1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Matthew
Theme: Fulfilled

Overview: At its most basic level, Christmas is evidence that God keeps his word. In this Advent and Christmas study from Matthew's Gospel, students will see how God's promises were fulfilled in Jesus through generations, through love, through promise, and through hope. They will learn to let Jesus bring them into his family, to live by love, to respond in worship, and to place their hope in the Son of David.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Author

Early church tradition unanimously identifies the author as Matthew, also called Levi, a tax collector whom Jesus called to follow him and who became one of the twelve apostles (Matthew 9:9; 10:3; Mark 2:14). As a former tax collector, he was accustomed to keeping careful records, and his Gospel is carefully organized.

Audience

Matthew wrote primarily for Jewish Christians. He quotes the Old Testament frequently, often noting that events happened "to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet," and he traces Jesus' genealogy back to David and Abraham (Matthew 1:1-17). Yet his Gospel also reaches out to the nations, from the Magi to the Great Commission.

Date

Most scholars date Matthew's Gospel between AD 50 and 70, before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, which Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:1-2).

Setting

The lessons in this study move from Jesus' family tree, which reaches back to Abraham and David (Matthew 1:1-17), to Joseph's home in Nazareth and the birth of Jesus (1:18-25), to the visit of the Magi in Bethlehem and the Holy Family's escape to Egypt (2:1-15), and finally to the grain fields and synagogues of Galilee, where Jesus clashed with the Pharisees over the Sabbath (12:1-23).

Theme

Fulfilled. Matthew shows again and again that Jesus fulfilled the Law, the Prophets, and the promises God made to Israel. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet" (Matthew 1:22). God is true to himself and always keeps his word.

Why Study Matthew?

Matthew shows us that the God who made promises to Abraham and David kept every one of them in Jesus. This study calls believers to join Jesus' family, to let his coming shape how they love God and others, to worship the promised King, and to place their hope not in religious systems or rules, but in the Son of David.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	Matthew 1:1-17
WEEK 2:	Matthew 1:18-25; 22:34-40
WEEK 3:	Matthew 2:1-15
WEEK 4:	Matthew 12:1-23

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Let Jesus bring you into his family.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Fulfilled

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 1:1-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 2 Samuel 7:11b-13

FULFILLED THROUGH GENERATIONS

BY MARK SCOTT

The New Testament begins with a genealogy. Is that an odd place or perfect place to start? The tax collector from Capernaum (Matthew, also called Levi) thought it was the perfect place to begin. For he and the other disciples had found in Jesus of Nazareth the desire of the nations (Haggai 2:7) and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). The Old Testament began in Genesis and the Hebrew Bible ended (in 2 Chronicles) in the same manner as the New Testament begins—with a genealogy.

Fulfillment and discipleship are two themes from Matthew's Gospel that we will study in December and January. Fulfillment was a major theme for Matthew. The word appears 15 times in the Gospel (the most of any of the Synoptic Gospels). Jesus fulfilled the Law, the Prophets, and the Scriptures at large. Jesus came to save us, to forgive us, to die on the cross, and to bring us life and peace, but he also came to fulfill God's promise to Israel. God is true to himself and always keeps his word. If he said he would bring a messiah to the world, then he would do it. In addition, this fulfillment was effectual in that it brought connections from Jesus' family to ours.

Family of Promise

Matthew 1:1-6

Jesus had the right roots. He had human roots (Matthew 1:1-17) and divine roots (vv. 18-25). Both sets of roots legitimized him as the Messiah. Jesus' story started long before he arrived on the scene. It began with the patriarchs. Abraham was *the father of* (literally "begat") Isaac. Whenever we read the Old Testament, we must always ask, "What is happening to the promise of Genesis 12?" Is it being advanced? Is it being compromised? Is it being derailed? In many ways, the Bible is a "theology of promise."

This promise came down through people who "needed a therapist," according to John Ortberg. I mean, look at these people: Abraham lied about his wife, Isaac loved one son over the other, Jacob had a poker face, and the list goes on. The place of women is quite significant in this first section. The listing of women's names in genealogies for that time was not unheard of, but it was rare. Four women are mentioned in this section: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (though, technically, Bathsheba was referred to as Solomon's mother . . . formerly "Uriah's wife"). These were not ladies you would put in the front row for a family reunion photo. All had issues of some sort—immorality, deceit, or were considered outsiders. But these names demonstrate that God can hit a "straight lick with a crooked stick." The promise flowed through grace.

