PRAISE FOR *MATTHEW*

Dale and Michael—father and son—have put together a wonderful blend of scholarship and cultural commentary, alongside a fresh translation of the biblical text. Read it slowly and prayerfully. It will encourage and also challenge you.

—**William Dyrness,** Senior Professor of Theology and Culture, Dean Emeritus, Fuller Theological Seminary

In this new commentary series, Dale and Michael Bruner have one hand on the pulse of the first-century gospels and the other on twenty-first-century America. Father and son anchor the gospel narratives in solid historical research, but they don't tether the significance of Jesus to the past. Rallying a chorus of poets and novelists and hymnodists, and braving contemporary political idols of both right and left, *Matthew: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* is a robust response to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

—**James R. Edwards,** Bruner-Welch Professor Emeritus of Theology, Whitworth University

In this new commentary on Matthew, Frederick Dale Bruner and his son, Michael, have teamed up to produce a resource for "fellow pilgrims" on the Christian journey. Free of academic jargon yet grounded in careful biblical and theological reflection, this volume makes the riches of Scripture accessible to a wide range of readers. The fruit of decades of faithful study is distilled into clear observations that help readers engage with the text more deeply and follow Christ more faithfully.

—**Patrick Schreiner,** Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Here is not a marriage but a consanguinity made in heaven! The elder Bruner (Frederick Dale) is among the best Bible teachers I've ever heard and among the most profound commentators on the gospels that I've ever read; the younger Bruner (Michael Mears) is every bit his equal in teaching and theological prowess and is a literati to boot—as comfortable with Flannery O'Connor and Shakespeare as with St. Paul or St. John. The fruit of their colabors in this series (and this inaugural volume) is nothing short of spectacular: readable and incisive, insightful and accessible, returning us to that lively power of Scripture that is sharper than any sword, dividing soul and spirit, judging the thoughts and actions of the heart (Heb 4:12). If, as they write, God speaks in chords, but we hear only in notes, this father-son duet helps us attune to the divine melodies, starting with the Gospel of Matthew. Greatest hits indeed! I'm already salivating for the next three volumes.

—**Brent A. Strawn,** D. Moody Smith Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and Professor of Law, Duke University

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Drawing from Frederick Dale Bruner's lifelong work with Scripture and Michael Bruner's extensive engagement with literature, culture, and evangelical theology, this deeply serious, engaging, accessible, and at times playful "liner notes" on the Gospel of Matthew helps the reader encounter Jesus and wrestle with the full implications of Jesus' "greatest hits" for Christian faith and life in fresh ways. This exposition of the gospel will be especially helpful to readers who travel the borderlands between faith and unfaith yet who are attracted to Jesus and want to know more about him in dialogue with these trusted conversation partners. Their fresh translation of the text, theological takes, and cultural connections helped me hear new elements within this familiar gospel album—and better discern the divine voice behind it.

—David L. Stubbs, Professor of Ethics and Theology,
Western Theological Seminary

The Bruners, senior and junior, have produced a commentary on Matthew that began with hours of father-son, biblical scholar–theologian conversations. The result is a tribute to their ability to mind the gaps: generation gaps; disciplinary gaps; cultural gaps. They have something new to say about this familiar biblical text, and a new way of saying it, insisting that Matthew introduces the world to the most important news it has ever heard. And like newspaper deliverers of yore, the Bruners make a compelling appeal: "Read all about it!" You should!

—Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Jonathan Blanchard Professor of Systematic Theology,
Litfin Divinity School at Wheaton College



MATTHEW

A Biblical-Theological Commentary

Frederick Dale BRUNER

Michael Mears BRUNER

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

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ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

Matthew
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This commentary series is dedicated to Katherine Booth Bruner (10/31/35–6/10/25), wife, mother, friend, without whom —and without whose love, wisdom, and encouragement— this series would never have found the light of day.

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As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented to Him.
And to this Son of Man was given dominion and glory and kingship,
So that all peoples should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,
And his kingdom is one that shall never be destroyed.

—DANIEL 7:13–14



However modest one may be in one's demand for intellectual cleanliness, one cannot help feeling, when coming into contact with the New Testament, a kind of inexpressible discomfiture: for the unchecked impudence with which the least qualified want to raise their voice on the greatest problems, and even claim to be judges of things, surpasses all measure. The shameless levity with which the most intractable problems (life, world, God, purpose of life) are spoken of, as if they were not problems at all but simply things that these little bigots KNEW!

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *THE WILL TO POWER*[1]



And as I close this chaotic volume I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.

—G. K. CHESTERTON, *ORTHODOXY*[2]

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Our family of four (Dale, Kathy, Fred, and Michael) prioritized talking as our main form of entertainment growing up, which has afforded the two of us (Dale and Michael) decades of fodder in the form of conversations from which to pull for this series. Good conversations may be forgotten, but they're never lost. And then there are the countless commentaries and sermons, novels and poems, music and artwork that make up much of the content of this book, both as inherited wisdom and as explicit sources. We are deeply grateful for all of it—conversations, commentaries, and the best of culture—an artistic and apostolic succession of the first order! We may not be saved *by* art, but we wouldn't at all be surprised if we were saved *through* it.

But it all begins, of course, with a prompting of the Holy Spirit, often in the form of the encouragement, love, patience, and wise counsel of family and friends, which gives us the energy and will to write day after day, week after week, year after year, to this project's completion.

An especially heartfelt thanks to Jenna, Arabelle, and Will. This book is for you.

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A BRIEF NOTE ON CAPITALIZATION

Throughout this book, we always capitalize the male pronoun referent to God (He/Him/His) and sometimes capitalize the singular words *Gospel*, *Church*, and *Righteousness*. Here's why.

We capitalize *He* when referring to God the Father in the same way that *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* are capitalized when referring to various members of the Trinity, not in order to emphasize God's maleness but to do the opposite: to indicate that *Father* and *Son* (and *He*) occupy a unique grammatical category that is neither male nor female (as opposed to when we refer to Jesus, for example, who really was a *he*). There is no divine gender, in other words. Some prefer using *God* or *Godself* repeatedly where a male pronoun might normally be used, but such diction sounds unnecessarily cumbersome to our ears. As for *She*, we feel that this simply draws attention to itself and becomes a distraction. God made both female and male equally in His image. We hope our readers understand our decision.

Whenever we capitalize *Gospel*, we are making a distinction between the individual gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the overall Gospel message, which inheres in all of them and is the good news of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the message of God's love made manifest in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of His Son.

We capitalize *Church* when we are referring to the Church universal, otherwise known as the (small *c*) catholic Church. When we are speaking of a particular church, we keep the lowercase.

When we capitalize *Righteousness*, which applies more to Matthew than the other gospels, we're referring to the particular gift of Righteousness given by God and not the righteousness we possess for—and from—ourselves. Please see our full discussion in chapter 2.

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

JESUS' GREATEST HITS

There are so many other things Jesus did.
If they were all written down, each of them, one by
one, I can't imagine a world big enough
to hold such a library of books.
—JOHN 21:25 MSG

An email I sent to my father back in 2017 as I was about to head out the door to meet my mother for coffee was how this project began:

Sent: Thursday, April 6, 2017 at 11:07:18 AM PDT
Subject: The Gospels

Hi Dad,

I wanted to follow up on my idea that I mentioned when we were all together last Monday night. It may not be of interest to you, and I want you to know that I would completely understand. Really. This is just an idea that I thought would be fun and useful, but it's up to you to decide.

What I'm imagining is that we'd divide up each gospel by pericope, and then we'd each comment on the pericopes and try to limit our comments to 2–3 pages each, which translates to 4–6 pages per pericope. I'm guessing there are maybe 30 or so pericopes in Matthew, which would bring the page total to about 150 pages for that gospel. Multiply that roughly by four and you get about a 600-page commentary. You'd focus on the biblical/historical stuff, and I'd focus more on the theological/cultural stuff (though we'd each be free to venture off into each other's territory if we felt led), so that it would be like a conversation between two biblical theologians. And because we're both committed to not rely on footnotes (except to reference quotes, etc.), it would go pretty quickly.

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When I reached the Starbucks in San Marino half an hour after sending the email, my mother's reaction was immediate, "Oh, Mick, he'll never do it." A few minutes later, my phone pinged:

Sent: Thursday, April 6, 2017 11:32 AM
Subject: Re: The Gospels from Dad

Dear Son:

I like the idea, and in all the ways you suggested! Let's go for it! I started writing chapter 1 yesterday, and will try to do each pericope, as you suggested, in 2 to 3 pages. Fun!

Expectantly, Dad

He had already started! Of course he had. No time to waste. The original plan had involved us getting together weekly, starting in the fall, to go over the pericope we'd be working on that week in the Greek New Testament in order to render our own translation, which would then give us an idea of where we each were headed before we tramped off to our respective caves to write.

Dad took off on his own like a rocket, eager to reach escape velocity and glad to finally have a writing project after a few years of writer's block. By the end of that year, he had nearly finished his half of Matthew and Mark, and Luke and John weren't far behind. I, in the meantime, was busy finishing my book on Flannery O'Connor, teaching the adult Sunday School class at First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, and carrying a full teaching load at Azusa Pacific University. I wouldn't end up even beginning my half of Matthew until six years later and one thousand miles away (another story). Best laid plans.

We are excited to finally have the first fruits of our labor in your hands. We trust that the original vision for the series continues to hold true: that these books will engage layperson and scholar alike, be blissfully free of extensive footnotes, and incorporate the best of biblical scholarship in the hope that the gospels come alive in new and arresting ways. May those who read these volumes consider anew their relationship to the Great Protagonist.

Why "Jesus' Greatest Hits"? The gospels are a culled and curated selection of Jesus' most memorable moments and sayings from his one-thousand-day promised land world tour. That is to say, his greatest hits. And this isn't just an attempt at a clever name. It's a deliberate interpretive move. That the gospels are essentially a compendium of Jesus' standout moments means that all those "so many other things Jesus did" that John alludes to in the quote above are left untouched because they are

unrecorded, which leaves a thoughtful reading of the gospels ample room to make responsible inferences about the wider context of Jesus' words and deeds.

