, Jesus was imparting God's forgiveness. The cripple should 'cheer up!' Jesus said. He was not just healing bodies but whole people who must live their life before God.

Scribes would not accept that there was anything of God in Jesus, and certainly not that he had authority to forgive. Only God could do that (Mark 2:7). But why should they have the evil thought in mind that Jesus was blaspheming? God had sent him to save them from their sins (Matt. 1:21). They should have recognised that Jesus was dealing with sins more truly than their own attempts to justify themselves. Jesus demonstrated that he did have power to forgive because healing (the 'harder' thing because it had to be demonstrated) would be a sign to them that the man had been forgiven. 'Son of man' is Jesus' favourite name for himself and everything that he did filled out that term. Gradually, it would be made clear who the Son of Man was (Matt. 14:33; 16:13; 26:63–68) one who would receive a kingdom that all his people could share (Dan. 7).

Jesus asking Matthew to follow him was a judgement on the narrow criteria Israel had prescribed for membership in the kingdom. Israel's leaders thought it had to do with ritual (sacrifice) rather than mercy. They needed to read Hosea 6:6 to understand the heart of God for his people. Matthew had many of his friends home for a meal (so Luke tells us) and they would have felt the warmth of that mercy reaching out to heal them all.

Jesus was anticipating a coming kingdom feast with Jews and Gentiles (Matt. 8:11) and was already celebrating this by feasting with Matthew and his friends. He had fasted on special occasions and the church would continue to do so (Acts 13:2–3; 14:23), but how could he lead his disciples in the regular fasting practised by the Pharisees (eg. Luke 18:12) when it was time to celebrate his presence in Israel as their 'Bridegroom'? Judaism's piety could not make enough room for Jesus' presence. His presence and mercy needed new arrangements.

As if to illustrate these new arrangements, Jesus was confronted with two requests for healing, the first from a synagogue leader who believed his dead daughter could be raised. Out of this man's desperate need came the belief that even death was not final. He was an indication of how Israel's leaders could change so that the power of Jesus could bring the healing needed by the whole nation. The public healing was interrupted by a private but confident seeking of help. The haemorrhaging woman received not just healing but the word of Jesus to say that he willingly bestowed this on her, and so, she shared in the blessing of this great day. She should 'cheer up' (as in v. 2 and 14:27). Likewise, the crowds who wept because of the girl's death should stop weeping. Everything in the wake of Jesus' ministry would have to change.

Two blind men recognised Jesus as Son of David, the Messiah who had come to save them. They also recognised that the day of his coming was a day of mercy (as

also in Matt. 15:22; 20:30; cf. Luke 1:69–75). They believed and were healed but were unable to suppress the desire to speak of their healing. Perhaps Jesus knew their witness would do him and the kingdom more harm than good.

Jesus himself was not retreating. His next healing, or exorcism made a dumb man speak. Many wondered because they could not recall such a thing happening in Israel. The Pharisees attributed this to the prince of demons. They would not accept the immediacy of this reign of mercy. These were days of profound significance for the nation.

How serious this was can be seen by the account in Matt. 12:22–32.

Still, Jesus continued to travel, to teach in synagogues, to proclaim the presence of the kingdom and to heal. Healings alone (and the enthusiasm they generated), without the teaching and affirming of the presence of the King, could not bring about what Jesus had come to do. He was the compassion of God in person, Israel's true Shepherd King and longed that others would understand God's mercy and be servants of the kingdom.

Prayer

Father, only your Son could proclaim to us the meaning of your reign among us. Make us ready for your mercy, both to us and to those among whom we live. May the presence of your Son, our Shepherd King, crucified and now risen, keep us in faith, even in the presence of death, so that we may always proclaim what is true. May the joy of forgiveness and of your presence remain with us forever. These things we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

Chapter 10

The mercy promised to Israel needed to be freely proclaimed and performed, by these disciples now, as well as by Jesus. The nation needed to be gathered to the Shepherd Messiah and to realise that God's kingdom had come near to them. The focus of Jesus on Israel was not a matter of proximity but of policy. To them belonged the Messiah (Rom. 9:4–5) and they must have full opportunity to understand the covenant mercy he had come to reveal (cf. Luke 13:16.). So, the twelve were named and sent out.

The apostles were to give freely and expect to be supported. Worthy or receptive households would receive the peace of God's reign on their whole family. Unreceptive households would be treated as though they were no longer part of Israel, and in fact, under sentence of terrible judgement. (Travellers returning to Israel would shake dust from foreign lands from their feet before crossing back into their own land.)

Being so generous with their message should not be confused with being gullible. They would be persecuted so would have to be as wise as serpents, though free of ill will (cf. the serpent in Genesis 3:1.) The opposition the apostles could expect would invade homes and put people in court, though, even here, it would serve the purpose of bringing the gospel to the notice of Gentiles. In all of this, disciples would never be abandoned but would have the Spirit of the Father to show them what to say.