Family of Royalty

Matthew 1:7-11

As soon as Matthew named David, the genealogy took a "kingly" turn. In fact, the whole genealogy turned on the gematria (numeric values that are assigned to letters of the Jewish alphabet) associated with David's name. David's name had three consonants. Their numerical value equaled 14, and Matthew noted the significance of that (v. 17). Some of David's descendants were good kings (e.g., Asa, Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Josiah). Others compromised their royalty by their waywardness (Rehoboam and Jeconiah, also called Jehoiachin). But once again, God's grace worked through broken people to advance his messianic mission.

Some people have wondered about certain names being left out of Matthew's genealogy. Some names are missing when we compare Luke's genealogy (Luke 3:23-37) with the names in Chronicles. But, as John F. Walvoord says in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, "Jewish reckoning did not require every name in order to satisfy a genealogy." The royal part of the genealogy showed that "Jesus Christ is the only Jew alive today who can prove the rights to the throne of David" (*Wiersbe's Expository Outlines of the New Testament*).

Family of Exiles

Matthew 1:12-17

In this last section there were no patriarchs and no kings. Why? Because God's people were in exile during that time. They were being punished by God and certainly were not in charge of their own destiny. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in 586 BC and burned the temple. He hauled many of the Jewish people into captivity. Would God's plan to rescue creation come to naught? No, God would preserve a faithful remnant. In fact, God's people often returned from exile (think Egypt, Babylon, and sin).

God raised up a pagan king named Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1), who allowed the Jews to go home in three waves with Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. It was through the faithful people in exile, some of whom are named in Matthew's genealogy, that the Messiah would come. Ultimately this genealogy came down to a man named Joseph who was the husband of Mary from whom came the Christ. Theology may have been God's purpose in the Christmas story, but history was his method.

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WHY BEGIN WITH BEGATS?

BY DAVID FAUST

Imagine you're reading the Bible through for the first time. The Old Testament comes to a close, and you sense silent centuries passing by while God prepares to turn the page to a new day and a new covenant. Eager to read the groundbreaking good news, you turn to Matthew 1, only to find the New Testament begins with "begats"—branches on a Hebrew family tree.

If you and I wrote the Bible, we probably wouldn't have done it this way. Writers usually try to grab their readers' attention with a strong lead paragraph, a thought-provoking question, or an interesting story, not by pointing out that "Ram was the father of Amminadab" (Matthew 1:4). For many of us, genealogical records sound about as interesting as the federal tax code. When I was a boy, my eyes fogged over with boredom whenever Dad droned on about my great-aunts or third cousins—relatives I barely knew.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit didn't ask my opinion when he inspired the biblical authors. Boring or not, the opening verses of Matthew's Gospel are important because they root the good news of Jesus in the fertile soil of Hebrew history, they create a bridge connecting the Old and New Testaments, and they introduce Jesus' qualifications as the Messiah who saves us from our sins.

What else does Jesus' human ancestry reveal about God's plan?

The Redemption Story Is About Real People

Christ's incarnation isn't a fairy tale. God reveals his will through the stories and struggles of real-life individuals and their families. History is "his story," but it's our story, too. Some of the names in Matthew 1 may look uninteresting to us, but every person listed there—in fact, everyone who's ever lived—has a story that matters to God.

The Messiah Entered Our Mess

Christ himself was sinless, but multiple mess-ups tainted his human bloodline. Abraham lied. Rahab was a prostitute. David committed adultery. Solomon's wives led him astray. Uzziah was prideful. King Manasseh and King Amon "did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 33:22). Yet, all of these individuals appear among the Messiah's human ancestors. Jesus' genealogy underscores his ability to identify with sinners, and it illustrates how the God of grace brings good out of messy circumstances.

Good Things Take Time

We tend to be impatient, but the eternal God follows his own timetable. Sin crushed humanity in Genesis 3. Many centuries and multiple generations passed before Christ came to crush sin once and for all.

In my teens I wanted to discover God's will for my life, but I found it elusive. I prayed, but the answers weren't always clear. I read the Bible, but no verses told me whom to marry or what college to attend. Someone recommended a booklet called *Affirming the Will of God*. The author, Paul E. Little, used a simple illustration. He said most often, God's guidance isn't a magic package that drops down from Heaven on a string. Usually it's like a scroll that unrolls a bit more each day.