At the same time, because each gospel passage marks a moment that stood out three and four (or six in John's case) decades after Jesus' departure means that each passage takes on an added significance because it was one among hundreds (thousands?) of memories that the earliest Christian communities—the eyewitnesses—chose to include in the gospel accounts. So we are simultaneously invited to infer from the gospel accounts what Jesus meant while still acknowledging the privileged witness of the gospel text itself. Such a creative paradox opens up a fresh realm of inquiry and expression by allowing for new and faithful renderings of a particular passage's meaning while simultaneously guarding against heterodox overreach. Thoughtful inference, a common method in science, is often the way to a deeper understanding of a text's meaning. This is also why we invite other voices from culture—music, literature, philosophy, art—into the conversation, so that they too can help illuminate the Gospel message. The gospels' very structure, in fact, compels us to do so. Think of it as our version of plundering the Egyptians, a term that Augustine popularized when he argued (borrowing from Exodus 12:36) for the use of pagan learning as a way of illuminating Christian truth by baptizing it for Christian purposes.[1]

And consider this: The gospel of Mark includes about thirty-eight discrete days of Jesus' life. If we assume that Jesus was about thirty years old when his ministry began and about thirty-three when it ended, thirty-eight days represents just over 3 percent of Jesus' ministry—and 0.3 percent of his entire life! We have in the four gospels, in other words, a mere fraction of what Jesus said and did. And yet this minuscule slice of life has inspired more than two thousand years of sermons, commentaries, debates, councils, dramatic reenactments, dissertations, paintings, hymns, and denominations. Such an inductive approach to Jesus' life not only leaves room for but invites creative conjecture where there is some question or doubt as to a particular passage's intended meaning (or, perhaps more accurately, where there are multiple meanings). We sense themes, spy trajectories, discern patterns in the form of three-point sermons, sculptures, paintings, poems, song lyrics, commentaries, and in so doing, we extend a two-thousand-year franchise that has attempted to uncover what Jesus *really* meant—at least for our day and time. His words might usually be clear, but their meaning isn't always—and anyone who tells you otherwise hasn't done the honest work of careful interpretation. Is it "blessed are the *poor*" or "blessed are the *poor in spirit*"? Well, it's both, of course, but what does *that* mean? The plain fact is, there is no such thing as a literal interpretation (of the gospels or of Scripture, in general) for the simple reason that if it's literal, it isn't an interpretation, and if it's an interpretation, it isn't literal. And those who want to claim that "if it isn't in Scripture, then it doesn't matter" aren't taking seriously the role of the Church down through the centuries in determining, among

many other things, which books and letters made the canonical cut and which didn't. There is no Gospel According to God.

We don't know for certain what Jesus was *thinking* at any given moment beyond what he *said* and *did*, but isn't what we are thinking every bit as much the true measure of a person as what he or she says or does? It was our thoughts and intentions, after all, that Jesus held up for us to examine when he redefined what murder and adultery are (Matthew 5) or told the parable of the soils in Matthew 13 and Luke 8, or the many times he chastises what the Pharisees and scribes are thinking when, for example, he says, "For from within, out of the heart of a person, proceeds evil thoughts" (Mark 7). The other Mark (Twain) begins his autobiography with this crucial caveat:

> What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself. All day long, and every day, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his *thoughts*, not those other things, are his history. His acts and his words are merely the visible, thin crust of his world, with its scattered snow summits and its vacant wastes of water—and they are so trifling a part of his bulk! a mere skin enveloping it. The mass of him is hidden—it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. These are his life, and they are not written, and cannot be written. Every day would make a whole book of eighty thousand words—three hundred and sixty-five books a year. Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man—the biography of the man himself cannot be written.[2]

The gospels, of course, are more than the "clothes and buttons" of Jesus, but have we really done much more than begin to understand who God is in reading them? Certainly we need Paul's letters too, and Luke's fifth gospel (the book of Acts), and John's Revelation, not to mention the Hebrew Scriptures. Twain says that if a person's thoughts for a day were written down, it "would make a whole book of eighty thousand words," which, as it turns out, is just about the number of words in the English translations of all four gospels.

In the end (and actually, from the very beginning), the Church inherited what each of the gospelers and their communities remembered about those crucial days, months, and years of Jesus' ministry, which would give subsequent generations a view—nothing more than a peek—into the extraordinary life of this God-man, this Word made flesh, this Jesus who entered into his own creation and introduced himself to us through its stories. John Updike once opined that a critical quality of a good story is that its characters are life-sized, which thus allows readers to relate to them more completely. The gospels share this quality. Jesus and his disciples are relatable. They (especially the disciples but also, remarkably, Jesus himself) are us, and we see ourselves in their gospels. We are tempted like Jesus, and we sin like Peter, and we doubt like Thomas, and sometimes, if only rarely, we believe like Mary. It turns out, we not only get the gospels, but they get us!

But why this commentary series? We believe that we not only have something new to say but a new way of saying it, both to the Church and to the wider and increasingly skeptical world. We hope these commentaries bring new perspectives and fresh answers to the deepest questions that we confront as human beings. The singular Gospel (as opposed to the four individual gospels) has never been a one-dimensional proposition. Every generation sees the world through a different set of eyes, and with that new vision comes a new set of assumptions and new blind spots and new and different preferences—even new languages. Separate cultures at separate times and places have understood and translated passages in ways that more accurately and helpfully reflected their particular time and place while somehow managing to (mostly) still hold to the consensus of the universal Church.

A story from our experience at a Wycliffe Bible translating outpost on a remote island in the Philippines in the 1960s illustrates this well. When it came to translating Jesus' "I am the bread of life" in John's gospel, the translators substituted *rice* for *bread* because the people of that region had no idea what bread was. They didn't have a word for it. Rice was the staple of their diet, and knowing that Jesus was calling himself the staple of life, the Wycliffe translators wisely translated Jesus to say, "I am the rice of life." In doing so, they more accurately portrayed the significance of Jesus' presence in the lives of these people. Our intentions are the same: to help current generations of people understand the presence of Jesus in ways that speak to life here and now, in the daily grind of contemporary (and particularly contemporary Western) culture.

The very presence of four gospels indicates the dynamic nature of the biblical witness. Even as the central truth of Jesus Christ remains unchanged, *how* such a truth is preached and understood naturally changes with the times—and with the telling. Just as a room looks different depending on the time of day and the slant of the sun's light through the windows (though it's the same sun), so too the Gospel is seen and understood in different and varying ways through the windows of the centuries, though it be the same Son. The gospels are about a *living* Word after all, and this series seeks to be attuned to that life-reflecting, life-altering, life-giving Word, who is Jesus Christ.

We believe in the heart of the Gospel message—"that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, that whosoever might believe in him will not die but will have everlasting life" (John 3:16)—but we are cautious about our own and each other's favorite interpretations of any single text (there are two of us writing this book, after all, and we don't always have the same interpretations). We try to examine ourselves as rigorously as we examine the gospels. One way we do this is

through a hermeneutic of suspicion that works both ways: toward the text and the cultural biases it carries *and* toward ourselves and the cultural biases we carry. As two authors writing in a single voice, we reach for responsible compromise where we differ (the exception) and a happy consensus where we agree (the rule).

As for Nietzsche's assessment of this material (see epigraph), we're left only shrugging our shoulders. The gospels—and the Gospel—certainly do not claim to be "intellectually clean" if, by that phrase, Nietzsche meant reasonable or self-authenticating. We do agree, however, that there is "a kind of inexpressible discomfiture" when confronting the gospels on their own terms. They are *audacious*, for lack of a better word, or if you prefer Nietzsche's word, *impudent*, especially considering what these gospels are claiming (that, for example, God became a *human being*).

Where Nietzsche falls afoul in his estimation of the New Testament is, first, when he calls the writers of the New Testament (gospelers included) "the least qualified." Really? Aren't eyewitnesses among the most qualified to speak on any given event, and aren't their testimonies considered among the most compelling in a court of law? Eyewitness accounts aren't sacrosanct, of course. But *four* eyewitness accounts that essentially agree, often written decades apart and likely from firsthand oral retellings (see Luke 1:1–4)? And wherever does Nietzsche get the idea that "the most intractable problems" are spoken with "shameless levity"? Did he bother to read the Sermon on the Mount? Of course he did, yet he calls gospelers "little bigots" for claiming that they *knew* the answers to such problems. On the contrary, they argue, disagree, are confounded, and are, when all is said and done, usually reduced to simple faith—or just as often, simple doubt. Nietzsche, in all his existential bluster, seems to be accusing the writers of the very thing he was guilty of (it takes a little bigot to know one). But he is right about one thing: In the pages of these gospels, "the most intractable problems (life, world, God, purpose of life) are spoken of." We believe that no better answers to such problems have ever been given.

The point of a commentary—at least the ones in this series—is to not be theologically coy but instead to leave everything on the table. If what we say here offends, we suppose it might be because the Gospel is an equal-opportunity offender. Indeed, if we're never offended by the Gospel, we probably haven't been paying close enough attention. For that reason, we don't hold back out of fear that what we say here might lose us future readers. The privilege of writing commentaries comes with the responsibility of shooting straight with the reader. You—the unknown, struggling believer (or nonbeliever) who is curious enough to pick up a book like this—you are the ones we are writing to. You deserve such an approach. And so does the Gospel.

Commentaries that write to the academy serve their purposes, but the academy is not our primary audience. We hope, of course, that those of you in the academy find what we have to say compelling. But this series is written deliberately to a lay audience, to fellow pilgrims, colaborers, and seekers who yearn for a commentary that comes from a commitment to deep scholarship but that, at the same time, dispenses with the academic window dressing and insider-speak that so many commentaries trade in. We want to speak in plain terms to those interested in living a hard-won and earnest Christian life, and we believe the gospels give us the map to and through such a way of life, who is Jesus Christ, our North Star who has given us a compass that we call Scripture.

All commentary writers are, essentially, spiritual cartographers who study the maps to make the compass more useful. We are aware, of course, that not all our readers carry the same compass or acknowledge the same North Star or even look at the same maps. But *you* have come to this map, and so we invite you to read on.

There is no small amount of faith required in suspending one's disbelief in what the gospels present to the earnest—even casual—reader. Demons inhabiting pigs? Fishermen walking on water? The best wine served last? Such strange and unfamiliar excesses are as hard to believe now as they were two thousand years ago. But we cannot change the truth of the gospels to fit our modern sensibilities, even as we learn new ways to understand the truths they tell.

