

The Message of Matthew: BEHOLD YOUR KING!

by Ray C. Stedman

Beginning in the New Testament we move from the realm of shadow, type, and prophecy, into the full sunshine of the presentation of the Son of God. The Old Testament speaks of him on every page, but speaks in shadows, in types, in symbols, and in prophecies -- all looking forward to the coming of Someone. You cannot read the Old Testament without being aware of that constant promise running through every page -- Someone is coming! Someone is coming!

Now, when we open the Gospels, that Someone steps forth in the fullness of his glory. As John says, "We have beheld his glory...as of the only Son from the Father," (John 1:14 {RSV}). I love the Gospels. They are to me one of the most perennially fascinating sections of the Bible. There you see Christ as he is. Remember that what he was is what he is; and what he is is what you have, if you are a Christian. All the fullness of his character and being and life is available to us, and we only learn what those resources are as we see him as he was and is. That is why the Gospel records are so important to us.

People often wonder why we have four Gospels. There is a very good reason for this. It is interesting to note that each of these Gospels is a development of an exclamatory statement that is found in the Old Testament. Four different times -- and only four times -- in the Old Testament there was an exclamatory statement made concerning the Messiah, introduced always by the word behold. In one of the prophets we read, "Behold thy king, O Israel!" In another place we read, "Behold the man!" In a third place we read, "Behold my servant!" In still a fourth place we read, "Behold thy God!" These four statements are amplified and developed in the four Gospels -- Matthew, the Gospel of the King; Mark, the Gospel of the Servant; Luke, the Gospel of the Son of man; and John, the Gospel of God, the presentation of the Son of God.

These four Gospels give us four aspects of our Lord's character and person. They are not, strictly speaking, biographies. They are really sketches about the Person of Christ -- eyewitness accounts by those who knew him personally, or those immediately associated with them. Therefore, they have the ring of authenticity, and they carry to our hearts that first and marvelous impression that our Lord made upon his own disciples, and then upon the multitudes that followed him. No more amazing character has ever walked among men. As you read the Gospel accounts, I hope something of this fascination breaks upon your own heart as you see him stepping forth from these pages, revealed to you by the Spirit, when you see him as he is.

The first book of the New Testament is Matthew, and this is the place where most people start reading the Bible. I think more people begin reading in the New Testament than the Old, therefore, that would make Matthew the most widely read book in all the world. In fact, Renan, the French skeptic, said of this book, "This is the most important book of all Christendom." He also said, "The most important book that has ever been written is the Gospel of Matthew." But it has its critics, too. There are those who claim that this book contains nothing but the early legends of the church which grew up around Jesus, that these accounts are not historical, and that this book was not actually written until the fourth century A.D. Therefore, they say, we are uncertain as to how much is really true. Other critics make the claim that this is only one of many gospels that were circulated.

Now, it is true that there are other gospels besides the four in the New Testament. There is the Gospel of Barnabas, for instance, and the Gospel of Peter, and yet other gospels. They can be found in a book called "The New Testament Apocrypha" if you would like to read them. The critics say that it is mere chance that these four Gospels survived. There is a legend that began with a German theologian named Pappas in about the 16th century who said that the Gospels were selected at the Council of Nice in 325 A.D. by gathering together all the many gospels that were circulating at that time, throwing them all under a table, and then reaching in and pulling out four which happened to be Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The foolishness of such a claim is evident to anyone who reads the Gospels with thoughtfulness. They are stamped with the fingerprints of God. The very pattern of these books reflects the divine imprint, and you

cannot read them or compare them with the Old Testament without seeing that they come from an inspired source. Furthermore, you have merely to compare them with the Apocryphal gospels to see how foolish such a claim is.

As you know, this Gospel was written by Matthew, otherwise known as Levi. He was a publican, and publicans were those men who took the taxes from the people. His name means "the gift of God," and to call a tax collector by that name obviously indicates that he was converted. It was perhaps our Lord himself who designated him Matthew, just as he changed Simon's name to Peter, and perhaps the names of others of the disciples as well. Tradition tells us that Matthew lived and taught in Palestine for 15 years after the crucifixion, and then he began to travel as a missionary, first to Ethiopia and then to Macedonia, Syria, and Persia. Finally he died a natural death in either Ethiopia or Macedonia, but this is not certain. It is one of the legends or traditions that have come down to us about Matthew.

The book obviously dates from a very early day. The idea that it was written in the fourth century is pure poppycock because there is much evidence that dates it in the early part of the first century. It is quoted, for instance, in the well-known Didache, which is the teaching of the twelve apostles which dates from early in the second century, so it obviously precedes that. Papias, who was a disciple of the Apostle John, says "Matthew composed his Gospel in the Hebrew tongue, and each one interprets it as he is able." This was confirmed by Irenaeus and Origen, two of the early church fathers, all of whom were well acquainted with the Gospel of Matthew.

