1717 BIBLE STUDIES

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

OVERVIEW

Study: Matthew
Theme: Jesus Is Lord

Overview: Matthew presents Jesus as the promised Messiah, the true King of the Jews, and the Lord of all. In this Advent and Christmas study from Matthew's Gospel, students will see Jesus as Lord of the harvest, Lord of creation, Lord of judgment, and Lord of all. They will learn to pray for harvest workers and be one, to rely on the Lord of creation to save and sustain them, to live ready for the Lord of judgment, and to confess Jesus, the Lord of all, as their Lord.

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 events in this study take place during the reign of Herod the Great (when the Magi visited the child Jesus in Bethlehem) and throughout Jesus' ministry in Galilee —in its towns and villages and on and around the Sea of Galilee—up to his final week in Jerusalem, where he taught his disciples on the Mount of Olives.

Theme

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, the King of the Jews, and the Lord of all. Matthew organizes his Gospel around five great discourses and shows Jesus' authority over disease, nature, demons, and death. The risen Lord declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

Why Study Matthew?

Matthew calls us to recognize who Jesus really is and to respond to him as Lord. This study calls believers to pray for and become workers in the Lord's harvest, to trust the Lord of creation in life's storms, to care for "the least of these" as they live ready for Christ's return, and to worship Jesus this Christmas as the Lord of all.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Matthew 9:35-38; 10:24-33

WEEK 2: Matthew 14:13-36

WEEK 3: Matthew 25:31-46

WEEK 4: Matthew 2:1-12

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Pray for harvest workers, and be a harvest worker.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Jesus Is Lord

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 9:35-38; 10:24-33

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 10:1-23, 34-39; Isaiah 6:8; 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Matthew 28:18-20

LORD OF THE HARVEST

BY MARK SCOTT

The God of the Bible is an avid farmer. He scatters his seed almost indiscriminately (Matthew 13:4-5, 7-8). The only thing he enjoys more than planting is harvesting. He is both Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8) and Lord of the harvest (Matthew 9:38). He works very hard in his field, and he invites others to join him there.

The closing paragraph of Matthew 9 functions as both a summary and introduction. It summarizes the content of chapters 8 and 9 and introduces the discourse to the disciples (Jesus' speech to the Twelve about their upcoming short-term mission trip).

A Prayer to Pray

Matthew 9:35-38

The events recorded in chapters 8–9 are not in strict chronological order. Matthew arranged three sets of miracles containing three miracles each. These are broken up by discipleship sections (Matthew 8:18-22 and 9:9-17). Matthew 8–9 display Jesus going through all the *towns* (walled cities?) and *villages* (unwalled cities?).

In these places Jesus did what he always did. He *taught* in their synagogues, *proclaimed* the government of God, and relieved suffering wherever he found it. These were his three priorities. He preached to the masses, he taught in smaller formal and informal settings, and he healed the needy. In fact, Matthew 9:35 is identical to Matthew 4:23. So these activities were not just "one and done."

When Jesus saw a crowd, he had *compassion* (felt deeply in his stomach area) on them. The Messiah of Matthew's Gospel is a compassionate king. *The Message* says, "His heart broke"; the people were *harassed* (to filet) and *helpless* (to be thrown down; cf. Matthew 27:5; Acts 27:38). Matthew described these folks as *sheep without a shepherd*. The same phrase was used at every significant juncture of the Old Testament when God wanted to emphasize the wandering nature of his people (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; Ezekiel 34:5).

Minister Nate Ross said, "Need leads." What needs done must get done first. Jesus believed that the answer to the tremendous needs of the people was to have a prayer meeting. Step one in preaching, teaching, and healing is prayer. So, the imagery shifted from livestock (sheep) to grain farming. The Messiah is the Lord over the harvest, so his resources must be tapped. The harvest is *plentiful*, but the workers are *few*. The answer was prayer. *Ask* (make a special request) the Lord to *send out* (throw out) workers into the harvest field. Jesus taught us to pray, but he also requested us to pray for workers.