The point of any commentary should never be to arrive at the full and final truth. Not only is such an attempt foolhardy—how can we know the mind of God?—it's egocentric. Do we suppose that we have special access to the eternal truths of the Gospel? We do not. If we find human consciousness an ongoing mystery, what of divine consciousness? We especially appreciate the translation in the Amplified Bible, Classic Edition (AMPC) of 1 Corinthians 2:9–11:

> But, on the contrary, as the Scripture says, What eye has not seen and ear has not heard and has not entered into the heart of man, [all that] God has prepared (made and keeps ready) for those who love Him [who hold Him in affectionate reverence, promptly obeying Him and gratefully recognizing the benefits He has bestowed].
>
> Yet to us God has unveiled and revealed them by and through His Spirit, for the [Holy] Spirit searches diligently, exploring and examining everything, even sounding the profound and bottomless things of God [the divine counsels and things hidden and beyond man's scrutiny].
>
> For what person perceives (knows and understands) what passes through a man's thoughts except the man's own spirit within him? Just so, no one discerns (comes to know and comprehend) the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

We've tried to write for the ear because these pages come from the conversations that we—father and son, biblical scholar and theologian—have had for over half a

century with God and with ourselves, and we invite you to join in. More than one hundred years of listening carefully to each other and to the gospels are collectively represented in these pages. After all, the better part of any good conversation, especially those we have with God, involves listening. Why? Because God speaks in chords. We hear only in notes.

Michael, with Dale (Holy Week 2025)

VOLUME INTRODUCTION

MATTHEW

Even though Matthew isn't the earliest gospel account, his insistence on systematizing the life, message, and ministry of Jesus likely led the early Church fathers to give him pride of place as the first book in the New Testament. I (Dale) used Matthew to teach Church doctrine to my Philippine seminary students, and it worked! They stopped falling asleep in class. I (Michael) grew up with Matthew as a second brother. My father began writing his commentary when I entered kindergarten, and it was published the year I graduated college. Matthew is an old friend.

Our intention in this book—and in this series—is to make the gospels accessible to the nonacademic seeker while still being helpful (and, hopefully, challenging) to pastors, theologians, and seminary students. We are committed, by default, to being equal-opportunity offenders for the simple reason that the gospels themselves—and maybe particularly Matthew's—refuse to bend a knee to political correctness of any stripe; they privilege no single political vision or platform. Liberals and Conservatives, Right and Left, progressives and traditionalists, all are equally on notice.

We are convinced that when the gospels no longer offend (in one form or another), they no longer preach. There are those who have tried to make the gospels more palatable by writing their own versions (Thomas Jefferson, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy . . .), but the Gospel itself refuses to be turned into a palliative. Matthew's magisterial Sermon on the Mount, for example, (likely culled from the many sermons Jesus preached over the course of his three-year ministry) goes for the jugular as often as it comforts the heart. As soon as we feel the balm of the Beatitudes, we're thrust into Jesus' almost impossibly high moral commands regarding murder and lust. In fact, it's precisely because we're called to be salt and light in an often insipid and dark world that we will need to fall back on the Beatitudes again and again. That's probably why Jesus started with the Beatitudes. He was preparing the listener to be challenged.

Matthew's gospel introduces us to the most important news the world has ever heard—and the news it most urgently needs—that God took the trouble to love us

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so completely that He became one of us to save us from ourselves. But so many of us have heard the story so many times that we run the risk of tuning it out every time we hear it. Reception fatigue. First-century Jews were in the same boat. They'd heard it all before. Matthew, like the other gospels, is meant to wake us up from our collective stupor so that we might hear the Gospel for what it truly is: a clarion call to wake up and engage the world with the only message that will save it—and us. Of course, before we can truly engage the world with the Gospel message, we need to be reengaged by it.



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CHAPTERS 1–4

A NEW GENESIS

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
—ISAIAH 11:1

This gospel's opening words, Βίβλος γενέσεως (*Biblos geneseōs*), set the tone for all that's to follow, not only in this first gospel but in all the subsequent books of this new revelation, this New Testament. The beginning of Matthew's gospel (and the New Testament) begins at the genesis of Jesus' messiahship, at what amounts to the beginning of Judaism: with Abraham as its first adherent and David as its last king. The New Testament is the New Genesis, and as Isaiah prophesied, the shoot that came up from the stump of Jesse, the Branch from that root, is Jesus.

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CHAPTER 1

THE GENEALOGY AND BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew's target audience was the first-century Jewish converts to what was now being called (by the fifties and sixties of the first century) *Christianity*. To do this, he had to establish Jesus' claim to messiahship by establishing his line of ancestors back to David and to Abraham. Matthew is signaling to his audience that Jesus is the heir apparent to Abraham's call and the rightful successor to David's throne. The incarnation of Jesus was the logical extension of Judaism, not the birthing of some new religion. Why indeed would Matthew begin his gospel by emphasizing Jesus' Jewish heritage if the purpose was to establish some new religion?

THE GENESIS OF JESUS (1:1–17)

[1]The book of the genesis of Jesus the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham.

[2]Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob, the father of Judah and his brothers, [3]and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, [4]and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, [5]and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, [6]and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, [7]and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, [8]and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of . . . Uzziah, [9]and Uzziah the father of Jothan, and Jothan the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, [10]and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, [11]and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

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> [12]And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, [13]and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, [14]and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, [15]and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, [16]and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.
>
> [17]So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen; and fourteen from David to the Babylonian deportation; and fourteen from the deportation to the Messiah.

How gripping are these opening verses, divided into three genealogical lines from Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian deportation, and the deportation to the Messiah? Not very, at least not at first glance. But Matthew has tucked away some gems in this apparently innocuous genealogy in the form of some striking insertions, precisely so that he can begin his gospel not with a boring list of ancestors but with surprisingly—and radically—good news.

As noted above, the first two Greek words of Matthew's gospel (and its original title) are *Biblos geneseōs*, which, literally translated, means "Book of Genesis." It takes some nerve to give his gospel the same revered title as the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, which had promised that the coming Messiah would be a Son of David and that his kingdom would last forever. Even earlier than David, in Genesis, the Lord had given Abraham a promise that through his lineage "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Both promises find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, and this consequential double promise is one of the hidden gems in these opening, and seemingly boring, verses.

At the beginning of the genealogy, four couples are mentioned (though the first isn't exactly a couple): "And Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar"; "and Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth"; "and David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah."

Where are the four noble matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah? Why weren't they included? And even more "unusual" (*shocking?*) are the four couples' pedigrees: (1) The patriarch Judah gives birth by an adulterous relationship with his own daughter-in-law, Tamar, a Canaanite disguised as a prostitute (Gen 38); (2) Salmon gives birth to Boaz by Rahab "the harlot" from non-Israel Jericho, who becomes a believer and a defender of Israel's spies (Josh 2); (3) Boaz gives birth to Obed by Ruth, who was a member, at that time, of Israel's enemy the Moabites; and (4) King David, promised progenitor of the everlasting King-Messiah, has an adulterous relationship with a woman whom Matthew scruples not to name (*ahem*, Bathsheba, a Hittite)—apparently even for Matthew, this was a bridge too far.

So why did Matthew record these four *outside-Israel*, *outside moral-boundary* liaisons, who don't appear to be essential to his genealogy to begin with, if the

purpose of the genealogy is to emphasize Jesus' noble lineage? Our best guess, with many Bible scholars, is that Matthew intends from the very outset to introduce a gospel that is not only *for* and *by* quintessential outsiders but *for* and *by* genuine (albeit repentant!) sinners, much like David's Psalms do. So here at the very beginning of Matthew's seemingly ordinary, ho-hum list of ancestors, an extraordinary group of characters is introduced. Surprise!

Where the first line of the genealogy (from Abraham to David) teaches the deep-and-wide gospel of God's grace, the second line (David to Babylonian captivity) teaches the judgment of God on His people's faithlessness. What is grace, after all, without judgment? The first assumes the second: It isn't grace unless judgment is deserved. And to the careful reader, this second line also teaches that Matthew had pedagogical intentions in compiling this list; he skips four people in this second line in order to keep a mathematically consistent fourteen generations per line, which is easier to remember. Of all the gospel writers, Matthew is most interested in keeping things neat and tidy (the first Presbyterian?), and this is significant mostly because it cautions the reader against an overly literal interpretation of Jesus' genealogy (see Luke's below).

The final line of the genealogy—from Babylonian captivity to Jesus—teaches us God's faithfulness in keeping His promises even when His people don't always keep theirs. With the inclusion of Joseph, Mary, and finally Jesus (with a quiet nod to the Holy Spirit) at the end of the line, we're shown how the trajectory of God's design is redemptive, even salvific. The moral arc of the universe is long, and it bends toward Jesus, which means that our unfaithfulness never gets the last word. It's a design that appears to be in the very genetic structure of Jesus'—and the cosmos's—DNA.

And what are we to make of the differences between Matthew's and Luke's genealogies? Not much, as long as we don't exclusively read the Scriptures literally (a fool's errand). Genesis begins with two different accounts of creation that cannot be logically equated without resorting to exegetical gymnastics. We appreciate how both Testaments, right from the start, provide correctives to any attempts to submit Scripture to our demands for logical consistency. Scripture is *theo*-logic, God's logic, and does not play nice with demands it neither wants nor warrants. The point here is the *inspired* nature of Matthew's genealogy, which not only shows God's radical inclusiveness as part of His intimate plan for salvation but also admits a level of creativity on Matthew's part that needn't be controlled by Vienna Circle rationalism.

The gospel writers wrote what they believed to be true, and what they felt free to alter, they did under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This may seem like a potentially hazardous explanation, as if the Bible were filled with nothing but conjecture. What any careful reader of Scripture is finally forced to reckon with is that the Bible is no more perfect than the Savior it heralds. Indeed, it *must* be less! If we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is "very man of very man, and very God of very God"—and it's best we do if we're to call ourselves Christian—then how can the witness to that God be more perfect than the God to whom it witnesses? To suggest

an equivalency between Jesus and the Bible is to engage in bibliolatry, but we don't worship Scripture. Scripture is, like the Jesus it witnesses to, both human *and* divine, written by imperfect humans but inspired by a perfect God. What we end up with is something both relatable and revelational, imperfect but divine (though not wholly divine). We see zero problems with this. The Bible is the medium (via the Holy Spirit), and Jesus is the message (via his Father). The medium, in other words, is decidedly *not* the message (unless, of course, you're Eugene Peterson).

We're encouraged by this because it serves as an open invitation to thoughtfully investigate the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which God is not intimidated by. (What He wouldn't give for such investigations!) There are, of course, limits and rules to how such investigations take place. We're not countenancing a free-for-all approach to biblical interpretation, but interpretation is inevitable when we read Scripture (or anything else for that matter), which makes the term *literal interpretation* a tautology. As we said earlier, if it's literal, it's not an interpretation. If it's an interpretation, it's not literal. The four versions of the Gospel, each of them either slightly (the Synoptics) or significantly (John) different from the others, are all the proof we need that a literal interpretation of Scripture is impossible. Just as the two creation stories in Genesis are God's way of saying, "*You figure it out!*" the four gospels are God's way of saying, "*Investigate!*" In both cases, God lets us tell His story (and history).