Over time, God unrolled the scroll and fulfilled his plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. His faithfulness over the long haul gives me hope. And it helps me realize that Matthew 1 can make interesting reading after all.

Personal Challenge:

Is there a part of the Bible that seems boring to you? This week, select and study a section of Scripture you find difficult to understand and apply. Ask the Lord to help you see it with new understanding and appreciation.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What challenges did you face last week?

2. Since we last met, with whom did you personally seek reconciliation or share God's message of reconciliation?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 1:1-17** aloud, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. What stands out to you most in this passage?

4. Let's dig more deeply into the passage.
   - Luke's genealogy (Luke 3:23-38) went all the way back to Adam. What would Matthew's choice of starting with Abraham convey to Jewish readers?
   - What do the titles for Jesus in this passage tell you about Matthew's purpose for writing this account?
   - Matthew divided his genealogy into three sections. What important events or transitions in Jewish history did this call out?
   - Whom do you recognize in this genealogy, and what do you know about him or her?
   - While women were rarely listed in most genealogies of that time, five are referred to in this one (Tamar in verse 3; Rahab and Ruth, verse 5; Uriah's former wife, Bathsheba, verse 6; and Mary, verse 16). What do you find interesting or informative about that?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. What do you learn from the people on this list about the importance of obeying God?

8. God's people are directed to be fruitful, grow in numbers, and reproduce (Genesis 1:22, 28; 9:1, 7; etc.). How can we do that in a spiritual sense?
   - How can we as a group work toward growing in numbers and reproducing?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. What challenges do you anticipate facing this week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 1:18-25; 22:34-40**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Let the birth of Jesus lead you to live by love.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Fulfilled

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25; 22:34-40

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 John 4:7-12

FULFILLED THROUGH LOVE

BY MARK SCOTT

How does Christmas affect your love life? The question is not about how Christmas affects the present you buy for the love of your life. Rather, how does the coming of God in Christ affect loving him and others? "Joseph Davidson" (Joseph, son of David, earthly father of Jesus—Haddon Robinson called him the "forgotten man of Christmas") had some love lessons to learn. But so did an unnamed Pharisee who was an expert in the law.

Joseph's Love for Mary

Matthew 1:18-25

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus (technically only one verse is devoted to the birth of Jesus—most of the text is devoted to the conception of Jesus) followed the genealogy of Jesus. The text begins, "This is how the *birth* (genesis) of Jesus the Messiah came about." It started with a problem. Mary is pregnant, and the baby is not Joseph's (they had not yet *come together*). Mary and Joseph were only *pledged* (betrothed—think "seriously engaged"—notice that Joseph is referred to as her *husband* in v. 19).

Joseph was a very good man. He might not have been "an expert in the law," as the Pharisee mentioned later was, but he was *faithful to the law* (that is, he was just). Maybe obedience "to" God trumps knowledge "of" God. Joseph knew what the law required about Mary's unfaithfulness (Deuteronomy 24:1). But he loved Mary and decided to divorce her quietly. Joseph faced a dilemma. His justice demanded one thing, but his mercy called him to do another (cf. James 2:13).

Joseph could "*consider*" nothing else. He was wrecked by the news of Mary's pregnancy. But God showed his tender love for Joseph by giving him a dream (Joseph's Old Testament namesake was also a dreamer). Joseph was to be brought up to speed with Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The unnamed angel (Gabriel?) said what angels typically say: "*Do not be afraid*." Joseph was to take Mary home as his wife. She really was pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit. Her story was true. When the baby was born he was to be named *Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins*. In his name was his mission.

Matthew interrupted his narrative by inserting the first of 62 Old Testament citations and the first of 15 specific fulfillments. Mary's pregnancy by the Holy Spirit was actually a fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah 7:14. While this passage had a meaning in its original context of King Ahaz's court, its ultimate (maybe layered or typological) meaning was fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was to come from a *virgin*. The virgin birth is not discussed much in the Bible. But the church has fought tooth and nail to maintain it as one of its dearest-held doctrines. It would seem that to lose the virgin birth is to lose a unique aspect of Jesus' divinity. And not only would he be called Jesus, but he would also be called *Immanuel* (i.e., God with us). So the Gospel began and so it ended (Matthew 28:20).

Joseph was perfectly obedient to the angel. He married Mary. But he did not *consummate* their marriage ("know" her). There was no commandment for Joseph not to be intimate with his wife. This was a chosen posture on his part to ensure that all would know that Jesus was biologically Mary's son, legally Joseph's son, but fundamentally God's Son (Warren Wiersbe). Joseph loved Mary with a most noble love.

