



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Four

Summary of Chapter Four

Following his baptism by John, God's public affirmation of him, and the anointing with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is then led by the Spirit deeper into the wilderness for 40 days of testing by Satan, a trial in which Jesus showed his complete faith and trust in God, along with his loyal obedience to the Father's call on his human life.

After the devil had left him, Jesus travelled back to Galilee and settled in the town of Capernaum. This was to fulfil prophecy and marked the start of his earthly ministry of teaching and healing.

Jesus then chose four local Galilæan fishermen to serve as his first disciples. These men would form the core group, who would be taught the necessary Kingdom principles so that, after Jesus had ascended to heaven, they could begin the work of spreading the Gospel and building the church.

After this, Jesus started to travel around the region, teaching, healing and driving out evil spirits. His work immediately started to draw large crowds to him, not only from Galilee but from the surrounding areas as well.

III Matthew 4:1-25 - Jesus the Messiah Begins to Advance the Messianic Kingdom

Jesus triumphs over the devil throughout a period of 40 days in the wilderness (vv.1-11), he then proclaims the Kingdom of God (vv.12-17) that effectively announces the start of his earthly ministry, and calls his first disciples to follow and learn from him (vv.18-22). Jesus teaches and heals many people, both local to Galilee and from wider afield, driving out demons who had caused them so much misery (vv.23-25).

III.a Matthew 4:1-11 - The Temptation of Jesus

Jesus' temptation or testing in the wilderness covers three primary categories:

1. It recalls Israel's wilderness years and whatever God had commanded of them, much more would he require of his Son.
2. Jesus provides a model for all tested believers.
3. It affirms the correct understanding of Jesus' messiahship, i.e. not as a political or military leader but as a spiritual king.

Immediately following his baptism by John, which had taken place in the wilderness by the Jordan River, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit deeper into the Judæan desert, where he underwent severe testing as a man against Satan.

Although this lasted almost six weeks, Matthew's account seems to either select just three of many temptations or is a reflection of the final stages of the trial period. Whichever part of the testing it reflects, Jesus was triumphant over his ancient adversary, who will continue to try to disrupt the work of Christ by attacking his disciples but will then suffer his greatest defeat through the Cross.

The temptations were a diabolical attempt to subvert God's plan for human redemption by causing Jesus to fall into sin and disobedience, thus disqualifying him as the acceptable sacrifice and sinless Saviour.

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4:1

Then implies that this occurred immediately following Jesus' baptism, something made more explicit by Mark: <<***And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness***>> (Mark 1:12).

Jesus was led up by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit guided Jesus in his earthly life, providing a pattern for Jesus' followers to be empowered and led by the Holy Spirit, something Paul will later expand on: <<***Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law***>> (Galatians 5:16-18).

Into the wilderness. By being alone in the wilderness, Jesus was giving Satan every opportunity to attack him with his guile without any supporting help or distractions to aid Jesus. However, Jesus was now emboldened through the Holy Spirit and would have been in full communion with his Father, something available to all believers when they face trials seemingly alone.

Most scholars hold the location of this testing to be Mount Quarantania, located north of Jerusalem not far from Jericho; others have suggested that it was as far away as Mount Horeb, which would link the account to that of Moses and Elijah, but there is no conclusive proof either way.

Some time before writing this I had a great conversation with a former pastor, who has experienced the Judæan wilderness and found that it was far from being a 'God-forsaken' place, but rather a place where 'the presence of God is powerfully evident'. This makes the temptation of Christ, and of the rest of us, all the more interesting if it comes in a place where the presence of God is felt and known, i.e. at times when we feel most at ease, rather than at times when we may feel abandoned, alone or in peril!

The Greek word for tempted is *peirazō*, and can also mean test: <<*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*>> (Hebrews 4:15). While God clearly never tempts anyone to do evil, something indicated by the Lord's brother: <<*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*>> (James 1:13), he does use circumstances to test a person's character and faith: <<*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son*>> (Hebrews 11:17), with the assurance that: <<*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it*>> (1 Corinthians 10:13).

There are some believers who get hung up on the idea of Jesus being tempted rather than tested. It should be remembered that the temptations which are resisted are not sin but are afflictions that have to be borne, here by Christ and in this life by all other disciples of Christ.