THE BIRTH AND CHRISTENING OF THE MESSIAH (1:18–25)

[18]Now the birth of Jesus Messiah took place like this. When his mother Mary
was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, it was discovered that Mary was
pregnant—by the Holy Spirit! [19]Joseph, her fiancé, was living a righteous life and
so, not knowing what had actually happened, and not wanting to publicly shame
Mary, he decided to quietly call the marriage off and to slip away. [20]But when he
had just made this decision, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and
said to him, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary to be your wife.
You see, the child who has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. [21]She will
give birth to a son, and you, Joseph, will name him 'Jesus.' He will have this name
because he himself will save his people from their sins." [22]This all happened so
that the Word spoken by the Lord through the prophet long ago would come to
fulfillment:

[23]*"Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,*
and people will give him the name 'Emmanuel,'
which means 'God is with us.'" [Isaiah 7:14]

[24]When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded
of him and took Mary to be his wife. [25]And they did not have marital relations
until she gave birth to a son; and as he had been directed, Joseph named him Jesus.

When God chose to be with us in His Son, his adoptive (and adopted) family was neither royal nor a family of wealth and means. It consisted of a peasant woman and her husband-to-be, a blue-collar tradesman. In other words, right in line with Jesus' genealogy. Neither his ancestors nor his family of origin was impressive, at least not by the world's standards. But God doesn't seek to impress the world (nor is He impressed by the world's standards). Humility, without affect, will be God's signature approach moving forward.

Jesus' human life begins at conception, when we meet the Holy Spirit, which points to a strong biblical mandate for supporting the life of the unborn child in much the same way that his future death points to a strong biblical mandate for opposing the death penalty.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is presented as the Christ-bringer par excellence who never brings attention to himself. (He is referred to as the shy member of the Trinity by some.) The other silent member of the Holy Family is Joseph, who never says a "mumblin' word" in Scripture. He speaks by doing. Matthew calls Joseph "righteous" because Righteousness (a subject Matthew will highlight throughout his gospel) expresses itself most eloquently in quiet obedience to the Lord. Joseph is the quintessence of quiet obedience. May more of Christendom seek to be like Joseph!

Most Christians through history have had little to no difficulty believing in Jesus' virgin birth (Luke's second witness to the virgin birth adds credibility to this unusual beginning). The Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a "young woman" who will give birth to a son and name him Emmanuel, whereas the Greek text of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, or LXX) uses the word *virgin* for the woman who will have this honor. Whatever the case, it is a fool's errand to debate the reality of the virgin birth for this simple reason: Where would the questioning end? It is a supernatural phenomenon and, as such, nonscientific, which is to say, unprovable. As are Jesus' miracles, and the existence of God, and the Trinity, and the resurrection, and just about any other reality that Christians take for granted. There is no way to prove such things—but proof isn't the point. If we believe in a God who brought the whole cosmos into being, believing that a virgin gave birth is a trifle. The writer Flannery O'Connor once said that faith is not certainty but trust.[1] Believers trust that God created the cosmos, then entered into it in a miraculous way through His son Jesus Christ. How, exactly, all of this went down is neither a matter of proof nor a certainty we hang our hat on. We choose to believe or we don't. Faith is a way of knowing that itself is not subject to proof. It wouldn't be faith otherwise.

We learn in this first chapter about God's *grace* in the first line of the genealogy, from Abraham to David, where we see Jesus coming not only from a long line of the faithful but a short list of the unfaithful—through repentant sinners and castaway outsiders who nonetheless tried to do their best to be loyal to the God of Israel. Then we learn of God's *justice* as the genealogy takes us from the kingship

of David into Babylonian captivity, which points to the inevitable results of sin and disobedience. There may not be a literal hell to pay for the disobedient (and presumably repentant) believer, but there certainly are consequences in this life for our disobedience that feel like hell. And finally, we learn of God's *faithfulness* in keeping His promise to an errant and wayward people, a promise that a son through Abraham's descendants will be a blessing for all the families of the earth and, through David, that his kingdom will last forever. Jesus would have made for a fascinating guest on the show *Finding Your Roots*; you can almost see the surprised look on his face as Dr. Henry Louis Gates asks him to turn the page.

Through the story of Jesus' humble birth, we also learn about God's humility and how, from such humble beginnings, the Spirit of God creates a space for the holy—that is, for the baby *Ya-Shua*; a God in the trenches, in the basest experiences of life, who trespasses all common decency to join us in the muck and mire of life, this is the God we worship. This is the first—but certainly not the last—time we are compelled to make this most astounding of claims: God is always both lower and higher than we are. We worship the one who rescues us. Jesus' name, in fact, describes this—and his—specialty: rescuing. The angel tells Joseph that Jesus will rescue his people from their sins, and this ongoing, unending rescue operation has been the experience of Christian believers through the centuries. Jesus meets us where we are, no matter how humble our station, and the promise of Isaiah 9:6, celebrated most beautifully in Handel's *Messiah*, reminds us that from such humble beginnings comes the greatest of endings:

> For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given;
> and the Government shall be upon his shoulders;
> and his Name shall be called—
> Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God,
> The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isa 9:6)

If the popular story of King George II is to be believed, it's no wonder that upon hearing these words performed at the London premiere, he rose to his feet, and the entire hall with him.

Heavenly Father, Eternal Son, Holy Spirit, help us to remember and give thanks for those who have preceded us in this life and have played a part in rescuing us and helping us rise to our own feet in your presence. Amen.

CHAPTER 2

THE INTRODUCTION OF JESUS

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness
of your dawn. . . . They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.
—ISAIAH 60:3, 6

Nothing would have stopped Matthew from making up details in his gospel to "miraculously" fulfill Old Testament prophecies. But does his inclusion of the gifts of gold and frankincense at the manger prove that he inserted this detail, or is it the other way around? Do the gifts "prove" the veracity of the prophecy? Neither. Biblical prophecies, like most biblical stories, fall outside the realm of proof, by which we mean those things that can be tested and retested in a controlled environment to produce what we call a "fact" (which, incidentally, are often overturned). Perhaps Matthew inserted this detail to fit the prophecy or maybe it's how the story came to him. We'll never know, can never know, and shouldn't finally care because it doesn't finally matter. (Were there really *three* kings or just three gifts?) Christians believe in the resurrection, and in God's creation, and in Jesus suspending the laws of thermodynamics when he walked on water. Compared to those, a shiny and spicy prophecy fulfilled at a manger is small potatoes.

THE MAGI'S MEETING WITH HEROD (2:1–8)

[1]Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod,
look! Magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem [2]asking, "Where is the one who
has been born king of the Jews? We want to know because we saw his star at its
rising in the east and we've come to pay our respects." [3]When King Herod heard
this, he was deeply troubled (and all Jerusalem with him). [4]So Herod gathered

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all the chief priests and scribes to find the answer to this question: "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" [5]They replied, "In Bethlehem of Judea, just as the prophet has written:

> [6]*'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,*
> *are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah;*
> *for out of you will come the Ruler*
> *who will shepherd my people Israel.*'" [Mic 5:2–5; cf. 2 Sam 5:2, etc.]

[7]So Herod secretly summoned the magi and learned from them when that star had appeared. [8]Then he sent them off to Bethlehem with these instructions: "Go and search carefully for that child, and when you find him, come and tell me so that I too can go and pay him my deepest respects."

He who comes from on high goes down real low. The Gospel will teach us, in its four iterations, how such lowliness—from naked birth to humiliating cross, from sketchy relatives to borrowed graves—are not anomalies in His way with humanity but are God's preferred method of operation, and His favorite way to reach us. And this lowliness comes as a sort of grace because it is something (and someone) we can relate to. Our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters see it thus: In God's bowing down, we are simultaneously lifted up. And so every subsequent birth since the incarnation is another incarnation of spirit and body, of joy unbound, of the *imago Dei* in the flesh. We are reminded of the lines from Dave Matthews' song "Samurai Cop (Oh Joy Begin)" about a baby being born naked and afraid, small and weak, and yet "oh joy begin."[1]

The three main characters in the opening verse (one of them merely implied) mirror humanity in our three modes of response to God: obedient follower (Mary), curious outsider (the Magi), and resistant or hostile antagonist (Herod). Another way to understand this threefold anthropology is as human nature *bearing* grace, human nature *receiving* grace, and human nature *resisting* grace. At any point in our lives, we participate in at least one of these three modes (and sometimes all three simultaneously!).

Mary, as the quintessential obedient follower, is only referred to indirectly ("Now, when Jesus was born . . ."), and yet she clearly shares center stage with her son. In her inimitably quiet and unobtrusive way, she bears, literally and figuratively, grace into the world. (Remember, again, how Righteousness [capital *R*] in Matthew's gospel expresses itself most eloquently in quiet obedience; see Joseph.) Contemporary Christians would do well to remember and recommit to such quiet modes of response, to unspectacular modes of witness.

The Magi, as outsiders, were understood in Matthew's time as (1) "scientific" astronomers (astro-*nomoi*: seekers of stars' laws) and/or (2) superstitious astrologers (astro-*logoi*: seekers of stars' messages). By including the magi in Jesus' birth

narrative, is Matthew suggesting that honest seekers of any background and by almost any means can be led to profound revelations and will receive grace in the process? These visitors from pagan country with questionable credentials are the first to receive a divine summons to come see the newborn Messiah. It's no wonder that the official religious leadership (read: *gate keepers of tradition*) were so threatened by the incarnation and found God's grace so confounding, even scandalous—it extended infinitely in all directions (for goodness' sake!), far beyond the gates they were keeping, which made all their feisty rules and fancy robes superfluous.

Perhaps by now we shouldn't be surprised by the Messiah's second-chapter guests, given his first-chapter ancestors. These opening scenes of Matthew's gospel introduce us to God's profound inclusiveness, a theme that shows up on almost every page of the four gospels and, as such, is worth reflecting upon in our day-to-day goings-on at the grocery store, at church, in class, at work, in our cars as we drive to and fro, and in our homes. The hospitality embodied in the person of Jesus is impossible to deny and, with the advent of our soul-sucking and society-fragmenting technologies that we've so thoroughly incorporated into our daily living, dangerous to ignore. If Christians aren't known, first and foremost, by their hospitality and by their love—of enemies, of immigrants (documented or not), of the "least of these," indeed, of *each other*—then something crucial has been lost in translation.