A Courage to Hold

Matthew 10:24-33

It is hard to pray for workers without volunteering to be one. If the disciples followed Jesus' request they would step up and get to the work that Jesus did (teaching, preaching, and healing). Chapter 10 is the second great discourse of Matthew's Gospel. This might be called "the little commission" to prepare the disciples for the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus was sending his disciples out for a short-term trip while the Teacher went solo for a while (Matthew 11:1). This speech helped prepare them. Many of the teachings are "Twelve-specific" (i.e., apply mostly for just the 12 apostles). But beginning in verse 22 the teachings are more generic for all followers of any age.

To do Jesus' bidding would require courage. Working in his field is just that—work. And it takes guts. Jesus used two metaphors to drive this home—the *student-teacher* metaphor and the *servant-master* (head of the house) metaphor. Jesus would be called *Beelzebul* (Philistine deity, equivalent to Satan) by his religious critics. The disciples should expect similar labels and treatments.

Three times Jesus told his disciples to "not be afraid," and he gave three reasons why: (1) They had already begun to live an open life for God, holding no secrets; therefore, they need not fear whatever was disclosed. (2) They do not need to be afraid of death because they fear the One who has power over it. (3) They need not fear because God will care for them in the minutest way (more than he cares for sparrows).

If the disciples would *acknowledge* (talk about) Christ on their short journey, Jesus would return the favor by "talking about" them to the Father. The flip side, however, is equally true—i.e., they could be *disowned*. Prayer for workers will embolden those workers to confess Christ in their mission work for him.

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SOMETHING IS MISSING

BY DAVID FAUST

Do you ever feel like you're missing something, like in the movie *Home Alone*? While driving away from home, do you wonder if you left the lights on or forgot to lock the door? While preparing a meal, have you ever omitted an important part of the recipe?

Matthew 9:36-38 mentions several missing ingredients.

A Crowd Without a Purpose

Jesus "saw the crowds" and "he had compassion on them" (v. 36) because, despite the crowd's large size, he knew something was missing. Big crowds create excitement at concerts or sporting events, but the size of the audience isn't all that matters. Priorities can be misguided. Sometimes big groups gather because of trivial things.

The silversmiths' union got upset when Paul preached in Ephesus. They thought the gospel was bad for business because customers who became followers of Christ would stop buying silver statues of the goddess Artemis. Soon a crowd of angry protestors filled the city's outdoor theater and the frenzied crowd screamed for two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The Bible says, "The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. *Most of the people did not even know why they were there*" (Acts 19:32, emphasis mine). The crowd was large and enthusiastic, but the purpose of the gathering was unclear.

Could the same be said about the church? When believers gather on Sunday, do we know why we are there? The church shouldn't be a crowd without a purpose.

Hurts Without a Healer

Jesus saw individual boys, girls, men, and women in the crowd who were "harassed and helpless" (v. 36)—otherwise translated as "distressed and dispirited," "faint and scattered," "confused and aimless." Depressing words like these provide a realistic snapshot of the condition of lost humanity. They contrast sharply with the previous verse, where Jesus displayed his messianic authority by "healing every disease and sickness" (v. 35).

Some hurts only the Lord can heal. The good news is, when Christ comes on the scene, we need not remain harassed and helpless. On this side of heaven, not every disease or sickness is healed, but no hurt goes unnoticed by the Lord. Even when the Great Physician withholds his healing touch in this life, we can be sure he will repair all our brokenness in the life to come.

Sheep Without a Shepherd

Some people in the crowd didn't look harassed and helpless at all. They appeared healthy and wealthy on the outside, but they couldn't pull the wool over Jesus' eyes. He knew their true spiritual condition. They were "like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 36).

Shepherdless sheep are directionless, needing guidance . . . hungry, needing nourishment . . . weary, needing rest . . . thirsty, needing refreshment . . . vulnerable, needing protection from predators. Sheep can't survive without a shepherd.

A Harvest Without Workers

Jesus mentioned one more missing ingredient. "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (v. 37). On the farm where I grew up, every family member pitched in at harvest time. We would never leave a ripened crop in the field or let sweet corn, beans, and tomatoes rot in the garden.