There were many biblical precedents of leaders who were tested before their true public ministry began, such as Abraham, Job, Jacob, Moses and David. In each case, they failed to some degree, only to be sustained by God's favour. Jesus alone has fully withstood the test.

A successful measure of testing is not so much whether we pass or fail but whether we come out changed for the better at the end of it. Testing should help to strengthen our faith and reliance on God as our provider, trusting him with all that we have and are. Sometimes we may get hurt in the process but that is OK for it is all part of the testing phase that forms the basis of life on earth. However, the advice to all is: <<*Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*>> (Matthew 26:41).

By the devil. *Diabolos* is used in translations of the Hebrew word *Satan*, and in Greek also translates as slanderer or accuser. Here it is preceded by the definite article to indicate that the one who tempts Jesus is uniquely the devil.

Although the devil intended to thwart God's plan and purposes, the Father used his evil intention for the good purpose of strengthening Jesus in his messianic role.

It should be noted that not all temptation comes from the devil: <<*But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it*>> (James 1:14).

² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Matthew 4:2

He fasted for forty days and forty nights. Jesus' experience of 40 days of fasting in the wilderness corresponds to Israel's experience of 40 years of testing in the wilderness, of which they were reminded by Moses: <<*Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*>> (Deuteronomy 8:2-3). Jesus endured his testing victoriously and obediently.

Jesus did not need to fast for the purpose of repentance, helping him to focus on God or in preparation for intercessory prayer, as may be the case for many believers, although it would be symbolic of other believers directing their hunger toward God rather than any earthly comforts or even necessities. It would have physically weakened his body, making the temptations more attractive to him in his human nature. Moses also fasted and prayed for 40 days and 40 nights on two occasions (Exodus 24:18 and 34:28), and Elijah at least once (1 Kings 19:8). Fasting was and still is a means of focusing intently on communion with God. Forty days is about the longest a human can fast without permanent bodily damage. For most people, liquids should be taken during extended periods of fasting and medical advice is recommended.

Afterwards he was famished is an indication of Jesus in his fully human state, which was essential if the period of testing was to have any authentic symbolic meaning. At other times, it appears Jesus could live in accordance with his divine nature, with one particular example relevant to the one stated here: <<*Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.'* So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work'>> (John 4:31-34).

³ The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'

Matthew 4:3

The tempter is another name for Satan, a term also used by Paul: <<*For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain*>> (1 Thessalonians 3:5). He was first encountered in the guise of a serpent in the Garden of Eden: <<*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?'>> (Genesis 3:1); who went on to trick the woman with his guile, causing initial sin and the fall of all*

mankind. However, he can in no way be blamed for all of it; indeed most of it comes from within the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

Matthew makes no attempt to describe the appearance of Satan. Some artists portray his image to be one that almost everyone would avoid if they encountered him in that form. In the year 2000, in the remake of the film *Bedazzled*, he was portrayed by a very attractive Liz Hurley, a guise that would attract many to him. It should not be forgotten that Satan had once been a heavenly being and it is quite possible for him to still portray himself as an angel of light. See the images.



Artist's impression of Satan



Liz Hurley as the Devil in *Bedazzled* (2000)

If you are the Son of God. This can also be translated as 'since you are the Son of God', which fits better in this case. It is clear that Satan recognised who it was he was dealing with. Jesus was not just a man claiming to be something he was not. John writes: <<*Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life*>> (1 John 5:10-13).

Jesus, of course, was and is the Son of God, but he refused to be tricked by the devil into using his divine prerogatives to make the trial any easier for himself. All disciples need to be aware that the world may often try to shape the calling of disciples. It is only God's definition of their role that applies. Jesus obeyed as a man, as the representative for all who believe, so as to fulfil all righteousness on behalf of his people, the purpose of undertaking his public baptism, as recorded in Matthew 3:15.