This second chapter is read in churches around the world at Advent and Christmas, and we are reminded of Charles Dickens's description of this season in *A Christmas Carol*:

> But I am sure that I have always thought of Christmas Time, when it has come round—apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that—as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts, freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.[2]

We shouldn't wait for Christmas to "open [our] shut-up hearts . . . to think of people below [us] as . . . fellow-passengers to the grave." We're not given the option of embodying certain virtues only when they're in season.

God sometimes uses nature to direct people to Jesus, or put another way, He uses natural revelation to mediate supernatural truth. Gerard Manley Hopkins famously asserted that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."[3] A trip to the Swiss Alps one recent winter left me (Michael) with some doubts about whether such grandeur is noticed much anymore. On a Sunday morning with the echoes of the church bells still ringing through the valley, my family and I entered

the main (only?) church in Lauterbrunnen expecting to join other worshippers. We stepped into an empty sanctuary. Apparently people had better things to do than give thanks to the One who had charged those magnificent peaks with their (His!) grandeur. The church was now, for all intents and purposes, a relic to some long-lost way of approaching the world. The only others who entered the church that morning were a Muslim family of four, and we couldn't help but wonder what thoughts swirled in their heads at the sight of an empty church on the Sabbath.

Back at ground zero and barely two chapters into the Jesus story, we're already being trained to notice the inside-out and upside-down ways of God in this world: the First Family, part of an occupied people; the first visitors, immigrants from a foreign country; and YHWH, the great God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as a cooing, helpless little baby boy. God's good news—the Gospel—is being introduced to us in bite-size pieces, in baby steps, and where any of us might be a part of an excluded minority or feel like otherwise helpless souls, Matthew is clear: This good news is for *us*, and we're in this together, every step of the way. Or as "Samurai Cop" puts it, "Remember we begin the same . . . First just one step."[4]

THE MAGI'S MEETING WITH GOD (2:9–12)

> [9]When the magi had heard the King, they left, and the star that they had seen earlier in the east appeared now once again, and it was moving on ahead of them, until it stopped right over the place where the child was. [10]When they saw the star stand still, they rejoiced with the deepest possible joy. [11]Then they came into the barn and saw the child himself, with Mary his mother, and they fell down on their knees and worshipped the baby, and they opened their treasure chests, which were filled with gifts—gold, frankincense, myrrh. [12]Then, having been warned in a dream, they did not go back to Herod but withdrew and went back home to their country by another way.

The Christocentric light shines like a Christmas star atop the cosmic tree of heaven. The prophet Isaiah's prediction (see the beginning of the chapter) may well have been on Matthew's mind and heart, and on the minds and hearts of Jewish believers when they first read or heard these "luminous" words. Don't we want our own lives to point to Jesus Christ as singly as this star now points to him? Christian preachers and teachers pray that their preaching and teaching are as blazingly Christocentric as this star, and like these first stargazers, all subsequent believers would like to bring their varied gifts and their various callings to God for His use in and for the world. The Magi's gifts to the manger are the first Christian tithes and offerings.

After the magi had met Christ, "they went back home by another way." The supernatural dream's alternate route saved the Magi's lives, and quite possibly the baby's, but the words suggest more than geography. "They went back home by another way" suggests a new way of *being*, of *living*. We never leave an encounter

with the living God the same way we came. An encounter with the incarnate God changes us, and we can't help but wonder what kind of magi they were before—legitimate astronomers or superstitious astrologers—and what they were now that they had met face-to-face the child who was also their Lord. Whatever they were, they were now going home by another way and into another life, accompanied from that moment on by a deeper joy wrought from that momentous night. And not just a joy but a sense of gravity too, an awareness of the darkness that would be gathered around in response to the offer of emancipation that this Messiah portends. Some of us prefer the devils we know to the angels we don't, particularly those of us with much to lose in such an offer of emancipation. T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" catches some of this holy ambivalence, which these wise men no doubt carried with them on the backs of their camels back toward their old kingdoms:

> We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
> But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
> With an alien people clutching their gods.
> I should be glad of another death.[5]

ESCAPE TO EGYPT (2:13–15)

> [13]Now after they left, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying: "Get up, take the child and his mother and flee for your lives to Egypt and stay there until I tell you. Herod is about to come searching for the child so that he can kill him." [14]So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and fled to Egypt. [15]He stayed there until the death of Herod so that the word spoken by the Lord through the prophet would now come to fulfillment: "*Out of Egypt I called my Son*" [Hos 11:1].

Just as the ancient Israelites had fled to Egypt and then came back out again in exodus deliverance, so now their Messiah fled to Egypt only to be delivered from danger. Jesus' life is not only a fulfillment of the ancient promise but a *mise en abyme* of the Old Testament rhythms of enslavement and emancipation, danger and deliverance. If repetition is an author's way of underlining, then perhaps Matthew's readers then and now are being encouraged to be sensitive to angels and to dreams, as Jesus' parents were. It's in the subconscious realms, after all, that our imaginations can flourish unencumbered, and Lord knows, it takes an imagination to follow the incarnated One's divine promptings and provocations.

Note that in the first half of the chapter the ruler is called "*King* Herod" six times, but after the Magi's encounter with the child, he is simply referred to as "Herod" (again six times!), as if a sort of reverse entropy took hold in that small corner of the universe that inaugural night, upending the hierarchies of the world and, in a kind of divine rebuke, bending the curvature of the cosmos toward a solitary

manger. The Christian faith will always subvert the status quo and be dangerous to the powers that be and a challenge to the comfortably smug. Good news is not always welcome news, and it probably goes without saying that the powers of the world did not—and do not—respond favorably to this particular christening and its embarrassingly modest—pathetic, really—manger ethic.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE CHILDREN (2:16–18)

> [16]When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the Magi, he was furious, so he sent his soldiers to kill all boys in and around Bethlehem two years old and younger—according to the time that he had learned from the Magi. [17]Then the Word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled where he said: [18]"*A voice was heard in Rama, deep wailing and weeping; it was Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted because they were no longer here*" [Jer 31:15; see also Gen 35:19; 48:7].

The darkness begins to gather immediately around the manger, and we're shown the horror wrought by those in positions of power who feel threatened by this God-child. Nihilism takes many forms. Ultimately, whoever actively resists or seeks to kill the living Christ in any of his manifestations (as a baby, as Messiah, as Son of God) eventually resists or seeks to kill those made in His image, and especially the "least of these"—who are another manifestation of the Christ (see chapter 25).

Given all of this, could not the parents of these sons of Bethlehem have been warned of Herod's imminent infanticide, as Jesus' parents had been? Such a question gets to the heart of the mystery of evil and to the crux of *theodicy*, which poses this paradox: If God were truly good *and* all-powerful, why is there so much suffering in the world? But ought not the question be, "Why is there any?" Shouldn't God stop *all* suffering? Couldn't God have stopped the Sandy Hook massacre in Newtown, Connecticut? *Shouldn't* God have stopped the Holocaust? We are rightly haunted by such questions, but we are also not totally bereft of answers. If the first public effect of the incarnation was infanticide, should we not expect other horrors to follow in its wake? Clearly, God does not remove all suffering from the world, but He does promise to walk with us through it. This may be cold comfort for some, but it is a comfort nonetheless. No one in this world suffers alone. In the meantime, even the air is charged, if not with the grandeur of God, then with His love. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me" (Ps 23:4).

In chapter two of the book of Exodus, we read of the suffering of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, which went on for nearly four hundred years. And what did God do? Rescue them right then and there? Step in immediately to save them from their suffering? No, not then and there, and not immediately. Not soon. Not even after a reasonable amount of time. This is what He did:

> The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked upon the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exod 2:23–25)

For four hundred years God did everything *but* step in! He *heard* their groaning, *remembered* His covenant with them, *looked* upon His children with compassion, and was *concerned* with their plight (the meaning of the Hebrew here is more like *felt their pain*). But He didn't stop their suffering. Not then. Not at the Slaughter of the Innocents. Not in Newtown, Connecticut. Not even at the Holocaust. And not at the cross. God enters into our suffering with all of His being, as He did with Jesus at Golgotha. This is a truth impossible to fathom.

Meanwhile, if by some inexplicable miracle, we are rescued from some suffering in this life, we can only stand back in awe and gratitude since there is no equation that can be invented, no sincerity of prayer that can be manufactured, no amount of faith that can be conjured up that will give any of us control over God's inscrutable—often silent, often baffling, often exasperating—providence. Are we prepared to believe in, much less worship, such a God? *That* is perhaps *the* question. We would be wise to think twice before we answer.

W. H. Auden's beautiful and haunting poem, "Musee des Beaux Arts," reminds us how the "Old Masters" knew a thing or two about suffering, and how it happens while others are simply going about their day.[6] Suffering is a double-edged sword: It's never wanted and always hurts. But is suffering the real problem, or is evil the true enemy? They are not the same.

The slaughtered children are, we believe, the first Christian martyrs, and they will be welcomed as such into the embrace of their Father. But what of their parents? Did they ever have the chance to meet Jesus face-to-face in their Bethlehem-Jerusalem neighborhood to give an accounting of their suffering, to ask him the impossible questions? We are convinced that, whether in this life or the next, Jesus will know them when he sees them. Such unbearable grief has a way of announcing itself to those who have borne a similar sorrow. God knows something of losing a son.

THE RETURN FROM EGYPT (2:19–23)

> [19]When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph [20]saying, "Get up and take the child and his mother and go back to the land of Israel, because those who were seeking the child's life have died." [21]So Joseph got up and took the child and his mother and they came back into the land of Israel. [22]But when Joseph heard that Archelaus was now ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee [23]and settled in a town called Nazareth. In this way, the word was fulfilled where it was said through the prophet, "*He will be called a Nazorean*" [Isa 11:1; Judg 13:5; 16:17].

This "second exodus"—of the Messiah from Egypt to the promised land—seems now to be almost complete, and Joseph's natural and understandable fear of Herod's son, Archelaus, is used and approved by God to lead him and his family northward to distant Nazareth. Joseph's apprehension and careful attention to God's ever-revising plans are given agency here, and we learn that God's providence is often more of a compass than a roadmap. The path of the faithful pilgrim is potholed with doubts, fears, and second guesses, but we walk on in spite of them—and sometimes because of them—in order to be where we are called to be.

It has been difficult for interpreters to find a reliable Old Testament text that teaches that Jesus would be called a "Nazorean." The most suggestive attempt has been to see a reference to a future Son of David in Isaiah 11:1's prediction that "a shoot shall come out from the branch of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him." We also learn from the book of Acts that one of the earliest names for followers of Jesus was not "Christians" but "Nazoreans." Perhaps there's a connection here.