In the church, the bystanders, spectators, and critics are many, but the workers are few. Something is missing in God's harvest field. Is it you?

Personal Challenge:

In the Lord's harvest field, what steps will you take this week to sow the seed of the gospel or to help water, weed, or harvest a crop that is growing in someone's heart?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. To whom did you tell about God's praiseworthiness over the past week?
2. What have you found yourself asking God for recently?

Ask two people to read aloud **Matthew 9:35-38; 10:24-33** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase both passages in as much detail as possible.

3. What similes and metaphors did Jesus use in these passages?
4. Based on these passages, what specifically does Jesus want his followers to do?
5. If you could describe Jesus to a friend who doesn't know him in just one word from these passages, what word would you use, and why?
6. Look again at Jesus' attitude toward his friends and the people he met along the way. What do you learn about yourself from his viewpoint?
7. Jesus tells his disciples three times to "not be afraid." Why should Jesus' followers not be afraid to speak about him to others?
8. How (and when, where, and with whom) will you acknowledge Jesus before others this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. We will end this week by spending some time asking God to be with several groups of people:
    - For those in our community or the world who are harassed and helpless in some way
    - For those who are going through life like a sheep without a shepherd
    - For potential "workers" who God may call to go into his harvest fields
    - For ourselves, that we may have boldness to share God's love with others

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Matthew 14:13-36**. 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: **Rely on the Lord of Creation to save and sustain you.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Jesus Is Lord

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 14:13-36

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 11:25; John 6:5-21; Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 3:14

LORD OF CREATION

BY MARK SCOTT

There are five miracles in this lesson text—the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus walking on water, Peter walking on water, the calming of the storm, and the healings at Gennesaret. Only the Lord of Creation could demonstrate his power over that creation.

The setting for these miracles is the third Passover. This is the one Passover in Jesus' public ministry that he did not attend in Jerusalem. He provided his own simple Passover meal in the wilderness. It contrasted greatly with King Herod's elaborate feast in the previous context. It was a simple meal of "fish and chips" in the desert.

The Lord of Creation Provided for His New Community

Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus wanted to withdraw from the crowds when he heard about the beheading of John the Baptist. He sailed eastward across the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, but he still could not get away from the crowds. Jesus sought a *solitary place* ("desert" in the sense of "uninhabited"), but the people forded the waters that fed the Sea of Galilee and actually reached the Lord's destination before Jesus did. Jesus turned his depression into service and expressed his *compassion* on the people by healing them.

As the day wore on, stomachs began to growl. The disciples advised Jesus to send the crowds into the neighboring villages to purchase food. After all, they were in a *remote place* (same word for *solitary place* earlier). Jesus must have stunned the disciples by saying, "You give them something to eat." The disciples had already scouted out the situation. They found a boy who had *five* small, pancake-shaped pieces of *bread* and *two* pickled *fish*. We know these details because all four Gospels tell this story.

Jesus asked for the boy's lunch. He organized the people into groups of fifties and hundreds and had them sit down on the green grass. Jesus took the lunch and, with words that sound like they belong in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, he *blessed* the bread and somehow started multiplying it. The disciples shared in the miracle as they distributed the food to the crowd. Three things were stunning—the number of people fed (at least 5,000), the number of leftovers, and the number of baskets picked up. Twelve disciples carrying twelve baskets might indicate that Jesus was providing bread from heaven for his new community.

The Lord of Creation Exercised His Power Over the Waters

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus dismissed the disciples and the crowd. This must have been a major undertaking since the crowd wanted to take Jesus by force and make him king (John 6:15). Jesus went up on the mountain to pray. During his devotions a storm arose —not an uncommon occurrence on this lake which is 654 feet below sea level. The disciples were trying to row west and the storm blew them south into the deepest part of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus discerned their struggle and sometime between 3 and 6 a.m. he came to them walking on the water.