Command these stones to become loaves of bread would have been a miracle that Jesus could no doubt have performed had he so chosen but that would have been to submit to human frailty. In his human nature, Jesus overcame this test. In doing so Jesus also avoided being labelled as a magician or sorcerer. Whereas magicians manipulated spiritual power and formulas, Jesus, despite his extreme hunger following 40 days of fasting, acted from an intimate, obedient, personal relationship with his Father: <<*When you are praying, do not heap up empty*

phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 'Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name>> (Matthew 6:7-9). Had he wanted to, Jesus could have had a feast, even in such a remote place. God had been tested to feed over a million Israelites in just such a wilderness and had responded to their questioning: <<They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness? Even though he struck the rock so that water gushed out and torrents overflowed, can he also give bread, or provide meat for his people?''>> (Psalm 78:19-20), by providing both quail and manna in abundance.

Satan's aim is always to dismantle the relationship between a believer and their heavenly Father, whether it be by bringing doubt into their minds about the Father's love for them or his ability to provide for them, or by leading them into disobedience in what often appears to be innocuous ways. He erects barriers to prevent unbelievers coming to God in very similar ways. What Jesus teaches here, in his own human weakness, is that reliance on God provides people with the strength to resist temptation and to do what is right in the sight of God, the only one who matters.

⁴ But he answered, 'It is written,
"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Matthew 4:4

It is written. Jesus responds to each temptation by quoting from Deuteronomy, linking his experience to that of the Israelites during their wilderness testing. He specifically uses three texts that are commands the Israelites in the main failed to keep, whereas Jesus would be obedient to all of them. There is no better teaching model than that of personal example. As already noted in Deuteronomy 8:2, Moses reminded the Israelites of God's testing through hunger and his miraculous provision of manna in the wilderness, which lasted until the day they ate the produce of the Promised Land: <<*The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year*>> (Joshua 5:12).

One does not live by bread alone, which God had demonstrated to his people in the wilderness, first letting them become hungry to bring them to a state of humility and then providing them with manna, as recently noted. Job observes: <<*As for the earth, out of it comes bread; but underneath it is turned up as by fire*>> (Job 28:5), which gives the ancient impression that hell, the devil's lair, lay just beneath the surface.

Every word that comes from the mouth of God, is not referring simply to words actually spoken by God but to all those that he inspired the authors of Scripture to record, whether in the OT or NT for: <<*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*>> (2 Timothy 3:16). Whatever is ordained by God will provide the sustenance for all life, otherwise: <<*You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and*

there shall be a gnawing hunger within you; you shall put away, but not save, and what you save, I will hand over to the sword>> (Micah 6:14), resulting in: <<You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes>> (Haggai 1:6). Ultimately, all believers should: <<Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security>> (Psalm 37:3).

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,

Matthew 4:5

The holy city is Jerusalem: <<Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem; and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in the holy city Jerusalem, while nine-tenths remained in the other towns>> (Nehemiah 11:1), <<Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place>> (Daniel 9:24), and: <<After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many>> (Matthew 27:53). Jerusalem is the holy city because it is where God had put his name: <<He built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, ‘In Jerusalem I will put my name’>> (2 Kings 21:4). The three universal faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all recognise Jerusalem as God’s holy city.

The pinnacle of the temple is probably the southeast corner of the temple area, the top of which was some 300 feet or 91m above the floor of the Kidron Valley according to Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 15.411-412.

The high places are often the most dangerous. God brings people low in order to raise them up. Satan raises them up to high places, i.e. puffs them up with self-esteem, in order to bring them low. Believers, especially leaders who are often the most gifted, find themselves naturally in the higher echelons of the church, making them an easy target for Satan’s fiery darts. Those in such positions need to remain humble in the sight of God in order to keep their feet grounded, thus making the target smaller to aim at, and more secure when it is hit. Matthew Henry wrote: ‘Those that stand high are concerned to stand fast’.

⁶ saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

“He will command his angels concerning you”,

and “On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”“

Matthew 4:6

For it is written. The devil’s quotation from Psalm 91:11-12 is a blatant misuse of Scripture in an effort to manipulate Jesus. Satan values its wording over its meaning as Psalm 91:3-10 actually addresses protection from dangers that

approach the righteous; it is not about testing God to see whether he will really do what Scripture promises. Such a spectacular display as jumping from this great height unharmed would have gained Jesus an enthusiastic following, but it would not have followed the Father's messianic and redemptive plan of suffering and proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven. His death by that manner would have served absolutely no purpose at all.