Jesus elsewhere noted that the sons of this world were wiser in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light (Luke 16:8). Paul described the way of being careful (I Cor. 14:20).

The apostles should be prepared to move on when the message was clearly rejected because there would be plenty to do before Christ came in power. This was either a reference to his ascension or return. The former is more likely because Jesus was still talking about the local towns of Israel.

How could disciples avoid these conflicts when Jesus had been treated as he was? If convictions in court were obtained by suppression of evidence, all the evidence would come to light before God's judgement. The proclamation should not be limited because of threats. Final judgement was coming, and they should live now in the light of what would be revealed then, and be confident of the Father's care in the present.

'Taking up a cross', suggesting an execution, must have shocked the disciples. What was at stake was more important than family, more important than life. Laying down their lives for Christ would now be their way of life. It was his own way of life, the way of the Father in his constant self giving. But in so giving themselves for Christ, they would find their lives in him. They would also find those who received Christ. What a rich participation in the mission — to be received as part of a person's receiving of Christ (cf. Gal. 4:14–15). Then, those who received the apostles would receive the same reward as the person who brought the word.

Prayer

Father in heaven, we have met your Son Christ through the preaching of your apostles and the church raised up through their testimony. We are humbled that such mercy has reached also to us. Grant that the joy and generosity of Christ may always lead us out into the world with his message. May the peace of Christ come to all to whom you send us. Help us to cast care aside and to live in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, that we may also have the fellowship with many in the good news of grace. Hear us through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 11

Jesus and his apostles went among Israel's towns (Matt. 10:6) with the good news of the kingdom. The call to participate in this announcement is highlighted now through the example of John the Baptist, now in prison. Could he have been mistaken? Jesus simply showed that the signs of God's rule as described by Isaiah (Isa. 29:18; 42:7; 61:1) were present in Jesus. John should not take offence because of his personal loss. Nor should any who bore witness to Jesus.

Jesus could not speak more highly than he did of John. He was not a weak man or people would not have gone to see him. He was not an elegant man or they would have found him in a palace. He was a prophet and was the voice preparing the way for the coming of the Lord and his comfort (Isa. 40:1–8). He had to show that humanity was like grass, quickly fading, and that their strength lay in listening to the word of God. (Israel had forgotten this and thought that the word of God was in their hands.) He had done that and had pointed to the coming of Messiah. Perhaps this was why he was greater than all before him. But what of those who received Messiah, those who entered the kingdom? The least of them would exceed John, not necessarily in virtue but in the gifts given to him or her.

Since John's coming, everything had become more intense and Jesus spoke tersely for those who would follow his meaning. Prophets had prepared for Jesus' coming. John was 'Elijah' who would precede 'the day of Lord' (Mal. 4:5–6). Since he came, some clung to their own agenda and became violent in trying to seize the kingdom for themselves (eg. Matt. 21:23–32; Luke 7:32; 13:14, 24, 31; 16:14–18; John 6:15). They resisted the generosity and purity and freedom of the kingdom. 'If you have ears, use them to listen!' said Jesus. Some sought to press John, and now Jesus, into their own mould, but John and Jesus could not play the games their critics called on them to play.

In fact, the towns who had rejected Jesus, towns in which he had done most of his miracles, were guilty of greater sin than Tyre and Sidon who had been proud (Isa. 23:7–9), or than Sodom which had been wicked (Gen. 18:20), and they would suffer a worse fate. This could hardly be imaginable for a Jew.

Jesus needed to pray. He thanked the Father for hiding pearls of wisdom regarding the kingdom from those who were wise in their own eyes and for revealing them to 'infants' who relied on Messiah for their wisdom. He told his disciples of the authority given to him, of the Father who alone knew him truly and whom he not only knew but could make known. Here was the secret of the kingdom. All the Father's reign was entrusted to this man, and they would know the Father because they received his Son. So, we should come to him. We should leave behind the heavy loads of self righteousness (Matt. 23:34) and private kingdom building and carry only the load dictated by the gentle and humble Christ. Even if this were a cross (Matt. 10:38), it would be an easy load to bear. The hope set before us and love poured out into our hearts would ensure this. Then we would know God's sabbath rest.

Jesus was appealing to Israel as had Jeremiah, but the urgency was now greater (Jer. 6:13–17).

Prayer

Father, your kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world, and your servants must learn to bear a different load from that which the world prescribes. Grant that we may not be offended if we suffer for your sake, nor forget the gentle healing which comes to so many by your works and words. When critics mount up and seek to bring their own rule to the kingdom of God, grant that we may again hear the word of your Son and rest in you, our Father. Hear us through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 12

Maintenance of outward ritual had become supreme in Israel. The consciences of Pharisees were attuned to lawful performance and not to the love of God and their neighbour. Everything about Jesus affronted them so that he and his disciples were watched for infringements by which they could be discredited.