The storm instilled fear in the disciples, and when they saw what they perceived to be a *ghost* (phantom), it added to their unease. Jesus said, "Take courage [cheer up]! It is I" (literally, "I am"). Also, "Don't be afraid." Only Matthew told about Peter's miracle. "If it's you," the disciple said, which has the sense of, "Let's suppose it is you." Peter was not interested in getting out of the boat until he was persuaded that it was Jesus and not the supposed ghost. Jesus responded with one of his favorite words, "Come." Peter did something no other human has ever done. He walked on water for a short time. Peter trusted the Lord of Creation's word more than the boat. Of course, Peter withdrew his gaze from Jesus and started to sink. He prayed immediately and earnestly, "Lord, save me!" Jesus may well have laughed as he pulled Peter up out of the water and said, "You of little faith."

Peter and Jesus got into the boat and the storm miraculously calmed. The disciples did not respond to the storm or to Peter's ability to water walk. They confessed that Jesus was *God's Son*. In the Old Testament, the God of the Bible hovers over the waters (Genesis 1:2). The disciples knew they had just seen God in action.

The Lord of Creation Healed People of Diseases

Matthew 14:34-36

The boat landed at the town of *Gennesaret*. This was a small town on the western shore of Galilee. Word spread quickly that Jesus was there. People tried to grab just a *tassel* of Jesus' clothing. Those who did were healed.

Jesus worked his way up the shoreline to Capernaum where the next day he would give his sermon on the bread of life (John 6). Jesus provides, Jesus displays, and Jesus heals because he is Lord of Creation.

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YOU'RE NOT TOO SMALL—OR TOO BIG—TO TRUST IN GOD

BY DAVID FAUST

My friends who are trained in mechanical and electrical engineering want to know how everything works. They enjoy taking things apart and putting them back together again. Not me. If my laptop works, my car runs well, and the furnace keeps my house warm, I am happy to trust the technicians with the details.

I understand, though, why miracles mentioned in the Bible make readers wonder, "How did that happen?"

My wife and I lead a small group for seekers and new believers. A young man in our group remarked, "I have questions about almost every line I read in the Bible." A chapter like Matthew 14 makes him wonder, "How could Jesus walk on water and feed thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish?"

Feeling Small

The Bible isn't the only information source that expands what we consider possible. The James Webb Space Telescope was launched on Christmas Day, 2021, and began sending images back to earth in July 2022. Stronger and quicker than its predecessor, the Hubble Space Telescope, Webb is producing mind-boggling images of distant galaxies. You don't have to be an astronomer to be amazed by the vivid colors and massive size of what we're discovering in deep space.

One of Webb's first images showed a patch of sky the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length, but it revealed thousands of galaxies in a tiny sliver of the universe. How tiny we are—and how little we understand about the universe where we live!

The psalmist David didn't have a telescope, but he spent a lot of nights outdoors tending sheep, and the stars filled him with wonder. He told God, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4).

Thinking Big

After calmly declaring, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," the Bible's opening chapter says almost matter-of-factly, "He also made the stars" (Genesis 1:1, 16).

Isaiah urged, "Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?" (Isaiah 40:26). Then he goes on to say that "the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth . . . gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak" (Isaiah 40:28-29). Our planet is a tiny speck in the vast universe, and there are approximately 8 billion people on earth, but our heavenly Father cares about each person and counts the hairs on every head (Matthew 10:30).

Believing God

Science can take us only so far. The more we learn about the universe, the humbler we should become. "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Hebrews 11:3).

I can't explain how Jesus performed miracles, but it makes sense that the inventor of H2O would know how to walk on it and the designer of fish would have no problem multiplying them. We may not comprehend the "how" of biblical miracles, but the "why" is clear. Jesus' miracles motivate us to believe and find "life in his name" (John 20:31).

Nobel prize-winning physicist Werner Heisenberg, a pioneer of quantum mechanics, put it like this: "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will make you an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you."

Personal Challenge:

Explain to a believer, seeker, or unbeliever why you believe in the existence and the love of God. What evidence compels you to believe?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you acknowledge Jesus before others last week?
2. If you were to ask Jesus to do the seemingly impossible for you, what would it be?

Ask two people to read aloud **Matthew 14:13-36** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in as much detail as possible.