It should be observed that, whereas Jesus uses Scripture to teach him God's will, the devil presents it merely as promises to be exploited for one's own purposes. Apparently, there is an alleged radio evangelist in the USA who teaches 'how to get God to work for you!'

Throw yourself down. Even if Satan had the power to push Jesus off this high point, either to his death, or to be miraculously saved by God, thus thwarting the whole point of Jesus coming as a man, it would serve no purpose to do so. He requested that Jesus take the decision to jump to get him to be the one testing God and thus being disobedient and breaking the bond of trust in their relationship. This is the way that Satan operates. He is more powerful than humans but his real weapon is to entice them into disobedience, breaking their bond with God and thus rendering them as captives in his world.

Scripture is of course true, for it is also written that: *<<he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken>>* (Psalm 34:20 NIV), although this would be fulfilled not by Jesus jumping from a high place but by his death on the Cross: *<<These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.' And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced'>>* (John 19:36-37).

⁷ Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

Matthew 4:7

Do not put the Lord your God to the test is Jesus' second quotation from Moses, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16a. Satan seems to believe that God is there to serve the Son and not vice versa. Others will come to the same conclusion later on: *<<Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son"'>>* (Matthew 27:39-43). There often seems to be an expectation that God would do what the people think he ought to do. When people become so arrogant as to think they have God figured out, they can easily miss God's true purposes and become Satan's mouthpieces. The words of Jeremiah state: *<<Who can command and have it done, if the Lord has not ordained it?>>* (Lamentations 3:37).

It is known that Jesus saves people from their sins. This does not mean they should deliberately sin in order to prove that he can and will save them:

<<What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?>> (Romans 6:1-2).

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; ⁹ and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

Matthew 4:8-9

Again, the devil took him. It is impossible to know whether Jesus walked from one location to the other, climbing the stairs to the roof of the temple or here climbing the mountain, or whether he was somehow transported supernaturally and instantaneously to these locations, or whether they were portrayed to him by some supernatural virtual reality display. However, it is the reactions of Jesus to each of the temptations that are important, not the physicality of them.

A very high mountain. The location and even the view Jesus was shown has various suggestions. Some commentators say the Devil used a trick to portray what the worldly kingdom would look like, rather than a physical view of it. Others say it was a literal mountain and that Jesus would have been looking over a relatively small region. Many, who like this suggestion, prefer Pisgah at the top of Mount Nebo to be the location, which is to the east of the Jordan. This is where God took Moses to view the Promised Land prior to his death: *<<Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan>>* (Deuteronomy 34:1). The imagery of this would have been quite powerful for Matthew's early Jewish readers.

All these I will give you was a lie. Although Jesus will later refer to Satan as having some rule over the earth: *<<Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out>>* (John 12:31), he has no ownership of it and operates only as God allows him to, for: *<<The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it>>* (Psalm 24:1).

Fall down and worship me. The devil offers a shortcut to Jesus' future reign in God's Kingdom – a shortcut that side-steps Jesus' redemptive work on the Cross and comes at the cost of exchanging the love of the Father for the worship of Satan. As a man, the temptation of avoiding the Cross must have been extremely strong. It is impossible for anyone to understand the levels of pain that such torture brings unless they have been subjected to it. Here, both Satan and Jesus know that a Messianic Kingdom without the Cross would be of no relevance or benefit to anyone. Jesus overcame such temptation to avoid suffering for he knew it was the Father's will for him to do so, yet he did not desire the associated consequences: *<<'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done'>>* (Luke 22:42).

To fall down and worship Satan would have been to fall into the trap that others had before him: *<<They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared>>* (Deuteronomy 32:17), with a similar warning issued by Paul: *<<No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I*

do not want you to be partners with demons>> (1 Corinthians 10:20), for: <<*In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*>> (2 Corinthians 4:4).

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.”’

Matthew 4:10

Away with you, Satan! for it is written. Jesus, finding this suggestion so repulsive, immediately dismisses his old adversary by again quoting the Word of God, this time from Deuteronomy 6:13. What should be noted each time that Jesus quotes the Scriptures is that, not only does he know and understand the Word of God, but he places it into proper context, both historically and culturally. David wrote: <<*I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you*>> (Psalm 119:11), indicating a key understanding of its purpose.