Isaiah summarizes in prophetic anticipation the central meaning of our second chapter:

> Arise, shine; for your light has come,
> and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
> For darkness shall cover the earth,
> and thick darkness the peoples;
> but the LORD will arise upon you,
> and his glory will appear over you.
> Nations shall come to your light,
> and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isa 60:1–3)

Guide us, Lord, to find your joy wherever it might be hidden, in star or manger, and to bring our gifts in service to you through whatever darkness presented to us. Amen.

CHAPTER 3

THE INITIATION OF JESUS

Fast-forward some thirty years. No word of what this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, baby, King, Messiah, Savior has been up to since his birth. All we have is a single vignette of a precocious twelve-year-old in the temple wowing his elders with a prodigious knowledge of the Scriptures (Luke 2). Another story, another book.

In the meantime, we can be fairly sure of only one thing: Jesus, whoever he was in his early years, was nothing special (apart from the fact, of course, that he was the Son of God). He would've stood out otherwise, made a name for himself, become famous, maybe even changed the world. In spite of attempts by some (Anne Rice, Walt Wangerin Jr., etc.) to paint the young Jesus as a wunderkind, by all indications he lived a normal, even prosaic life up through his late twenties. He was a sleeper Messiah whose true identity was known only among a few: his mother, his aunt (maybe his cousin?), a dead priest, a few magi from the eastern hinterlands, and a couple of superstitious shepherds. But that was a lifetime ago and a world away. We can't even be sure what Jesus knew of himself. Did his mother tell him anything? And if so, what? And did his wild and crazy cousin know Jesus' true identity, or was that just an *in utero* epiphany?

THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST (3:1–12)

[1]In those days John the Baptist arrived, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, [2]"Turn your lives around because the kingdom of heaven is nearly here!"
[3]This is the very man whom the prophet Isaiah predicted when he said:

> *"You will hear the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness:*
> *Prepare the way of the Lord:*
> *Let his paths come right straight into you!"* [Isa 40:3]

This fiery preacher, prophesied about in Isaiah and discussed by the eminent first-century Jewish historian Josephus in his *Antiquities*,[1] is prominent near the

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beginning of each of the four gospels, and his martyrdom is attested to in both Matthew and Mark. This wild and seemingly crazy host initiates the coming Messiah into his ministry, and we should take note that he is the chosen messenger of God; it should tell us something about God's *modus operandi*, which, to state the now obvious, is unconventional. The medium, in the Baptist's case at least, is very much the message. If the messenger is strange, we shouldn't be surprised if the message is too.

John's two main utterances in this initial paragraph are found in verse 2: (1) "Turn your lives around," and (2) "because the kingdom of heaven is nearly here!" In John's world, it seems that confession precedes worship. But that's not how the about-to-be ordained Jesus sees it. In Jesus' world and in the subsequent world of the Church, the exact reverse is preached and predicted. Yes, we seek to move all hearers *inward* to examine their hearts and confess all that is not right in them, but it is precisely the exultant attentiveness of God's greatness—a sense of a supreme Good in the world—that serves as the motive for our inward confession. The messianic King and his messianic kingdom are indeed *en route* and headed straight for us—*imminently and personally*—in Christ's mission to change the world. But only sufficient attention can lead to honest confession, which means that the cries of "*maranatha!*" and "*mea culpa!*" are not only intimately connected but are connected *in that order*! In the Lord's Prayer, we acknowledge God's glory and beseech God's presence "on earth as it is in heaven," and only then are we led to confession of sins. In the classic creeds of the Church (the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed), the greatness of God is confessed before our sin and need for forgiveness are acknowledged. This same pattern is found, for example, in the historical confessions and catechisms of the Presbyterian Church: the Scots, Heidelberg, Second Helvetic, Westminster, and Shorter and Larger Catechisms, all of which declare God's goodness or Christ's faithfulness *prior to* any confession of sin. Augustine and Ambrose refer to this as prevenient grace, which essentially says that we can't measure—or really even know—the depth of our own fallenness until we have something to measure that fall against. We might think the mountain outside our window is huge until we see the Alps or Himalayas. Likewise, we might see ourselves as "basically good" until we begin to apprehend the unsurpassable goodness of God. God's blessing always precedes our fall; divine faithfulness comes before human unfaithfulness; love is always prior to judgment. Love is always prior.

Did John the Baptist have it backward? He leads with repentance, after all, right? No, he does not, at least if one understands his Jewish audience's *a priori* assumption that God is faithful and righteous and great beyond measure. His message of repentance, in other words, is preceded by an implicit acknowledgment of God's holiness, and it was meant to reawaken his Jewish audience to that startling truth. The Baptist's message, with all its warnings and calls to preparation, alerts future preachers that where either God's glory or God's judgment is missing, the witness of the Church is compromised and the power of the Gospel is neutered.

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(1) Expectant attention and (2) honest confession both make up the substance of the liturgical life of a Christian—and in *that* order: God's grandeur leads to a recognition of our fallenness. The Gospel will remain opaque if we do not get this divine chronology.

> [4]This John had clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was grasshoppers and wild honey. [5]People came in droves from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and from all the region along the Jordan to see him. [6]They were being baptized by John in the Jordan River, honestly admitting their sins.

What a contrast John's rough and wild raiment is from the fine linen and priestly robes of the priests in Exodus and Leviticus. But John's calling was Elijah's, after all, and Elijah was "a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kgs 1:8). John would have reminded his first-century audience of his ancient progenitor, and he would have reminded them, like he reminds us, that God often prefers the strange, the outcast, and the outsider as His means of grace. John was just extending the prophetic franchise.

> [7]When John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the scene of his baptisms, he said to them, "You den of snakes! Who warned you to slither down here in hopes of escaping the coming anger of God? [8]If you really mean to repent, then start living lives that bear the fruit of that repentance. [9]And don't you dare say to yourselves: 'We have Father Abraham on our side—we'll be alright!' [10]Listen, the Divine Axe is already poised at the root of the trees, waiting to chop down every one that doesn't produce good fruit and throwing them into the fire!"

John's preaching style is not for the faint of heart, nor is his message, and we learn from Jesus' later rebukes of the Pharisees and Sadducees that they accepted neither John's message nor his baptism (Matt 21:25–32). Their presence is simply out of sheer curiosity, more investigational than confessional, and thus deserving the Baptist's rebuke. From the beginning until now, there have been those for whom Christianity has been a mere curiosity, a sideshow circus that either amuses or repels. And if a circus sideshow one expects to find in Christ (or the Church), a circus sideshow one will get. What we bring *to* Christianity is often what we get *out* of it, at least initially. But such seekers must tread lightly, lest what is foolish to them now becomes the very *power* of their salvation later.

Nor is John impressed with the Pharisees' and Sadducees' religious credentials. His axe and fire warnings teach the Church that the Gospel does not soft-pedal nor seek to placate but is, instead, dead earnest and with lasting consequences in our response to it. John doesn't believe he helps his listeners by sugarcoating his

message. The Gospel is aimed at *us* and not just our theologies, in order that we change not just our convictions but our *lives*—heart, mind, and soul. It has often been said that the devil is content to let us give our hearts and minds to God. He just wants our *wills*. Whether or not this is true, it certainly seems consistent with the devil's wiles that he might allow us to—even prefer that we—deceive ourselves into thinking that saying and feeling the right things somehow makes up for not doing them.

> [11]"I baptize you with water for the purpose of turning your life around; but the One who is coming after me is so much greater than I am; I am not even worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire! [12]He has his winnowing fork at the ready, and he is going to make his threshing floor spotless and will gather the wheat into his granary and throw the chaff into an unquenchable fire!"

And we thought John the Baptist was intense. Whoever this "One" is who is coming after him will apparently make John look like some middlebrow preacher, and the fire with which this One will baptize reminds us that when he comes, he comes not only to save but to burn—indeed, burn *unto* salvation. There is no other way. The speaker in William Blake's poem "The Tyger" points to the ferocity of this "One who is coming" and reminds us that, for all the fear a tiger instills in us, he is no match for the One who made him:

> Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
> In the forests of the night;
> What immortal hand or eye,
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

The speaker then catalogs, through a series of questions, the traits that make a tiger so frightening—his burning eyes? his stout heart? his quick mind?—before finally asking what, or who, after all, could have made such a fearsome beast? Note in this final stanza the slight alteration of the first stanza:

> Tyger Tyger burning bright,
> In the forests of the night:
> What immortal hand or eye,
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?[2]

In Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Revelation," the protagonist, Ruby Turpin, a modern-day Pharisee, is shown in a vision at the end of the story a multitude making their way through the pearly gates, and she notices that "by their shocked and altered faces . . . even their virtues were being burned away."[3]

Murderers and robbers, hucksters and thieves, charlatans and showmen, liars and cheats, cynics and saints, modern-day Pharisees, the holy and unholy alike—O'Connor wants to say that we all face a fire in the end and we all get burned, come heaven or hell. The difference is that some will be burned unto salvation and others will be burned unto damnation. The fire—God's holy love—remains the same. It's how we *respond* to that fire, to that love, to the Gospel, that makes all the difference. In this world and in the next. And this isn't works righteousness we're talking about but our response to God's undeserved and unearned saving grace. We've got some skin in the game, in other words, even if we don't have the last word.

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (3:13–17)

> [13]Right then Jesus arrived from the Galilee at the Jordan River to be baptized by John. [14]John tried to dissuade him: "I'm the one who needs to be baptized by you! Not the other way around." [15]But Jesus answered, "It's right we do it this way. You'll see." So John baptized Jesus, [16]and immediately, right as Jesus was coming up out of the water, *look*! The heavens were opened above him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down upon him like a dove. [17]And, *listen*! a Voice came out of the heavens, saying: "This is my priceless Son, whom I love!"