3. What do you notice about Jesus' relationship with God the Father in this passage?
   - What do you notice about his relationship with his disciples (the Twelve)?
   - What do you notice about his relationship with the crowds?
4. How did Jesus provide for the disciples?
   - How did he empower them?
   - How did he encourage them?
   - How did he challenge them?
   - How did he comfort them?
5. If you had been one of the disciples, what would you have learned about Jesus through the events of this passage?
6. What do you learn about yourself from this passage?
7. How will you explain to a believer, seeker, or unbeliever why you believe in the existence and the love of God? What evidence compels you to believe?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Matthew 25:31-46**. 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: **Live ready for the Lord of Judgment.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Jesus Is Lord

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 25:31-46

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 25:1-30; Revelation 20:1-15; Psalm 96:9-13; John 5:22-23

LORD OF JUDGMENT

BY MARK SCOTT

Judging someone else might be the worst cultural sin in America right now. To pass judgment on someone is anathema. We do need to be careful with it (Matthew 7:1), but we must also judge with righteous judgment (John 7:24). Jesus came as a Savior the first time. When he returns, he will come as our judge. In fact, all judgment has been given to Jesus by the Father so that all will honor the Son (John 5:22-23). He is Lord of Judgment. The diamond of the gospel shines brightest on the black cloth of judgment.

Our lesson text is the last section (parable?) of the fifth discourse in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 24–25). It is known as the Olivet Discourse because Jesus delivered it on the Mount of Olives (the only mountain named in Matthew). Jesus had predicted the temple would be destroyed. The disciples figured that might be the end of the world, so they asked him when this would happen and what would be the sign of his coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). The two-chapter discourse is Jesus' answer to both questions. The temple would be destroyed in AD 70, but his return would be in the distant future. Scholars do not agree on when Jesus finished answering one question and started answering the second (perhaps at Matthew 24:13-14? 24:15? 24:27? 24:29?). But there seems to be agreement that Jesus was speaking of his return by at least Matthew 24:36.

Jesus ended the discourse with an Old Testament reference (Noah and the flood), some cultural norms (men in fields and women grinding at the mills), and parables (master of the house and the thief, faithful and wise servant, ten virgins, talents, and the sheep and goats). Our text tells of the sheep and goats, which some say is not a true parable. Even if it is not, it certainly has parabolic elements.

The Lord of Judgment Will Come

Matthew 25:31-33

The parables in Matthew 25 indicate we should "be ready" like the five wise virgins (vv. 1-13), "be prepared" like the two faithful servants (vv. 14-30), and "be loving" like the sheep in the separation from the goats. Jesus started this section with his favorite third person personal reference, *Son of Man*. There can be no confusion about what he meant by that divine title, for he then used the term *King* (vv. 34, 40).

When this Son of Man King comes, he will come in *glory* (shiny brilliance and weighty presence). He will come with his *angels*. He will take up the judgment of the *nations* (global judgment) on his glorious throne (Revelation 20:11-15). The judgment will begin with the separation of people, similar to how a shepherd separates sheep from goats at day's end. In many ways, God's judgment involves separation from the presence of the king (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

The Lord of Judgment Says 'Come'

Matthew 25:34-40

One of Jesus' favorite words was *come* (Matthew 11:28). He used it in reference to the sheep (people) *blessed by* his *Father*. These compassionate folks could take their *inheritance . . . prepared . . . since the creation of the world*. It was not as if they did their good deeds to be seen by men (Matthew 6:1) or in an attempt to earn their salvation (Galatians 2:16). In fact, they were surprised (probably due to their humility—vv. 37-39) when the king commended them.

They were invited in because their faith caused them to express their compassion with food, drink, hospitality, clothing, help with illness, and even by taking care of the needs of people who were in prison. When these good folks expressed surprise, the king answered by saying that when they acted compassionately to the *least of these brothers and sisters*, it was as if they were serving Jesus.