Peter, believing he was protecting his master by shielding him from his preordained death, was rebuked by Jesus: <<*But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’*>> (Mark 8:33). However, Jesus was not dismissing Peter in the way he dismissed Satan here; he was simply making him aware that he must not stand in the way of the Kingdom’s progression, however costly it may appear from human perspective.

Satan caused David to sin by commanding a census not decreed by God: <<*Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel*>> (1 Chronicles 21:1), with catastrophic consequences for the people, with God instructing the prophet Gad to pass on three options to David for undertaking the census: <<*So Gad came to David and told him; he asked him, ‘Shall three years of famine come to you on your land? Or will you flee for three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to the one who sent me.’ Then David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands’*>> (2 Samuel 24:13-14). The devil was also the author of Job’s misery, even if it was with God’s authority to test the man’s faith: <<*One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the Lord, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.’ Then Satan answered the Lord, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’*>> (Job 1:6-9). He will trouble mankind until the end: <<*The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved*>> (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10).

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 4:11

Then the devil left him. Jesus resisted the devil by standing firm on God's Word, setting an example for his followers: <<*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*>> (James 4:7), confirmed by: <<*Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering*>> (1 Peter 5:9).

Angels came and waited on him. Their ministering probably included much needed physical sustenance. All of heaven knew the significance of Jesus' initial victory in this cosmic battle, and were clearly viewing it keenly and with great expectation of the victory they knew would surely come.

III.b Matthew 4:12-25 - Jesus the Messiah begins his Galilæan ministry

At some point after his encounter with the devil in the Judæan wilderness, Jesus travelled north back to the region where he grew up. He set up his main base in the large commercial town of Capernaum, the town where Peter lived, and would later probably operate from Peter's family home.

The duration of Jesus' ministry has traditionally been thought to have been three years: a year of obscurity, a year of popularity, and a year of increasing rejection. Matthew and the other Synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke, largely omit discussing the first, obscure year, but it is recounted in John's Gospel Chapters 1-4.

III.b.i Matthew 4:12-17 - Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee

Matthew records the start of Jesus' earthly ministry in the town of Capernaum, whereas Luke records it as starting during a visit to his home town of Nazareth nearby, a visit that met with rejection; an occasion that Matthew will record later on in Chapter 13. Luke often wrote thematically rather than chronologically, so Matthew's account may be more historically accurate, although this bears little significance in Kingdom terms.

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.

Matthew 4:12

John had been arrested. Jesus withdrew to Galilee amid a gathering storm over the imprisonment of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great. John's incarceration would ultimately lead to his execution. Conditions for the people to receive the Gospel were more favourable in Galilee at that time and his appearance there would again fulfil Scripture.

This is one of very few further references made by Matthew to John the Baptist, which is in keeping with John's own testimony: <<*He must increase, but I must decrease*>> (John 3:30).

¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

Matthew 4:13-14

He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum. Jesus home town, little more than a village, was relatively remote and obscure. Jesus needed to base his ministry somewhere more prominent for his message to spread, and to accommodate the large crowds he would attract. That Capernaum appears in later rabbinic accounts solely in connection with schismatics, presumably Jesus' followers, suggests that Jesus' missionary strategy was ultimately successful.

As already mentioned, Luke marks the start of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth with an account of his rejection in his home town, recorded later in Matthew's Gospel. However, in keeping with Luke's thematic writing style, it is possible he recorded both his opening address: <<*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'* And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'>> (Luke 4:16-21), which marked the start of his ministry, with his rejection in his home town that occurred later.

Capernaum, on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, would remain Jesus' base of operations and his new home town for the duration of his ministry in Galilee.

Excavations at Capernaum, modern day Talhum, have revealed residential structures, a synagogue, and an octagonal Christian site.

Capernaum's prominent, well-preserved synagogue has been dated, based on thousands of coins found below its pavement, to the 4th or 5th Century AD, although some argue it is earlier.

The territory of Zebulun and Naphtali refers to the land allocations given to these two tribes of Israel, named after the sons of Jacob. The allocation to Zebulun is described in Joshua 19:10-16, and Naphtali in Joshua 19:32-39. Capernaum was in Naphtali, although not referred to in the allocation account, and the land bordered Zebulun on its nearby southern boundary.

Spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. Matthew continues his theme of showing just how many Scriptures were being fulfilled in the early days of Jesus' life and ministry.

- 15 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the
Gentiles –
- 16 the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.'

Matthew 4:15-16

The quotation that Matthew provides is another messianic prophecy from Isaiah 9:1-2, which refers to the arrival of the Messiah in the lands that formed the region of Galilee in Jesus' day.

Darkness, light. The land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali had been part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and had experienced turmoil under Assyrian domination: <<*In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria*>> (2 Kings 15:29), and the Jewish inhabitants had longed for liberation from Gentile rule. The prophet had written: <<*They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upwards, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness*>> (Isaiah 8:21-22). They are now the first to see a great light of God's deliverance in Jesus, just as was foretold: <<*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace*>> (Luke 1:78-79). Light discovers and directs; so does the Gospel.

On the road by the sea refers to the major trade route that passed through the region that would have been used by people travelling from Assyria and Babylon down to Egypt.

Galilee of the Gentiles. After the northern kingdom of Israel had been overrun by the Assyrians and the majority of the population had been exiled, scattered among many nations, the king of Assyria, probably Shalmaneser V (727-722BC), brought foreign people to settle in Samaria in 722BC. Refer to comments made on Luke 10:33 for a fuller account of this historic event.

The debate whether light has dawned refers Jesus' birth or ministry has no real bearing on the overall fulfilment of the prophecy by Isaiah.

- 17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

Matthew 4:17

From that time marks a significant turning point in Matthew's narrative, indicating that the preparations for Jesus' messianic ministry are complete. He will notify a similar dramatic shift with similar language: <<*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*>> (Matthew 16:21).

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Jesus' message builds on that of John the Baptist. Refer to comments made on Matthew 3:2. Although the Christ had come, it seems that the Kingdom was still just out of reach and would remain so until the Spirit was poured out just a few weeks after his crucifixion and resurrection. This was a message that had been spoken of through the prophets, and was now being spoken out by the one who needs to be heeded by all: <<*Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him*>> (Hebrews 2:1-3).

III.b.ii Matthew 4:18-22 - Jesus Calls the First Disciples

In order to establish his church, Jesus needed to train up men in order to teach them the Kingdom principles they would need for their work. He started by choosing four Jewish fishermen from Galilee.

To be a Talmud or disciple of a Rabbi was a real honour and only the brightest pupils were selected to serve. Disciples sought places with Rabbis. Jesus was different, clearly in breach of tradition and protocol, for he went out and chose his key disciples personally. The men he chose were not what other Rabbis would have considered to be the right 'type' of person to perpetuate their own teaching. Jesus, however, does not judge by outward appearance as a man often does: <<*But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'*>> (1 Samuel 16:7).

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Matthew 4:18-20

Two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew. These brothers had probably been followers of Jesus, in part at least, for about a year: <<*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!'* The two

disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)>> (John 1:35-42), but apparently had returned for a time to their normal work. The passage from John also explains how Peter got his name, which means rock or piece of rock.

These brothers were not just fishermen but, as boat owners, they should be classed as self-employed businessmen: <<*He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat*>> (Luke 5:3). This would not have placed them with wealthy land-owners but they were not to be considered among the poor either. When Peter was later called before the Sanhedrin, along with John, it was recorded: <<*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognised them as companions of Jesus*>> (Acts 4:13), which does not imply that they were illiterate but that they had not been to Rabbinic school to become as well versed with scriptural teaching and therefore should not have spoken with the confidence that they had been displaying.

Casting a net into the lake. A circular cast net, 20-25 feet or 6-7.5m in diameter with lead sinkers attached to the outer edge, enveloped fish as it sank.

The Sea of Galilee was often referred to as the lake or Lake Tiberias, although John refers to it as the Sea of Tiberias: <<*After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way*>> (John 21:1). At 200m below sea level, Tiberias, on the western shore of the lake, is the lowest city in Israel. On the eastern shore, the sea was often referred to as the Lake or Sea of Gennesaret.