The twofold "look! . . . listen!" (in the original Greek text, *idou! . . . idou!*) in our text's final two verses intentionally heightens the importance of what is taking place in this climactic scene: Jesus' baptism is also his first public miracle—the miracle of his humility—as he joins the sinners in the water as baptizee rather than baptizer. This will become the "Jesus way," his signature move all the way to his death. His entire ministry will bear the mark of this cosmic humility, in fact, where the low road is the high road, which his disciples must learn to take; this road less traveled, where going down and not up (one of the Gospel's main descriptions of a life well lived) is the essential itinerary. How is it that the Lord we serve is so often lower and less than we are? *Look! . . . listen!*

And who shows up? The *Holy Spirit* in visual descent as a dove (Matthew tells us that this is what *Jesus* saw, a vision he must have then later shared with his soon-to-be disciples); the *Father* as *vox dei*; and the *Son* as willing receptor. The Trinity is in full dress, in other words, to bear witness to this baptism/ordination. God again shows up by coming down not as a mighty eagle prepared for battle but as a gentle dove to inaugurate peace. No fanfare here, no pomp and circumstance. Just a simple ritual with an equally simple message from God: *I love my Son.*

We have lost this simplicity and humility in the Church, and it is to our and the world's benefit to find our way back to it. In its stead, we have too comfortably and too often adopted a pompous posture and triumphalist tone, neither of which woos the people we've been called to love and serve. Perhaps this is because we are trying to serve too many masters. It is often much easier to serve a cause we support than the Lord we worship. We want our cake and to eat it too; to serve God *and*

_____ (insert chosen Mammon). But always when we try to serve two masters, the Master who demands more gets less.

"This is my priceless Son, whom I love!" The Father will say these same words over Jesus again at the transfiguration in the middle of his ministry, but the Father adds the words: "Listen to him!" (implying, perhaps, that they weren't—and we won't?). This union of Father and Son is adumbrated throughout the gospels and points to the fundamental motivation for God's creative, redemptive, and ultimately salvific purposes in the first place: Jesus came to die *so that we might truly live*. There is no deeper purpose for his creative act than this. "The glory of God is a person fully alive," Irenaeus reminds us. This is what it means, then, to be a disciple: to be truly alive by living a deep and meaningful life following Christ with purpose and intention. When we respond to God's love in Jesus Christ, we find not only the source of such a life but the *means* by which to live it.

So the ministry of Jesus begins.

God Most High, help us to remember our baptism and to hear anew your baptismal declaration over us: "This is my priceless daughter, my priceless son, whom I love!"

CHAPTER 4

IN THE BEGINNING (OF JESUS' MINISTRY)

Like the start of so many other chapters in Jesus' life, his ministry begins in an unexpected, even bizarre way: with a demonic confrontation. This chapter is an extension of Jesus' initiation—let's call it Hell Week—and with such an unexpected way of beginning comes unconventional ways of being.

JESUS' TEMPTATIONS: THE SET-UP (4:1)

> [1]Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil.

So much for a gentle dove descending. No sooner has the Holy Spirit visited Jesus as a dove in his baptism than he now drives Jesus, like some ill-tempered Virgil, into a dark and foreboding wilderness. It is odd that the Spirit does so too, as we're told elsewhere that God never tempts anyone: "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it" (Jas 1:13–14). We may prefer to translate Matthew 4:1 "Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he was tempted by the devil," as if Jesus were somehow tempted by accident, but the Greek verbal phrase "to be tempted" (πειρασθῆναι, *peirasthēnai*; aorist passive) is, structurally, a purposive clause. We're left to wonder about God's intentions. We beseech God in the Lord's Prayer to *not* lead us into temptation, but why would we ask God to *not* do something He doesn't intend to do in the first place? Or perhaps Jesus added this petition because he himself *had* been led into temptation by his Father, and so he intercedes for us, asking his Father not to do the same to us. In some ways, this makes sense. Jesus understood, in a way the rest of us never will, what such an experience entails. To be sure, the Father *does* ask of Jesus things he does not ask

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from us because, at the risk of understatement, Jesus is a special case. That's why *WWJD?* has always and only ever been marginally helpful advice.

Or is Jesus being *tested* rather than tempted? The Greek word is the same: *peirazō* (πειράζω). What is the difference between the two? It's not always clear, but this much is sure: The intended outcome of temptation is *sin*, while with testing it is *salvation*. It's notable that at the beginning of God's people's pilgrimage to the promised land in Exodus and His Son's pilgrimage to the cross in the gospels, He leads both into dark places where they are severely tested. We believe that God does so for the sake of making His people—and His Son—stronger and more resilient. God "saves His deepest silence for His saints," John Updike wrote in his poem, "Midpoint."[1] Dark places, in other words, aren't always bad places, even if they can be hard ones. The difference between being tempted or tested also comes down to the source of the directive—the devil or God—which in turn determines its intended outcome: sin or salvation. The challenge lies in resisting the one and receiving the other. But here's the catch: The one we ought to receive is almost always the more difficult of the two.

JESUS' TEMPTATIONS: THE BODY (4:2–4)

> [2]And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was famished. [3]The tempter came to him saying, "If you really are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into bread!" [4]But Jesus responded, "It is written: '*People do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*'" [Deut 8:3].

The devil comes at the *end* of Jesus' fast when he is at his weakest. This is the devil's preferred method, to hit us when we're down. What the devil did not account for, and never really does, is that when we're weakest, God is strongest (2 Cor 12:9–10). This is not just a tired trope; it is the substance of divine reality. What often gets in the way of the Spirit's work is our stubborn independence.

Fasting prepares. It focuses the mind, hardens the body, stills the soul. But as anyone who has fasted knows, fasting long enough accomplishes just the opposite: It confuses the mind, softens the body, and confounds the soul. By all accounts, forty days is too long. But God was preparing His Son for an unconventional ministry, which needed to be preceded by an unconventional test. For Jesus to have lasted that long, resisting the devil's temptations in the process, says much about the condition of his body, the state of his mind, and the depth of his soul, but it says even more about God's provision, which never sends us into something we cannot get through and never leads us where we are not able to go. When one fasts, ideally one replaces food with Scripture. It's not surprising, then, that Jesus' answer to the first of the devil's three temptations comes directly from Scripture. It is, after all, the only thing he'd been eating for almost six weeks.

The tempter usually seeks out our weaknesses first. Jesus is starving, so the devil has his opening. And his reasoning is plausible: If Jesus truly is the Son of

God, he could turn stones into bread with one arm tied behind his back. This is the same Word, after all, through which God spoke creation into being. Athanasius writes that "the Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things that exist owe their being to His will and power, that through Him the Father gives order to creation, by Him all things are moved, and in Him they receive their being."[2] Turning stones to bread would have been child's play, but this, of course, is a key part of the temptation.

Furthermore, the devil's suggestion sounds almost spiritual, even faith-based. Sometimes the most sensible—even most "spiritual"—suggestions turn out to be wrong. They may seem obvious or logical, but logical ≠ *theo*-logical. God's logic is not our own, and God's ways are not always obvious. We are thus wise to think twice (and pray thrice!) before moving out "in faith." Many a well-meaning Christian has mistaken spiritual advice (enthusiastically offered by many) for God's Word. We would do well to fast before big decisions and life changes, but that doesn't mean not sustaining ourselves. It just means changing our diet from food to Scripture. When we fast from food, we feed on the Bible instead, scouring Scripture whenever we feel hungry—which will be often.

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 in his response to the proof-texting devil. Jesus loves Scripture and thus (in this case literally) lives by it. Is not his love of Scripture the first lesson we learn from Jesus' response to temptations? Knowing and memorizing Scripture and making our home in it isn't just good for the mind; it quickens the heart, soul, and will too—and apparently the body. A mark of mature discipleship is a love of God's Word and a willingness, even an eagerness, to interpret Scripture against the evil uses of it, as Jesus does here. God's Word was instructing Jesus the Word to fast, however unreasonable it may have seemed to Jesus the man. So fast he did. I guess, if it doesn't kill you . . .

We're reminded of the command God made to Adam and Eve to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The devil's temptation seemed reasonable and sensible. But it was a lie. God's words to the first couple, on the other hand, were the truth, however *un*reasonable or *un*sensible they may have seemed at the time. This fundamental truth about God's thoughts and ways (Isa 55:9) must not only be understood but accepted if we hope to make any sense of our faith in our myriad struggles to discern God's call on our lives.

For those of us who live in cultures of excess, where the love of the body and the love of food are two among many gods competing for our attention and worship, we would be wise to restrain and subdue such misguided loves through the discipline of thoughtful fasting. Totally aside from the benefits that can come with a well-managed fast, simply practicing the discipline of restraint, very much in short supply these days especially in the West, is well worth the effort. In a world where it is estimated that about a thousand people die of hunger *every hour*—one hundred of them children—it is a lesson we privileged few *must* learn. According to the World Bank, the poorest 10 percent of the world's population accounted

for 0.5 percent of all consumption while the wealthiest 10 percent accounted for 59 percent (!) of all consumption. A little closer to home, according to an article in *Scientific American* in 2012, Americans account for only 5 percent of the world's population but create 50 percent of the globe's solid waste.[3] This is not normal and should neither be accepted nor unconsciously perpetuated. Christians, in particular, should care enough about this to live differently.

JESUS' TEMPTATIONS: THE MIND (4:5–7)

> [5]Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him at the top of the temple [6]and said to him, "If you really are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written: '*He will give his angels charge of you and they will hold you up with their very hands, lest you should even stub your toe against a stone*'" [Ps 91:11–12]. [7]But Jesus said to him: "But in another place it is written: '*You must never put the Lord your God to a test*'" [Deut 6:16].

In this "Dueling Banjos" section of Jesus' ministry, the devil knows Scripture and is happy to quote it when it fits his purposes, and we're reminded again of how, in the wrong hands and out of the wrong mouths, the words of Scripture can be used for evil ends and nefarious purposes. Scripture can be a tool for all manner of lies and propaganda, with all the injustice and suffering that comes with such lies. The old bumper sticker, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That seals it," might sound pithy, but it's dangerously naive. Hucksters and charlatans (often in the guise of preachers!) have used Scripture since the beginning to peddle their ideological wares in the form of political agendas and selfish motives, and we are always wise to test anyone's words against Scripture (1 John 4:1). In discovering the will of God, we must take into account the *whole counsel* of God laid out over the *whole course* of Scripture, and not just isolated texts that suit our present purposes, as the devil does here and elsewhere and up to today.

Having tempted Jesus at his weakness, now the devil tempts Jesus at his strength and, notice this, with Jesus' own words: "It is written." The enemy can almost always find some Scripture that can be artfully used to move a person in a wrong (even if "super-spiritual") direction. We can be tempted most easily at our weaknesses, to be sure, but we can also be tempted most effectively where we are strongest. The devil would love to use our strengths for his purposes, and one of Jesus' main strengths is, of course, his knowledge of Scripture. But in this case, the devil is a fool rushing in . . . Like Aslan telling the children in Narnia that although the evil Queen knows a deep magic, he knows a deeper one.[4] The devil may know Scripture, but Jesus knows it better.

JESUS' TEMPTATIONS: THE SOUL (4:8–10)

> [8]Again the devil took Jesus up to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. [9]Then he said to him, "I will give all of

these to you, if you will just genuflect to show me some respect." [10]Then Jesus said to him, "Get out of here, Satan! For it is written, '*You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only*'" [Deut 6:13; 10:20].