Even in the first century itself we have Jewish voices that prove the existence of Matthew. Two Jewish people, Gamaliel the Second, who was a prominent rabbi, and his sister, Immashalom (which, incidentally, means "woman of peace," though she was far from that) pronounced a curse upon the Christians in these terms: "A curse upon the readers of the evangelistic Scriptures of the New Testament."

Now, the only evangelistic Scriptures of the New Testament that were extant in their day (about 45 or 50 A.D.) were the Gospel of Matthew and, perhaps, the Gospel of Mark, so that the date of writing of this Gospel is about 45 or 50 A.D. It was probably first written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek.

There are many who think that the Gospel of Matthew is one of the most difficult books of the New Testament to outline, but I would like to challenge that. I think there is no book in the Bible that lends itself more easily to outlining than the Gospel of Matthew. The reason is that the Holy Spirit himself has given the outline within the book. This occurs in several of the books of Scripture, and if you are observant, you can see these marks.

The major divisions of Matthew are given to us by the repetition of a particular phrase that appears twice and divides the book into three sections. First of all, there is an introductory section which takes us to chapter four, where we have the first occurrence of this phrase. It says (verse 17):

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." {Matt 4:17 RSV}

That marks a major turning point in the argument and presentation of this book. Then you find a similar phrase occurring in chapter 16, introducing the third section. We read (verse 21):

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. {Matt 16:21 RSV}

That is the first mention of the crucifixion in Matthew. From here on it is the aim and point of development of this book.

Now, there are subdivisions given to us in the same way by another kind of phrase. You will find the subdivisions marked for you by a verse which appears five different times. The first occasion is in chapter seven, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount. We read (verses 28, 29):

And when Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. {Matt 7:28-29 RSV}

In chapter 11, verse 1, you find another subdivision indicated:

And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. {Matt 11:1 RSV}

Look at chapter 13, verses 53, 54 where you have another subdivision indicated:

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his own country he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" {Matt 13:53-54 RSV}

In chapter 19, we read (verses 1, 2):

Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan, and large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. {Matt 19:1-2 RSV}

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of man will be delivered up to be crucified."

You notice that each one of these introduces a complete change of direction -- a new subject. These mark the divisions of this book.

The first division is all about the preparation of the King for his ministry. "Lo, your king comes to you;" the prophet Zechariah has said, "humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass," {Zech 9:9b RSV}. Matthew, then, is the Gospel of the King, and that prophecy was fulfilled in the triumphal entry when our Lord entered the city of Jerusalem in exactly that manner. It is Matthew's task to present him as the King. The book opens, therefore, with the genealogy of the King. Every king has to have a genealogy. The ancestry of a king is the most important thing about him. He has to go back to someone; he has to be in the royal line. Therefore, Matthew opens with that exhaustive and somewhat exhausting genealogy that traces from Abraham on down to Joseph, his stepfather, who was called the husband of Mary. Joseph was in the royal line of David. It is from Joseph that our Lord gets his royal right to the throne, because he was the heir of Joseph. It is through Mary, who was also of the royal line of David, that he gets his genealogical right to the throne. His legal right comes through Joseph; his hereditary right through Mary. Joseph, of course, was not really his father, but Mary was really his mother.

The first chapter also recounts his birth. The second chapter describes events which ensued, including the flight into Egypt. In the third chapter we read of the baptism of our Lord. The first two chapters thus relate him to earth. His genealogy ties him to the earthly royal line of David. But his baptism relates him to heaven and gives his heavenly credentials -- his heavenly authority -- for the heavens opened, and in an amazing way, the Father's voice spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son." There the royal line is declared according to the heavenly standard.

In the fourth chapter you have the testing of the King. This is his experience of temptation in the wilderness, where he is related to all the powers of darkness; where hell is loosed upon him. Now, the testing of our Lord is the key to the Gospel of Matthew. He is tested as a representative man. He goes into the wilderness as the Son of man, and is tested as to whether he can fulfill God's intention for man. Man is made up of three divisions -- body, soul, and spirit, and it was on these three levels that our Lord was tested.

You will notice, first of all, that he was tested on the level of the body's demands. The dominant passion of the body is self-preservation. Our Lord's first temptation came on that level. Would he continue to be God's man, even when he was faced by an extreme challenge on the level of self-preservation? For 40 days and nights he had not eaten, and then the temptation came subtly to him: "Change these stones into bread, if you are the Son

of God. Preserve your life." But he insisted upon walking in the will of God despite the intensity of this pressure. What would you have done after 40 days of fasting if someone offered you bread?