Follow me. Jesus called them to abandon their ordinary occupations and accompany him full-time. This was a sacrificial commitment for these men to make: <<*Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you'*>> (Mark 10:28), although it would have been seen as a culturally significant honour to be called as a Talmud for a Rabbi, let alone to be called by the Lord of All to go and fish for people.

Immediately they left their nets and followed him is the right way for disciples of Jesus to respond. Once called to serve it is not necessary to sit around waiting for a further prophetic word or sign to do what is already written in Scripture that all believes should be doing, e.g. feeding the hungry, helping the poor, spreading the Gospel, etc. for more significant mission, such as church leadership, overseas evangelism, etc. will work themselves out naturally as part of the calling.

The account here, and the one to follow, show there was and always will be an economic price to pay for discipleship. This was nothing new at the time for the Jews told stories of pagans giving up wealthy lifestyles to become proselytes, and Greek philosophers similarly had accounts of people giving up wealth to follow a particular philosophy. Individuals in the early church also gave up much of their own wealth to ensure the poor were well provided for: <<Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common>> (Acts 4:32). Acknowledging that all things are given by God and belong to him anyway, helps believers to understand that they are not being generous when they give something up or away to benefit others. For the disciples in this account, what they would gain was immeasurably more than they gave up, even though most of them would die as martyrs for doing so.

²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

Matthew 4:21

Two other brothers, James, John. Unlike Peter and Andrew, these two worked for their father, although it would have been viewed as a family business. James is usually referred to first as John was the younger brother, probably in his early to mid teens at this time. The language of his Gospel indicates that he was a disciple of John the Baptist, part time at least, when he first encountered Jesus. See the quote from John's Gospel given in comments on vv.18-20.

That they were mending their nets does not imply poverty as some have claimed. Fishing was a reputable industry, providing healthy, nutritional food for those that could afford it. Owners would have been typically middle-class and those who worked for them would have been paid according to the success of the catch. Nets would often snag on rocks and become torn. Mending them was part of daily life for a fisherman.

A boat, dating from around or before the 1st Century AD by radiocarbon analysis and associated pottery, was found in the Sea of Galilee south of Kibbutz Ginnosar in 1986. It is consistent with boat representations in mosaics from Migdal or Magdala, also on the Sea of Galilee.

At approximately 26.5 feet long and 7.5 feet wide, or 8 by 2.3m, it could hold about 15 people, including four rowers and a helmsman. It probably had both fore and aft decks, a central mast and sail, with positions for two sets of oars on both sides.



He called them. Once again, there was no debate or persuasion needed. John knew who Jesus was from John the Baptist's testimony and would have told his father and brother.

²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Matthew 4:22

Left the boat and their father. They relinquished commitment to the family business and their livelihood to join Jesus' messianic mission. Culturally, there was nothing more important than fulfilling family responsibilities and caring for parents. Therefore, to some, their actions here would have seemed scandalous. However, their father would no doubt have other hired hands to help with the work and would have released his sons with his blessing to serve under a Rabbi, as it would have been an honour for his family to have one son as a Talmud, let alone two of them! The only question that might have come to his mind was 'who exactly was this Rabbi?' As mentioned, John would have passed on what John the Baptist had said but nothing else was known of him at this stage.

Serving in ministry is about placing God at the centre of all we do, serving him and his church, but at the same time not neglecting duties to our families, friends and employers. In addition, this life is meant to be enjoyed. All these things are honouring to God, which is a key aspect of discipleship.

III.b.iii Matthew 4:23-25 - Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People

As was typical of Jesus' ministry, he taught the people where they were, either in the synagogues on the Sabbath or out in open spaces. To indicate the authenticity of his messianic preaching, he supported his work with miraculous signs and wonders of physical healing and demonstrations of his power over the spiritual realm. Initially, it was perhaps the miracles more than the teaching, which drew large crowds to Jesus from around the region.

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Matthew 4:23

The region of Galilee had a population of about 300,000 inhabitants living in 200 or more villages and towns, with no major cities in the area.

Jesus' ministry included teaching disciples and those already familiar with his message, proclaiming truth to those unfamiliar with the Gospel message, i.e. the good news, and healing physical, emotional, and spiritual infirmities.