The Pharisee's Lack of Love for Jesus

Matthew 22:34-40

Christmas calls us to love Jesus more. The Pharisee in our text was yet to learn that truth. Following the three events (triumphal entry, cleansing the temple, and the cursing of the fig tree—Matthew 21:1-22) and the three parables (sons, servants, and wedding banquet—Matthew 21:28–22:14), Jesus encountered three questions (Matthew 22:15-40). First there was the question of taxes, then the marriage question, and finally the greatest commandment question.

An unnamed Pharisee saw how Jesus had put both the Pharisees and Sadducees to shame. So he *tested* (the same word is used of the devil in Matthew 4:1) Jesus with a final question. He asked Jesus about the greatest commandment. This was often up for debate in rabbinic circles. Jesus answered from Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18. Moses had his 10 famous "words" (the Ten Commandments) but *the Law and the Prophets* (a way of speaking about the entire Old Testament) *hang* (depend) on these two commandments. They summarized all of the commandments. Perhaps this lawyer who put Jesus to the test had a change of heart during their encounter (Mark 12:32-34). Joseph and the Pharisee shared one thing in common: their fidelity to God's law. But there was one glaring difference between them: Joseph acted in love.

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THE SECOND CHOICE

BY DAVID FAUST

Joseph's second choice impresses me more than his first one. His first choice was relatively easy. Mary was an eligible young woman, and no doubt Joseph found her attractive. Nazareth wasn't a big town. It's likely their families knew each other well and their parents approved of their engagement. The local grapevine buzzed with cheerful chatter about their upcoming wedding. As a gift for his wife, Joseph may have used his carpentry skills to build furniture for their home—a kitchen table or a frame for their bed.

But soon, the grapevine buzzed with a different kind of news. Mary was visibly pregnant, and Joseph knew he wasn't the father. In his workshop, the carpenter pounded out his frustrations and pondered his options. End the betrothal and divorce her quietly? That wasn't his first choice, but it seemed like the best option for everyone.

Conceiving the Inconceivable

God interrupted Joseph's contemplation by interjecting a new thought. "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife" (Matthew 1:20). The inconceivable had been conceived. "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (v. 20). God himself handled the gender reveal: "She will give birth to a son"; claimed the paternal naming rights: "You are to give him the name Jesus"; and foretold the child's future destiny: "He will save his people from their sins" (v. 21).

This is where Joseph's second choice came in. The first time he decided to marry Mary, it was easy. Now the situation was messy and the decision was more difficult. Joseph's second choice required him to follow God's leading more than his own reasoning. It required ongoing restraint to wait until after the baby was born to consummate the marriage. And by obeying God's instructions, Joseph would have to endure his neighbors' misunderstanding and criticism.

Loving at a Deeper Level

Motivated by faith, Joseph made tough choices over and over again. In the opening chapters of Matthew, three times God instructed him to do something difficult: (1) "Take Mary home as your wife" (1:20); (2) "Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt" (2:13); and (3) "Take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel" (2:20). The carpenter obeyed each time—each decision required courage and sacrifice—but by obeying God, Joseph participated in the fulfillment of ancient prophecies and helped to alter the course of history.

You and I face second choices, too. The decision to marry is exciting. But when the initial shine wears off and disagreements, illnesses, or financial pressures rise, love goes to a deeper level. The husband and wife must decide over and over again to be faithful "for richer or poorer, in sickness and health."

It's easy to love your church when the members get along, the minister's messages are inspiring, and new believers are being baptized. But what about when your congregation goes through hard times? What about when things get messy and the body of Christ is hard to love?

Jesus loved his disciples even when they were unlovable—when they misunderstood his teachings, quarreled among themselves, and asked foolish questions. "He loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

It's good to say, "I love you." It's even better when we make the choice to love over and over again.

Personal Challenge:

In your journal or on a piece of paper, write down the name of a person or persons you're currently struggling to love. This week, find a specific, practical way to demonstrate God's love to them.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What from this past week would you like to thank God for?

2. In what way did you bear fruit over the last week?

Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 1:18-25** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to retell the story as if telling it to a group of high school students. Then ask two readers (the same two or two others) to read **Matthew 22:34-40** one after the other. Ask a third person to briefly retell this story.