This text is misunderstood if one concludes that humanitarian effort earns heaven. It may also be misunderstood if applied generically—i.e., to all humanity (though we are to do good to all men—Galatians 6:10). "Brothers" in Matthew's Gospel refers to the Christian community. At the very least, Jesus might be commending Christians taking care of Christians.

The Lord of Judgment Says 'Go'

Matthew 25:41-46

To the goats (uncompassionate people) on the left Jesus will say, "Depart" (i.e., go up and away). These people were *cursed* and will go into *eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels* (Revelation 20:7-10). Their lack of compassion was underlined with the same response ("when did we see you hungry or thirsty?"). While some have embraced what is called annihilationism (sinners simply die and cease to exist), church history is more on the side of eternal punishment being "forever dying." That is due to the flip side of eternal life (which we think of as forever alive). Being forever alive sounds like the best of Christmas gifts.

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CARING FOR 'THE LEAST OF THESE'

BY DAVID FAUST

Jesus' teachings abound with vibrant analogies and illustrations. Don't build a house on sand. Don't put fresh wine in brittle wineskins. Recognize the growth potential in a tiny mustard seed. Value God's kingdom like a fine pearl or a hidden treasure.

Worried? Consider how God provides for birds. Critical of others? Don't be like a man with a two-by-four stuck in his eye trying to give someone else an eye exam. Struggling to forgive? After doing it 490 times, see if it comes more naturally. Becoming too enamored with material things? Don't be like a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle.

In Matthew 25, Jesus compares himself to a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. This Scripture passage teaches important truths about the Lord, and it has practical implications for us.

What It Says About Christ

His identity. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne" (Matthew 25:31). These are strong words about Jesus' identity. No mere mortal could make such claims. "Son of Man" is a messianic title (see Daniel 7:13-14), and who else but God can command heaven's angels and sit in the place of judgment on a glorious throne with "all the nations" gathered before him (v. 32)?

His authority. The "shepherd" (v. 32) is also the "King" (v. 34). Who else but the Sovereign Ruler of the universe has the right to separate all humanity into two groups—the saved and the lost? The sheep on the King's right side will be eternally blessed and rewarded, while the goats on his left "will go away to eternal punishment" (v. 46). Hell is an uncomfortable concept, but Jesus believed in it and warned about it multiple times. He came to provide the remedy for sin so we don't have to perish and face the condemnation we deserve (John 3:16-19).

His sympathy. Heaven's King is not a tyrant. He sympathizes with our suffering and identifies with those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, inadequately clothed, homeless, and imprisoned. One criterion he applies in his role as judge is this: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these . . . you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

What It Says to Us

At Christmas we recall that God's Word became flesh—an innocent, helpless-looking baby lying in a manger. But that baby grew up to be the risen Lord, the ruler of all nations, the King of kings who possesses "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). Jesus' analogy of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 reminds us to respect his authority as judge of the world.

It also reminds us to treat others with justice, mercy, and generosity. Do you know people who are hospitalized, shut-in at home, or in prison? Go and visit them, just as you would visit Christ himself if you had the opportunity. Do you know someone who needs food, clothes, or housing? Step in with hands-on help or financial support just as you would if Christ himself were in need.

"Let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). The way we care for "the least of these" shows what we value most.

Personal Challenge:

Take time during the holidays to visit shut-ins, prisoners, or the sick. As part of your Christmas gift-giving, support individuals and ministries that care for the homeless, the imprisoned, and those who need clean water and nutritious food.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Over the past week, how did you explain to a believer, seeker, or unbeliever why you believe in the existence and the love of God?

2. In what ways are you prepared and still unprepared for Christmas?

Ask two people to read aloud **Matthew 25:31-46** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in as much detail as possible.

3. How is Jesus pictured in this passage?
   - What does that say about his identity?
   - What does that say about his authority?

4. This passage contrasts two groups of people, depicted by Jesus as sheep and goats. Read verses 34 and 41 again. What contrasts do you see?
   - What other contrasts between the "sheep" and the "goats" do you see? (Note to leader: Please read Mark Scott's "Study" on this passage beforehand; it will help provide vital theological context.)