Appealing to the Sabbath commandment to condemn the disciples for preparing a snack did not stand up to investigation. Would Pharisees also condemn David for his taking bread from the temple (I Sam. 21:3–6). Would they condemn the priests when they worked at presenting Sabbath day sacrifices? Jesus himself was more significant than the temple. He was its replacement (John 2:19–21) and the 'labour' of the servants of this Temple should be understood and received without question.

Such a critical spirit arose from not understanding the prophets who understood that sacrifice without mercy was not a true offering to God (Matt. 9:13; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:8).

It was Jesus, the Son of Man, who would rightly interpret and fulfil what the Sabbath meant, not the Pharisees (cf. Mark 2:27–28). Sabbath had been a sign of trust in God's labour rather than that of his people. Sabbath would now be a whole life of trust in the works of God in Christ.

In the synagogue, the debate continued, this time, over the healing of a withered hand. Jesus used yet other Scriptures to reason with them. No one quibbled over farmers rescuing a stray sheep on a Sabbath. Where were their priorities?

Jesus, not eager to fuel conflict, left the area, discouraged publicity but continued his healings. How could it be otherwise? The Holy Spirit had anointed him as Servant of the Lord to bring God's justice in the form of mercy (Isa. 42:1–4) and crowds followed him. Here was the hope for all peoples. After Pentecost, the same would happen among the nations, but the generosity of the kingdom was already being displayed in Israel.

The healing of a demon possessed blind and mute person was stunning, so much so that people asked if Jesus was Messiah (Son of David). This upgrading of public sentiment was met with sterner official denunciation: Jesus must have access to demonic power. Again, the arguments against Jesus were unreasonable. They had been confronted with the Holy Spirit working these signs and the Kingdom of God was upon them. It was time to be with Jesus, not against him. No-one could remain neutral. The issues were now too clear. The Spirit had identified Jesus and the kingdom to these people. They could be forgiven for speaking against the man Jesus but not for resisting the Spirit who bore witness to him. They were urgently in need of the mercy they denied to others.

The fact that Jesus said this as a principle rather than as an accusation suggests it was meant as a warning. What were they doing? Their words were the fruit of their lives and they came from evil hearts. Those same words would be used to condemn them on judgement day. Their situation was more desperate than they thought.

Some Pharisees were moved to enquire further as to who Jesus was by asking for a sign. They may have wanted the kind of sign which made it publicly respectable to confess that he was the Christ and not a servant of darkness. This only further proved the wickedness of their hearts. They, like Nineveh, were an evil generation. Jonah's encounter with death (Jonah 2:2), and then, his presence among the Ninevites was a clear sign that they should repent. Jesus also would encounter death and God would raise him up (John 2:18–19) to preach forgiveness to us all. This would be the only sign for Israel, and of course, for the world.

Nineveh will rise up in the judgement to affirm that the sign given to Israel was clearer than the one given to them. Jesus, who stood in the midst of Israel, was greater than Jonah. He was also greater than Solomon whom an African Queen had acknowledged.

When the gospel is preached, we may say that Jesus stands among us to proclaim that he has died, and is alive again. This is his sign to every wicked generation that he is the true Saviour of the world (Acts 2:22–36; 4:10–11; Rev. 1:5, 17–18).

Jesus had just exorcised an evil spirit from a deaf and blind man, but there were other kinds of evil spirits. Israel had specialised in cleaning out their lives but were not letting the wind of the Holy Spirit fill their emptiness, the wind that was now blowing across the land in the ministry of Jesus. The meaning of the Old Testament was opening up and the coming power of salvation was already being revealed. Jesus said that this evil generation would fall prey to many such spirits and be far worse off than they were before their fanatical attempts to cleanse themselves.

Perhaps the unusual combination of an evil spirit which prevented a man seeing and speaking was a parable for Israel. The spirits revisiting their empty lives were preventing Israel from seeing the Christ and the signs he performed, and from confessing what they should confess.

The appearance of the family of Jesus gave him opportunity to acknowledge his true household, those who, through him, heard and obeyed the word of his Father.

Prayer

Father, we are amazed at the purposeful quietness of Jesus going about the work you gave him to do. We are amazed also as we realise that such mercy as he performed is always your will for us, both to give it to us and for us to give it to others.

Father, we are shamed at the evil of our hearts that drives us to preserve our self justifying culture and proves nothing but our anxiety and selfishness. How powerful these things are, powerful enough to kill your Son.

We bless you, our Father, for the sign given to us, a wicked and adulterous generation, the sign of your Son raised up with power to heal our withered lives.

Lord, you have warned us not to trust what we can build but to live under Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath. May the wonderful winds of your Spirit open our minds, take us to your Son and broaden our affections. Lord, save your people, and bless your inheritance, through Christ our Lord. Amen.