3. What connections do you see between these two stories?

4. Let's dig more deeply into the passages.
   - What character traits do you see in Joseph?
   - Put yourself in Joseph's sandals. How would you describe his situation and the choices he needed to make?
   - In what ways did Joseph help fulfill ancient prophecies?
   - What role does obedience play in this story?
   - What did Joseph and the experts in the law (Pharisees and Sadducees) have in common?
   - How were they different?
   - In what ways do all the Law and Prophets hang on the two commandments Jesus gave?

5. What do you learn about God's sovereignty (his control over everything) from these passages?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. What do you learn from Joseph about obeying God and the results of doing so?

8. The name "Jesus" comes from the Hebrew word *Yeshua* (or Joshua), which means "the Lord saves." He is also known as Immanuel, which means "God is with us." As Christmas approaches, how will you share those messages with the people God puts around you?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. Since God is indeed with us, what would you like to tell him—and us—about the challenges you may face this week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 2:1-15**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Let the fulfilled promise of Jesus' birth lead you to worship.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Fulfilled

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 2:1-15

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Daniel 7:13, 14; Genesis 49:10

FULFILLED THROUGH PROMISE

BY MARK SCOTT

The Old Testament repeatedly says, "Someone is coming." The end of the Bible says, "Someone is coming again." And in between the beginning and end, the Bible says, "Someone came." At its most basic level, Christmas is evidence God keeps his word. The Bible is a theology of promise. Even foreign dignitaries, indifferent religious leaders, and wicked kings learned that.

Promised Star

Matthew 2:1, 2

After Matthew traced Jesus' human roots (1:1-17) and divine roots (1:18-25), he told the story of the visit of the Magi, King Herod's reaction to their visit, and the Holy Family's trip to Egypt (2:1-15). This text is steeped in Matthew's typological use of three Old Testament texts and a storyline that retraces Israel's early history. (In fact, the visiting Magi retraced Abraham's journey from Ur through Haran to the land of promise; cf. Genesis 12:1-20.) Even in his earliest earthly days, Jesus showed himself to be the new and true Israel of God.

Our text is a Christmas text, but it is probably two years removed from Jesus' actual birth. By the time the Magi arrived in Bethlehem, Jesus was not an infant. Jesus was called *child*—not infant—six times in this passage. At this point, Mary and Joseph had moved into a *house*. And Jesus being a toddler gave credence to Herod's effort to kill the babies "two years old and under" (Matthew 2:16).

There are many theories about the identity of the Magi. Were they astronomers? Astrologers? Sorcerers? (The same word is used of Simon in Acts 8:9.) Priests? Kings? (Tertullian thought so.) All we know for sure about them is what Matthew told us—i.e., they came from the east, sought to find Jesus, were tipped off by Herod and religious leaders that they should go to Bethlehem, worshiped Jesus through the giving of their gifts, and left to go back home and by-passed Jerusalem in the process.

The Old Testament does not say much about the star. But the strange narrative about Balak and Balaam included this prediction: "A star will come out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). Since the Magi might have been exposed to the Hebrew Bible as a result of the Jews living in captivity in Babylon, the Magi may well have connected the dots between this astrological phenomena and the birth of a messiah. They at least knew that their posture should be one of worship.

Promised Ruler

Matthew 2:3-12

Herod the Great was an outstanding builder and a horrible person. He was emotionally undone by any threat to his throne. He was *disturbed* (torn to pieces) when he learned of the Magi's search. He quickly assembled the religious leaders and inquired about the birthplace of this supposed Messiah. The *chief priests and teachers of the law* (Sadducees and Pharisees that composed the Sanhedrin) based their response to Herod on Micah 5:2. This Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (King David's town just six miles to the south), he would be a *ruler* (leader) from the tribe of Judah, and his rule would be exercised through *shepherding* people—in contrast to Herod's style of leadership.

In feigned loyalty, Herod called the Magi *secretly* (the same word used for what Joseph contemplated in Matthew 1:19) and sent them to Bethlehem to find this child king with the notion that he too would worship Jesus. But the Magi could smell a rat. They probably saw past his pathetic and duplicitous request. The angel later confirmed their feelings by sending them home by another route. In the meantime, the Magi reengaged with the star, which led them south to Bethlehem. They found the Holy Family and *worshiped* (the third time this word appeared in our text) through the giving of gifts. (The gold, frankincense, and myrrh served as emblems of Jesus' identity and mission, and they may have helped finance the family's upcoming trip to Egypt.)