Then he was tested on the level of the soul -- that is, through the dominant passion of the soul, which is self-expression. On this level, we all want desperately to reveal ourselves; to show what we can do, or as we put it, to express ourselves. This is the drive that is the primary function of the human soul. Remember, it was during this testing that our Lord was taken up to the top of the temple, and given the opportunity to cast himself down and thus capture the acclaim of Israel. Such temptation plays upon the urge for status, for manifesting the pride of life. But he proved himself true to God despite the pressure that came to him in that way.

Finally, he was tested in the deepest, most essential part of his humanity -- the spirit. The dominant passion of the spirit is to worship. The spirit is always looking for something to worship. That is why man is everywhere essentially a religious being, because the spirit in him is craving, crying out, for an idol, someone to follow, a hero, something to worship. It was on this level that the Devil came to him and said, "All these kingdoms of the world will be yours if you will fall down and worship me," {cf, Matt 4:9b RSV}. Our Lord's answer was, "... it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve,'" {Matt 4:10b RSV} So he passed the test. He revealed himself fully and adequately to be man as God intended man to be.

Then, in the Sermon on the Mount, he begins to put this same test to the nation Israel. Israel had been chosen of God through the centuries to be his channel of communication with humanity, and they had regarded themselves as his favored people. Now the nation is to be put to the test, in the Gospel of Matthew, as to whether they can pass the same test our Lord did. This is the essential story of Matthew. He is tracing how the Son of God -- God's King -- came into the world, and offered himself to be King of Israel, first on the level of the physical, then on the level of the soul. When he was rejected on both these levels, he passed into the realm of the mystery of the human spirit. In the darkness and mystery of the cross, he accomplished the redeeming work that would capture man again for God, body, soul, and spirit.

Redemption, therefore, begins with the spirit. That's why the work of Christ in our own hearts -- though we may be attracted to him on the level of the body, for the supply of physical need; or on the level of the soul, for the need of self-expression and improvement in our lives -- will never really change us until it has reached the level of the spirit, the place of basic worship, wherein we have committed ourselves, body, soul, and spirit, unto him. Then the change begins to show.

Now you see this worked out in the Gospel of Matthew, with the nation Israel as the recipient. The first ministry begins, as we saw, in chapter four, with the mark, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,'" {Matt 4:17 RSV}. Then follows the Sermon on the Mount, where we have the presentation of the King and the laws of the kingdom. This covers the rest of chapters four, and five through seven. In these rules of the kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount there is an obvious emphasis on the physical life. Notice this as you read through it the next time.

This is one of the most penetrating, most incisive messages ever set before human beings, but it approaches us on the level of our ordinary, physical, material life. There are two physical sins dealt with -- murder and adultery. The life of God is illustrated for us in the realm of giving alms and of fasting -- physical acts. God is offered to us as One who so cares for us that we do not need to think of tomorrow -- how to be fed, how to be clothed -- the worries that come to us on the physical level. Our Lord is saying, "If you discover me and receive me as your King, you will discover that I am the answer to all your physical needs." He is offering himself to the nation, and to us, on this level.

Then this is followed by a section on miracles, and in chapters eight through twelve you have the miracles of the kingdom. These are illustrations of the benefits that our Lord can bestow on the level of the physical. There is no spectacular display here, but a representation of our Lord's power over everything affecting the body -- disease, demons and death. His authority in this realm is that of King.

This, in turn, is followed by a section of parables of the kingdom, where the rejection of the kingdom is declared in a mystery form. It is apparent even before this time that the nation is going to reject our Lord's

offer of himself as king on this physical level, and so a new word appears. In chapter 11 he begins to utter the word "woe" -- "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! Woe to those who have not believed!" {cf, Matt 11:21 ff RSV}. He pronounces judgment upon the nation on this level. The mysteries of the kingdom are in chapter 13, where the parables are given with truth hidden beneath a type of symbol. Then we have a section that is simply instruction to individuals -- to those among them who will believe, who will receive him on this level.

All of this section, by the way, beginning with chapter 13, verse 54 through chapter 16, verse 20, has to do with bread. There is the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 14; the questions on what defiles a man in chapter 15; and then the incident of the woman who came and asked for crumbs from his table, and he said, "The bread belongs to the sons of the kingdom," {see Matt 15:22-28}. Then there is the feeding of the 4,000 in chapter 15; the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees in chapter 16, and finally, the revelation of our Lord's person to Peter in that wonderful time when Peter was given the first insight that here, indeed, was one who would go beyond the level of the physical and even of the soulish, into the depths of man's spirit.