5. What do you learn about Jesus in this passage?
   - What do you learn about yourself?

6. In what ways will you serve the needy in our community, especially over the Christmas holiday?

7. At this time of year, we celebrate Jesus coming into this world as a baby. How will you use this passage as a reminder of who he has always been and always will be?

8. With whom will you share Jesus' identity as King, Judge, Shepherd, and Savior?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Matthew 2:1-12**. 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: **Again this Christmas, confess Jesus, the Lord of all, as your Lord.**

STUDY: Matthew

THEME: Jesus Is Lord

LESSON TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Philippians 2:5-11; Revelation 7:9-10; Isaiah 9:1-7; Ephesians 3:6

LORD OF ALL

BY MARK SCOTT

Private investors have launched a multimillion-dollar campaign to reintroduce Jesus to Americans. It is called "He Gets Us." Maybe the question this Christmas Sunday should be, "Do we get him?" We rejoice that within Jesus' name is the word *us*. He came for us—which should be enough for us to embrace him as Lord of our lives.

The babe of Bethlehem (and Messiah of Matthew's Gospel) is Lord of all—even wise men. Matthew devoted only one verse to the birth of Jesus (1:25) even though he spent many verses tracing Jesus' human roots (1:1-17) and divine roots (1:18-24). Then, a good length of time after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, the *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem*. So, very early on in this "Royal Jewish Gospel" we see that Jesus is Lord of all.

Foreign Visitors

Matthew 2:1-2

King Herod is not the hero in the Christmas story, and yet he populates every scene in the narrative of Matthew 2. The godfather of the Herod family was known as Herod the Great. He was an incredible architect and longtime leader, even though he was insanely jealous (as this story will demonstrate). News traveled much slower in those days, so it took time for the wise men and Herod to learn of Christ's birth. The Magi came from the east toward the end of Herod's reign.

Who were these foreign visitors? Scholars do not agree on their identity. Some think they were astrologers while others say they were astronomers. Some think they were of priestly origin, but Tertullian, the early church father, said they were kings. Where they came from, how they got there, and what they came for may be more important than who exactly they were. They came from the east, essentially retracing Abraham's steps (Genesis 12). They saw and/or followed a *star* (prophetically referred to in Numbers 24:17). They were intent on one purpose—to *worship* the real *king of the Jews*. Think of it—foreigners worshiping a Jewish child.

Disturbed King

Matthew 2:3-8

King Herod lived in more than one spot (Caesarea, Jerusalem, the Herodian, etc.), but when the Magi came to worship Jesus, Herod was in Jerusalem. The presence of the Magi in Jerusalem could have created quite a stir. No wonder Herod and the city were *disturbed* (frightened or even terrified)—maybe for different reasons.

The question about the "king of the Jews" caused Herod to consult the Sanhedrin (composed of both *chief priests* and *teachers of the law*). It's ironic the religious leaders knew the answer to Herod's question. They answered in the words of Micah 5:2. If they had really been longing for their Messiah, one might think they would have walked the six miles to check out this claim. (If they did, we have no record of it.) Perhaps this is an example of faith going to seed. *Bethlehem* (house of bread), located just six miles south of Jerusalem, was not a large or significant town. Its prominence would result from someone in the line of David being born there who would become the *ruler*/*shepherd* of his people.

The private meeting between Herod and the Magi must have raised some suspicions in the minds of the Magi. How much they believed Herod's stated intent to worship this king of the Jews is hard to say. Herod wanted a *report* (message—one of the words for preaching in the New Testament) so, he said, he could *worship* (bow down and show homage to) this king.

Worshiped Child

Matthew 2:9-12

The Magi left the private meeting with Herod. Upon leaving, they saw the star they had seen earlier from when they were in the east. The text says the star *arose* and *went ahead* of them. This may indicate that the Magi saw the star in the heavens while they were far off (in the east), but the star technically moved only six miles in leading them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. There is probably no way to know this for sure, just as it's unknowable whether God used a special natural phenomenon like a nova or just put a miraculous star in the heavens.