Promised Son

Matthew 2:13-15

While the Magi returned home, and while Herod organized his butchers to head to Bethlehem, Joseph, in obedience to the angel's instructions, took Mary and toddler Jesus to Egypt. God's people had grown numerous during their centuries living in Egypt (Genesis 46–Exodus 3). As the Magi retraced Abraham's journey, so now Jesus and his family retraced Moses' journey.

In time, Herod died (Matthew 2:19). Joseph, after another angelic encounter, took his family back to the Promised Land. Matthew connected the dots between Hosea 11:1 (a clear collective reference to Israel as God's Son) and Jesus leaving Egypt. Because Jesus truly was the promised Son, the Magi responded appropriately—they worshiped him.

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THE DAY I VISITED A KING'S PALACE

BY DAVID FAUST

While in Israel filming a documentary about the basics of the Christian faith, I visited Herodium, the palatial residence designed for King Herod's protection and pleasure. By all accounts Herod was paranoid and cruel. He tortured and killed family members, servants, and bodyguards. Ironically, this ruthless ruler who destroyed so many lives was an innovative and prolific builder who oversaw the construction of enormous forts, palaces, water projects, and Jerusalem's crown jewel, the Jewish temple.

Herodium (also known as Herodion) is now one of Israel's national parks. It is a 300-foot-high hill resembling a volcano, jutting into the sky about a 10-minute drive from Bethlehem. On the day we visited, a cool breeze blew across the site and thunder rumbled in the distance.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Herodium was the largest palace in the Roman world. Near the bottom of the hill was a sprawling 40-acre complex that contained houses, stables, gardens, and a gigantic pool more than 200 feet long watered by an elaborate system of aqueducts. On top of the hill was a lavish royal residence finished a few years before the birth of Christ. Herodium served as Herod's personal country club complete with banquet rooms, a bathhouse, courtyards, a Roman theater, and living quarters for the king and his guests—all surrounded by stone walls and four large guard towers. King Herod literally could look down on his subjects from his hilltop perch. At Herodium he escaped the heat of Jerusalem's summers and its always-simmering political pressures.

When Herod knew his death was approaching, he ordered that prominent Jewish citizens should be imprisoned and executed on the day he died to ensure the nation would mourn. Instead, when Herod died in Jericho at about age 69, the prisoners were released and rejoicing filled the land. According to the historian Josephus, Herod was buried at Herodium with his body "covered with purple; and a diadem was put upon his head, and a crown of gold above it, and a scepter in his right hand." It was a burial fit for a king (at least, a certain kind of king).

Stooping Down

I looked down across the valley below, enjoying the panoramic view from Herodium's high walls. In the northwest I saw Bethlehem, barely three miles away. Standing there in Herod's palace, I reflected on the contrast between two kings—one a fearful tyrant, the other a faithful servant.

Herod slept in a palace while Jesus slept in a manger. Herod surrounded himself with soldiers and armaments; shepherds surrounded the baby Jesus. Herod terrified his subjects with threats and violence; Christ drew his followers with sacrificial love. Herod elevated himself; Christ lowered himself, exchanging the privileges of Heaven for the problems of earth. Herod leveraged other people's money for his own personal pleasure. Christ—even as a young child—attracted seekers from far away who honored him with voluntary gifts. Herod savored his amenities; Jesus loved his enemies. Herod pushed others down to prop himself up; Christ established an eternal kingdom by stooping down to serve.

There in the dusty, deserted house of a long-gone king, I felt grateful that God sent his Son to a manger, not to a gated country club made of stone. The King of kings lives and rules in our hearts. You and I are his palace.

Personal Challenge:

What will you do this week—and what will you do in the coming year—that requires you to stoop down and serve humbly rather than demanding a position of power?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What challenge did you face last week?

2. In what way did you tell others about Jesus ("the Lord saves") and Immanuel ("God is with us") last week?

   Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 2:1-15** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to retell the story as if sharing it with a group of adults and kids gathered in front of a fireplace.

3. The rest of you: What would you change or add to that retelling?

4. Let's dig more deeply into the passage.
   - Discuss the five Ws from this narrative: (a) Who is involved? (b) What is happening? (c) When did these events happen? (Be as specific about timing of events as possible.) (d) Where did these events take place? (e) Why did each of these events occur as they did?
   - What evidence do you see in this text that these events likely occurred a couple years after Jesus' birth? (Also see v. 16.)
   - What roles do supernatural events (including dreams) play in this narrative?
   - What role does worship (both real and feigned) play?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. What do you learn from the Magi about obeying God and the results of doing so?
   - What do you learn from Joseph about faithfulness and obedience?