Beginning with chapter 16, verse 21 (we have already noted this major division), we have the second ministry of our Lord to the nation, this time on the level of the soul. He is offering himself on this level. His first revelation is to the disciples only, for they are the nucleus of the coming church, and this takes us up to chapter 18, verse 35. Here is the transfiguration and the first intimation of his death. This is followed (as in the first section) by parables of the King. These are addressed first to the disciples, and then to the nation. All are parables presenting him as the King who has the right to command and to determine the character of individuals. Nothing is said now about their physical lives, but rather, their soulish lives. Are they willing to follow him; are they willing to let him mold and shape their lives and characters?

Soon we have the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which becomes the judicial entry, when our Lord judges the nation, passes into the temple, stops the offerings, and drives out the money changers. Once again you hear the word "woe" coming in. In chapter 23, verse 13, he says, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, ..." {Matt 23:13a RSV} In verse 16, "Woe to you, blind guides, ..." {Matt 23:16a RSV}. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" {Matt 23:23a RSV}. All through the chapter, like the knell of death, this word "woe" rings out again and again.

This is followed by a section in chapters 24 and 25, where we have instructions to individuals again. This is what we call the Olivet discourse -- instructions to the believing remnant on what to do until he comes again. It reveals how world history is going to shape up; what will happen in the intervening years; what forces will be loosed upon the earth; how the forces of darkness are going to take God's own people and test them, try them, and shake their foundations. He declares that they can only stand as they learn to reckon upon the inner strengthening of the Holy Spirit.

Finally we arrive at the last section, where we have the betrayal, the trial of the Lord Jesus, the agony, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, when our Lord, in the mystery of darkness, passes out into the blackness of death. There, alone, forsaken by his friends, he entered into a death grapple with the powers of darkness. In the mystery of the cross, he laid hold of the forces that have mastered the human spirit and he broke them there. In the wonder of the cross, he vanquished the powers that have been against mankind. As Paul puts it later, he mastered them and made an open show of them, triumphing over them, and leading them behind him as a conqueror would lead a train of captives in open display before the people.

In the crucifixion story you see him standing as a lone prisoner before Pilate in judgment, and then passing into the darkness of the garden, from there to the whipping post, and then to the cross where he was nailed up to die. In the anguish and haze of that awful six hours, he grappled with these forces of darkness and vanquished them. Thus, the only crown he ever had as an earthly king was a crown of thorns; the only throne he ever mounted was a bloody cross; the only scepter he ever wielded was a broken reed.

But this is followed by the resurrection, when he broke through into the realm of the human spirit. Up to that time, in effect, God had never been able to move into the spirit of man -- on the ground of faith he could -- but now the way into the very center of man's being is opened wide. As we come to know the Lord in our spirit, we discover that the worship of our hearts is given to him there. The spirit is the key to the mastery of the

whole man. When you get a man's spirit, you have all that he is. By means of the cross and the resurrection, our Lord has made it possible to pass into the very holy of holies of man, and to dwell within him.

The great message of the Gospel, then, is that God is not up yonder on some throne; he is not waiting in some distant judgment hall to pass judgment upon us. He is ready and waiting to pass into the center of a hungry, thirsting person's heart, and there to minister the blessing of his own life, his own character, his own being, pouring them out for us. When the King is enthroned in the life, the kingdom of God is present. That is the message of Matthew -- "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heaven does not mean some place out in space; it means the realm of the invisibilities, where God reigns in the spirit. That kingdom is at hand in the presentation of the King.

The great question to which Matthew demands an answer is, "Is Jesus Christ King of your life?" Have you received him only as Savior of the body or Savior of the soul? Then he is not yet King. The question that Matthew brings before us is, "Has he become King? Has he penetrated to the spirit? Has he mastered your heart? Has he laid hold of your worship as an individual, so that he is the one single most important person in all the universe to you?" That is when he becomes King. That is the fulfillment of the first commandment. "You shall have no other gods before me, for you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your strength, and all your mind." The result will be that you will love your neighbor as yourself.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that as we look at this Gospel of the King we may see the majesty and the glory, the greatness of this One who has come to master us, who is not interested in merely helping us, but who has come to direct us. He has not come to take sides, but to take over. Lord, we pray that you would make us understand this and yield to him the throne of our lives; that in this very moment, as we worship before you, our hearts may be saying to him "Lord Jesus, come and reign in my heart; be the King over every area of my life; master me in all the aspects of my being; plant your bloody cross as a throne in my heart, and rule unchallenged." We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

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