The Magi came to the *house* (not stable or inn). By the time they arrived, Jesus was no longer an infant. He was a toddler (*child*), and Mary and Joseph had found a more permanent residence. The Magi saw Mary and *bowed down* and *worshiped* Jesus. This worship was expressed in the gifts of *gold*, *frankincense*, and *myrrh*—strange gifts for a toddler, perhaps, but expensive and maybe even practical for the upcoming flight to Egypt.

God guided the Magi first by a star and finally by a *dream* (there are several of these in Matthew 1–2). They went home while the holy family left to escape Herod's butchers. Jesus is the real king of the Jews, the ruler/shepherd of Israel, and the child Messiah.

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WHAT THE MYSTERIOUS MAGI CAN TEACH US ABOUT FAITH

BY DAVID FAUST

We call them Magi, but they weren't magicians. We picture them riding camels, but the Bible doesn't specify their mode of transportation. We don't know how many Magi made the trip "from the east" (perhaps today's Iraq or Iran), although it's traditional to assume there were three of them because they brought three gifts. Scripture doesn't mention their names, nor does it say they came to the manger; they arrived later when the child Jesus was residing in a house, not a stable.

We don't know about these mysterious characters, but the Magi illustrate what it means to live by faith.

They Followed the Light to a New and Unfamiliar Place

What kind of star led the Magi "until it stopped over the place where the child was" (Matthew 2:9)? Since God created stars in the first place, it was no problem for him to provide a special heavenly light. The Magi called it "his star" (Matthew 2:2)—the Messiah's star. Numbers 24:17 predicted, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." Jesus called himself "the bright Morning Star" (Revelation 22:16).

The Magi followed the light God provided, even when it led to unfamiliar places and encounters with dangerous people like King Herod. In a world darkened by sin and confusion, the written Word is a lamp for our feet. The living Word said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12) and he called us to be bright spots as well (Matthew 5:14). Instead of complaining about the darkness, are we willing to follow the light we have?

They Gave More Significant Gifts Than They Realized

Generosity is a natural response to God's leading. The Magi came to worship, and worship includes giving. They "opened their treasures and presented him with gifts" (Matthew 2:11).

Are we willing to open our treasures to God? What kind of present can we give the omnipresent God? Talk about someone who's hard to buy for! What can we give the Lord who already owns everything? The Magi did the best they could, offering gifts appropriate for the Messiah. *Gold*—a gift fit for a king. *Frankincense*—an aromatic resin used for medicinal purposes, which priests used in the tabernacle (Exodus 30:34-38). *Myrrh*—a spice used for burial, including the burial of Jesus himself (John 19:39).

God does more with our offerings than we realize. He "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

They Played a Role in a Divine Drama More Profound Than They Comprehended

These mysterious Magi probably didn't realize they would go down in history and be forever associated with the Messiah's arrival. God warned them to avoid King Herod, so "they returned to their country by another route" (Matthew 2:12), disappearing from the biblical record as abruptly as they first appeared.

But their story lives on. The Magi remind us to seek the Lord . . . follow the light . . . worship Christ . . . give our treasures . . . and reject the counsel of this world's Herods. We all have our own parts to play in God's redemptive story, if we are wise enough to follow.

Personal Challenge:

How will you open your treasures to honor the Lord during this Christmas season? As an act of worship, make a faith-stretching year-end gift to a neighbor in need or a ministry or mission that is advancing the gospel of Christ.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Over the past week, with whom did you share Jesus' identity as King, Judge, Shepherd, and Savior?

2. What kinds of things in general disturb you?
   - What things make you overjoyed?

Ask two people to read aloud **Matthew 2:1-12** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in as much detail as possible.

3. What titles (roles) for Jesus are mentioned in the passage?

4. What was the Magi's purpose for their travel?

5. What can you discern as King Herod's purpose for finding out where the child was located? (Hint: The Magi were searching for "the one who has been born king of the Jews.")

6. What contrasts do you see between the Magi and King Herod? (See especially verses 3 and 10.)

7. What do you learn about Jesus in this passage?
   - What do you learn about yourself?

8. How can the Magi be examples to you for how to radically pursue Jesus?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

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.