8. The Magi made innumerable personal sacrifices that enabled them to worship Jesus. What are you willing to surrender to worship him and to tell others about him?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. As Christmas approaches, what challenges or blessings might you experience this week?

For Next Week: Over the next week, read and reflect on **Matthew 12:1-23**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Let Jesus change your life as you pursue hope in the Son of David.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Fulfilled

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 12:1-23

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 Samuel 21:1-6; Leviticus 24:5-9; Numbers 28:9, 10; Hosea 6:6, 7; Matthew 5:17-20; Isaiah 42:1-7

FULFILLED THROUGH HOPE

BY MARK SCOTT

One day in class at Denver Seminary, Haddon Robinson said, "Hope is the music of the future, and faith is the courage to dance to it now." Humans, by nature, are creatures of hope. As we approach a new year, people hope that 2021 will be better than 2020. But hope is only as secure as the object in which it is placed. We hope that science can give us good vaccines for pandemics. We hope the political process can give us leaders who can right the wrongs of injustice. But are science and politics secure havens for our hope? Is there something better? Is there someone better?

Hope for a Defense

Matthew 12:1-14

Matthew 11 ends with what is called "The Great Invitation." Jesus called the weary to rest and the religiously fatigued to discipleship. The very next thing Matthew recorded were two "rest" (Sabbath) controversies. In both of these events, Jesus claimed the title *Lord of the Sabbath*. Jesus had returned from the Passover in Jerusalem (John 5). Somewhere en route, the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for picking and eating heads of grain. (They criticized Jesus too, according to Luke 6.) Jesus defended himself and his disciples.

Jesus first presented a narrative defense. He referenced a story from 1 Samuel 21. David was running from Saul and needed food for his men. David stopped at Nob where Ahimelek gave him consecrated bread from the tabernacle. This was technically forbidden, but human need trumped rules—and Jesus was related to David.

Next, Jesus offered a legal defense. The law taught to do no work on the Sabbath. But the priests had to exercise some work in the temple even on the Sabbath—and Jesus was *greater than the temple*.

The third defense was a prophetic defense. For the second time in Matthew's Gospel, Hosea 6:6 was cited: God desired *mercy, not sacrifice*. Mercy is the great loving-kindness or loyal love of God—and Jesus exemplified it. Jesus defended his disciples.

The Pharisees' criticism grew into looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus as he made his way into a synagogue along the way. Jesus healed a man with a *shriveled* (withered; dried-up) hand. The Pharisees' question was loaded, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus answered with a defense about a sheep, a pit, and the Sabbath. If the sheep falls in a pit, it does not matter what day it is, you rescue the sheep. And people are more important than sheep.

After that lesson, Jesus healed the man, who gave evidence of his healing by stretching out his hand for all to see. Jesus first defended his disciples, and then he defended the man with the shriveled hand. Jesus was painted as a total lawbreaker, which is why they plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Hope for Compassion

Matthew 12:15-21

The disciples and the man with the shriveled hand must have felt affirmed when Jesus defended them. They would feel even better when Jesus showered his compassion on them. Jesus withdrew from the religious leaders. But it was nearly impossible for him to hide (cf. Mark 7:24). The crowds followed him, and he healed all who were ill.

Jesus brought about justice by acts of compassion (e.g., healing people). Matthew connected what Jesus was doing with the longest quotation from the Old Testament in this Gospel. Verses 18-21 were taken from Isaiah 42:1-4 and clearly were messianic. The servant was not Israel (as a nation) or Cyrus or some other appointee. The servant was God's Messiah. The Father was (and is) endeared to him (*chosen*, *loved*, and *delighted* in), and the Father has enabled him (that is, empowered him with the Spirit).

This equipped the Messiah to proclaim justice to the nations. But the way of the Messiah was compassion—not quarreling, not breaking reeds, and not blowing out smoldering wicks (i.e., lifting their heads rather than stomping on their hearts).