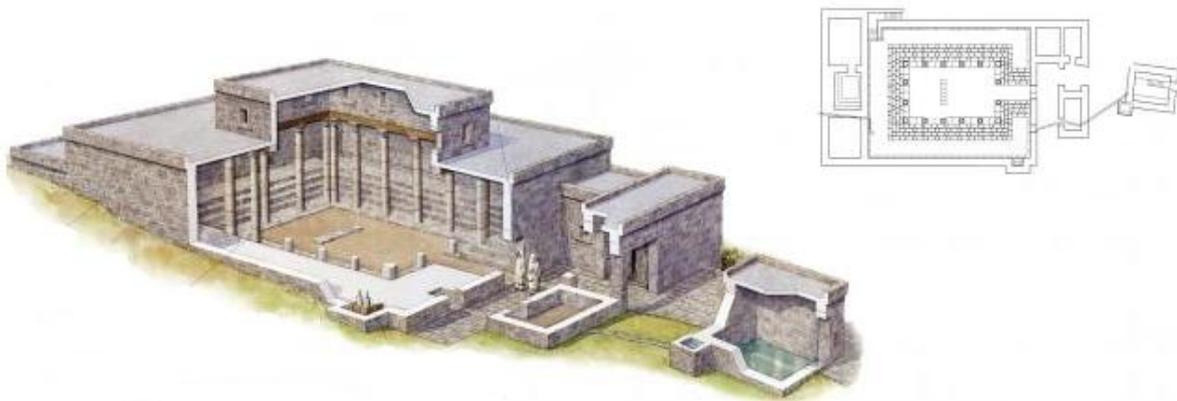
Curing of every disease and every sickness gives an amazing foretaste of the age to come, where there will be no more disease, sickness, pain or death: <<*So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power*>> (1 Corinthians 15:42-43), <<*He will transform*

the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself>> (Philippians 3:21), and: <<he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away>> (Revelation 21:4). Jesus combined ministry that met people's physical needs with ministry to their minds and hearts, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven.

That Jesus cured every disease and every sickness should not be extrapolated to say that he cured every single sick person in the region, for not everyone was brought to him. Other passages show that he did spend a lot of his time healing people both physically and spiritually. It is also clear that he performed many individual healings, where a simultaneous group healing would have been possible but would not have met all the needs of the person being healed.

Teaching in their synagogues. In towns and cities other than Jerusalem, the synagogue was the centre of Jewish worship during the time of Jesus. Synagogues were located in most of the leading towns of Israel.

Although very little remains of the original 1st Century synagogue at Capernaum, extensive archaeological evidence exists for a typical Jewish synagogue in the town of Gamla, which would have had much in common with the synagogues Jesus visited throughout Galilee.



An Artist's Impression of the Synagogue at Gamla

Among the people. Jesus had come to those who were his own, which is everybody but his focus was on ordinary people, not kings, rulers or religious leaders. It was these people that he knew would be more willing to hear the message and respond to the news of the Kingdom of Heaven.

²⁴ So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.

Matthew 4:24

Despite the lack of modern communications systems, his fame spread throughout all Syria. News was often sent from town to town by runners and it was surprising just how quickly that such news could be disseminated.

Syria was a Gentile region north of Galilee, between Damascus and the Mediterranean Sea. However, in all the surrounding lands there were pockets of Jews and it may be these people that were coming to Jesus initially.

Once again, the range of disabilities and illnesses is impressive. Whatever anyone might be afflicted with they came to Jesus and he cured them. What was being performed here has not even yet been matched with modern medicine, let alone by natural causes; it is only achievable by the God who sustains and controls nature: <<*He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God’*>> (John 3:2). The miracles performed were those expected of the Messiah: <<*Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, ‘When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?’*>> (John 7:31), for it had been foretold: <<*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert*>> (Isaiah 35:5-6).

²⁵ And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judæa, and from beyond the Jordan.

Matthew 4:25

The great crowds that followed Jesus had responded in some sense to his teaching and healing ministry but had not yet become his disciples.

The Decapolis is Greek for ten cities, and was the Roman, generally Gentile, district to the south and east of the Sea of Galilee.

Beyond the Jordan commonly referred to the region of Perea, or more generally the territory east of the Jordan River.