This final temptation shows two things: that Jesus was apparently feasting on the book of Deuteronomy, and that the devil does not give up easily. He takes Jesus higher and higher, from desert wilderness to the temple mount to, finally, a mountain peak, and at this peak the devil pulls out all the stops. A simple gesture, barely a nod of the head, is all the devil asks for in exchange for the satisfaction of Jesus' central passion—his mission to save the world. We're forced to ask: Isn't almost anything worth sacrificing to save the world? Apparently not, even if it comes at the mere cost of a simple genuflection to someone (or something) other than God. After forty days of fasting, Jesus' priorities remain. He didn't break.

In God's accounting of things, ends never justify means. But too often today, many self-proclaimed followers of Christ do just that: justify morally bankrupt means in order to achieve "holy" ends. From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus never once justifies means to achieve ends—including divine ones—and the temptations are exhibits A, B, and C of this. Jesus had many opportunities to do so, from the temptations in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry to the garden of Gethsemane and the cross at the end, but he resisted moral, even justifiable, shortcuts because he understood that the purposes of his Father could never be gainsaid by even noble intentions. Even Jesus himself says to his Father in the garden, under a brow of blood, sweat, and tears, "Not my will but your will be done" (Matt 26:39). The lesson for the Church couldn't be clearer: Its ultimate mission in the world, which is the Great Commission of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, isn't to be pursued at *any* price. The Church would have done well to practice this restraint in the Age of Exploration, but when you're carrying a Bible in one hand and a sword (or gun, or missile) in another, restraint usually takes a back seat. Forced conversions are one of the most tragic oxymorons in the history of Christianity. If we are more consumed with our goals than with our God (no matter how virtuous our goals might be), our goals become our gods. Only Jesus, and not our service to him, is Lord. Virtues, when they become ends in themselves, become the most pernicious vices of all.

All three of Jesus' scriptural repulsions of the devil's temptations come from Deuteronomy 6–8, which compels us to heed a final lesson from this passage: We should be as widely and intimately acquainted with Scripture's general counsels as possible so that we can learn to distinguish between its greater and lesser teachings. In the Old Testament (or what Fuller Seminary professor John Goldingay refers to as the "First Testament"),[5] we basically have access to Jesus' private library, and the temptation narratives can move us to seek a more intimate acquaintance with this often stranger and more difficult yet equally inspired collection of books. We must always balance the First Testament with the Second,

of course, as Jesus himself did ("You have heard it said of old, but I say to you . . ." [Matt 5:21–22]), but we miss much of God's deep and profound counsel if we spend devotional time in the New Testament only. A whole feast is set before us from Genesis to Malachi.

[11]Then the devil left him, and look! Angels surrounded Jesus and served him.

What a break-fast that must have been! Jesus had just walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and now a banquet was set before him with angels as his waitstaff (Ps 23). The Shepherd was being shepherded.

JESUS' MINISTRY BEGINS (4:12–25)

[12]When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to the Galilee again. [13]He left Nazareth and settled not far away in Galilean Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. [14]By this the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah was fulfilled:

> [15]*"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea,*
> *across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—*
> [16]*the people sitting in darkness have seen a great Light,*
> *and over those sitting in the region and shadow of death—*
> *Light has dawned!"* [Isa 9:1–2]

[17]From that moment on, Jesus began to preach: "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is at hand!"

[18]While Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers: Simon, called Peter, and Andrew his brother. They were casting their nets into the sea (they were fishermen). [19]Jesus said to them, "Come join me! I will teach you how to catch people!"

[20]They immediately left their nets and followed him. [21]Walking along a little farther, Jesus saw two other brothers: James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother. They were in the boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets when Jesus called them as well.

[22]Immediately they too left their nets and their father and followed Jesus.

[23]Jesus was circulating throughout the whole of the Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, heralding the wonderful news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every malady among the people. [24]Word about him went out into the whole of Syria, and people were bringing to him people with all kinds of sicknesses and torments—people who were demon possessed, had epilepsy, and were paralyzed—and he healed every one of them. [25]Huge crowds followed him—from Galilee [the northwest], the Decapolis [the northeast], Jerusalem and Judea [the southwest], and from beyond the Jordan [the southeast].

Obscure, out-of-the-way Galilee, as insignificant geographically as it was geopolitically, was nevertheless the place where the prophet Isaiah had once predicted that the world's great divine Light would one day dawn. And like Jesus' baptism at the beginning, his first call to ministry demonstrates again God's preference for the unimpressive, the unsophisticated, the marginal of the world who are forced to take the low roads and the byways of life. In our present historical moment, when the Twitters, Facebooks, Instagrams, and TikToks of the world beset our lives at almost every level, it is unsurprising that we find ourselves hounded by attention getters and self-promoters of all ages and persuasions. There is a simple solution to such things, of course, but most of us prefer, apparently, to be besought. For the rest of humanity not plugged in (an increasingly small number!), life goes on unfettered by the chaos and babel that such misdirected attention brings.

It's also worth noting that Jesus wisely leaves Judea out of concern for his safety. We might be tempted to think that because Jesus is God, he has nothing to worry about. God will take care of him(-self). But to operate with this kind of . . . what? spiritual bravado? . . . is to move from faith to presumption. Indeed, it is to *test* God. But God is no micromanager, and bad things happen to the best of us. We can be secure in God's love for us, of course, and in His will for our lives, but tragedies still occur. Loved ones die, jobs are lost, marriages split. To acknowledge this is not to show a lack of faith but to show an abundance of caution, even amid God's providence. We can rightly assume that Jesus felt the urge to "withdraw" not simply out of common sense but because he felt the Spirit leading him to do so. His parents felt the same urging when they lit out for Egypt when Jesus was a baby. He learned well. As it happens, many of us haven't. Too many Christians strive to be more spiritual than God, and they mistake superstition for spiritual discernment.

"Turn your lives around, because the kingdom of heaven is nearly here" (Matt 3:2). This had been John the Baptist's initial message as well. We are to take responsibility for how we live and *own* our actions, and what necessarily follows from this is God's inbreaking presence into our lives. That Jesus' main message here is in the imperative mood shows the urgency of the Gospel. He assumes that we are, seemingly by default, heading in the wrong direction and in need of a major course correction. Note that he doesn't distinguish between winners and losers, good and bad, as if repentance were just for the morally unfit. In this passage, at least, Jesus is bringing the same message to everyone. Who is good enough? Though some may presume to be *quantitatively* better or worse than others, we are all *qualitatively* damned. Why the urgent message of repentance otherwise? Why, indeed.

We learn from the first chapter of John that Jesus was in John the Baptist's congregation, along with some of these very brothers (Simon and Andrew, James and John). According to the gospel of John, Jesus knew these disciples from prior acquaintance (John 1:40–42) and was inviting them to become students in his rabbinic school, which is what Jesus' invitation meant at the time. "Follow me" was a personal invitation to join a particular teacher in a particular school.

Surprising in this recruitment is the fact that it's not the students who are applying but the teacher who is recruiting—a highly unusual move at the time and another form of the low road Jesus always takes. And his methods haven't changed: He still recruits. We still reply.

The special promise to these two sets of brothers is that Jesus will teach them to catch people. This "catching," as we will learn throughout this gospel and from the rest of the New Testament, happens by *spending time with*, *talking with*, *mentoring*, and *teaching*. Jesus invites these two sets of brothers into this unique and (what would become) world-changing school of discipleship, with no prior experience needed! And they respond in simple, almost uncanny, obedience.

The purpose of Jesus' ministry was to bring truth and healing to the needy and hurting towns, villages, and neighborhoods around him and, by the ministrations of his Holy Spirit, to bring that truth and healing to the rest of the world—and to us. Why do so many (most?) schools, hospitals, and relief organizations around the world have Christian roots? Jesus and his followers cared for bodies and minds as well as souls. Almost everywhere the Church has planted itself in genuine mission, accompanying educational and medical services have followed. Jesus healed wherever he taught, and care for the healing of people's physical, mental, and spiritual needs should be as near to the hearts of Jesus' disciples as they were to Jesus. But the Church's history of educating local populations has also been fraught with problems, not least among them its abuse of the very people it was called to serve, replete with the built-in Western biases, prejudices, and preoccupations that such abuse assumes. Despite this, Christian mission has also often meant increasing literacy and opportunity for those bereft of education and drowning in poverty, which has often led not only to more than subsistence living but the breaking down of social barriers that prevent women from living full lives, the dismantling of caste systems that come from structural racism, and improved agricultural practices that lead to more productive yields.

The "so what?" of any Christian mission enterprise worth its salt has been about caring for the whole person and whole communities. At its worst, the Christian missionary movement has been the religious arm of a secular kingdom that only cares for unquestioned fealty. Where God and secularity (which is to say wealth and power) have gone hand in hand, God's purposes have always gotten the short end of the stick, as have the communities reached "in His name." God help them, and God forgive us.

The verb *heralding* (κηρύσσων; *kēryssōn*) means that Jesus had something extraordinary to bring to these communities and, by extension, to the world. Christian educators and preachers would do well to remember this: Jesus' message is not only good news but *breaking* news, so no one should suffer from what has been called "presentation fatigue," which is the belief that the Gospel needs to be dressed up in fancy clothes to grab people's attention, which often turns the Gospel into a spectacle. Using illustrations to bring Jesus' message home to a particular

audience at a particular time and place is, of course, an important part of what it means to make the Gospel relevant for our times. But too often in our attempts to make it relevant, we have relativized the Gospel, which, in the end, only eviscerates its very revelation.

If we truly believed the message that we've been called to bring to the world, it would reorient the way most of us spend our days. Many preachers would serve their congregations well by simply reading a gospel passage for twenty minutes and then summing it up in five minutes with a variation on the theme that God loves this world and us in it, and Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection were His way of showing—embodying, proving, broadcasting—that love. This essential Gospel message in all of its variations should be taught with a humility and an urgency befitting both its content as well as its Source. It is, after all, no run-of-the-mill bromide about being a good person or reaching some sacred enlightenment or finding "your bliss." It is the truth about God and ourselves, which leads to extraordinary ways of both living and being in the world. It means taking Robert Frost's road "less traveled," which always makes "all the difference." And as his poem reminds us, we cannot travel both this road *and* another and "be one traveler." We cannot be of two wills nor serve two masters.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

—*Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"*[6]

Heavenly Father, help us to resist temptation and to repent of our sins when we don't. We pray for the courage to take the road less traveled when it is according to your purposes. Amen.