Hope in the Son of David

Matthew 12:22, 23

As a result of the many miracles Jesus performed, people brought to him a man with three problems—he was demon-possessed, blind, and mute. Jesus healed him, and the crowd entertained the question and confession of faith, "Could this be the Son of David?" That potential confession brought a stinging accusation from the religious leaders: "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons" (12:24, *New American Standard Bible*). Jesus would go on to teach about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

As we approach the dawn of a new year, is our hope located in religious systems or rules . . . or in the Son of David?

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HE'S GOT YOUR BACK

BY DAVID FAUST

Last December 31 when we celebrated the New Year, I told my wife, "2019 has been rough, but I have a good feeling about 2020. It's going to be a great year!" Clearly, I don't have the gift of prophecy. The year 2020 brought a global pandemic, racial strife, economic upheaval, and political turmoil. Someone joked that in the future 2020 will become a one-word catchphrase to describe a big mess. When asked, "How was your day?" you can say, "A total 2020," and everyone will understand.

How did your faith weather the storms this year? As 2020 winds down and a new year begins, what is your attitude about the future? There's always hope if we fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2) and "press on toward the goal" (Philippians 3:14).

Our Rear Guard

Isaiah did have the gift of prophecy. Centuries before the Messiah walked the earth, Isaiah foretold what the Messiah would do. The predictions included:

"He will bring justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1; Matthew 12:18).

"He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets" (Isaiah 42:2; Matthew 12:19). Jesus disrupted social and religious norms, but he wasn't merely a rebel and a rabble-rouser. He altered history by changing hearts.

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:3; Matthew 12:20). If you're bruised, he won't break you. If you're on the verge of burnout, he won't blow out the fire you have left; he wants to fan the flames again.

"In his name the islands [nations] will put their hope" (Isaiah 42:4; Matthew 12:21).

A few verses before predicting the crucifixion where Christ was "crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5), the prophet used a military image to encourage God's people. He said, "For the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard" (Isaiah 52:12). The rear guard fulfills an important role. Generals position soldiers at the rear of their advancing troops to protect the army from behind. As we face the future, God leads us forward ("the Lord will go before you") and he protects us from behind as well ("the God of Israel will be your rear guard"). God has our backs!

We're Not Alone

There was a large barn on the farm where I grew up. It was built in the 1890s with sturdy hand-hewn timbers fastened together with wooden pegs. When I was a boy, I worked in that barn every day—and I played there, too, because Dad installed a basketball backboard and hoop inside so my brothers and I could play even on bad weather days. I liked that barn during the daylight hours. At night, though, it was a scary place with creaky boards underfoot and hidden dangers behind its dark corners. I didn't like going into the barn at night.

One thing made a big difference. If Dad was with me, the darkness didn't bother me. The barn wasn't scary when my father was there.

We have gone through a rough year in 2020. What will happen in 2021? Only God knows. But we can approach the future with faith, not fear—with hope, not despair. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, the Father will be with us.

Personal Challenge:

On a piece of paper or in your journal, write a letter to God. Reflect on the lessons you learned in 2020. List the challenges and opportunities you face in 2021 and ask the Lord to help you with each one.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Leader: *Provide extra time for this lesson, especially for question 2 as you recap this past year and question 9 as you plan for next year.*

1. What challenge or blessing did you experience last week?

2. What was your biggest challenge and your biggest blessing of 2020?

   Ask three people—two readers and one reteller—to help. Ask the readers to read **Matthew 12:1-23** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Ask the third person to retell the story in one minute or less.

3. Would anyone else like to change or add to that retelling?

4. Let's dig more deeply into the passage.
   - What in general were the Pharisees accusing Jesus and his disciples of?
   - How were the crowds responding to Jesus?
   - How would you compare and contrast the focus of the Pharisees with that of Jesus?
   - What attributes of Jesus do you glean from this passage?
   - Look again at Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah in verses 18-20. How specifically do you see these descriptions fulfilled in Jesus in the rest of this passage?
   - Reread verse 21. If you were the people being healed, the rest of the crowds, Jesus' disciples, even the Pharisees, how would Jesus give you hope?

5. What do you learn about God's love from this passage?

6. What do you learn, both good and bad, about people?

7. As you seek to follow Jesus, which of his attributes, convictions, or actions in this passage will you pursue?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

9. As a group let's take some time to make (and write down) some plans for 2021. What will we do next year in our community to:
   - show mercy?
   - bring restoration?
   - bring healing?
   - proclaim justice?
   - bring about hope?

10. What challenges or blessings do you anticipate this week as we begin a new year?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.