

The Beginning of Jesus' Ministry
Matthew 4:12-25
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Matthew introduces the public ministry of Jesus by establishing that His ministry would be based in Galilee. While Galilee was originally part of the kingdom of Israel, after the Assyrian invasion of the Northern Kingdom, it was considered to be largely a Gentile land. In this land, Jesus would choose His disciples and train them to reach the nations, and His ministry would involve preaching, teaching and healing which would draw multitudes. This previews what Matthew will develop in the rest of this Gospel.

The setting of Jesus' ministry (4:12-17)

This section begins with Jesus hearing that John the Baptist was taken into custody. While it is not evident in Matthew's Gospel, we learn from the Gospel of John that there is about a year that passes between the baptism of Jesus and the arrest of John the Baptist by Herod. This is evident by the events that take place in Galilee in John 1:19-2:12 followed by Jesus' ministry in Judea in John 2:13-4:42. Jesus visited Jerusalem for the Passover, cleansed the temple for the first time, talked with Nicodemus, taught in Judea and spoke with the woman of Samaria on His way back to Galilee.

This gap in time is fitting with Matthew's topical approach to his story of Jesus. He is willing to omit events in order to build the case for Christ's authority as the Messiah of Israel. Matthew transitions the reader from John's ministry to Christ's ministry in 4:12 with Christ basing His ministry in Galilee. Matthew includes the reason for this location—the fulfillment of prophecy.

Matthew describes Christ's going to Galilee as a withdrawal. This is not to escape the dangers of Herod since Herod also ruled Galilee but was for ministry purposes with the Galileans. His ministry to the disciples and the multitudes would last longer being further removed from the religious leaders in Jerusalem who opposed John the Baptist (John 4:1-3). Luke acknowledged the prior travels from Galilee to Judea and back by his description that "Jesus returned to Galilee" in Luke 4:14.

Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth to settle in Capernaum. In this town, Jesus would perform miracles such as healing the servant of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13), healing Peter’s mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-17), cleansing an unclean spirit from a man (Mark 1:23-28) and healing a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). Capernaum had a prime opportunity to see the glorious power of the Messiah, which explains why Christ would later say this town was worthy of greater condemnation than Sodom on the day of judgment (Matthew 11:23-24).



Capernaum is described in Matthew 4:13 as in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. Capernaum was in the area given to the tribe of Naphtali and Nazareth was in the region of Zebulun. These regions were part of the northern kingdom that was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and were referred to as Gentile land because the Jews had intermixed with the Assyrians. It was looked down upon by the Judeans for this reason even though it was the territory of the nation of Israel. The light of the Messiah came to those living in darkness.

The prophecy that was fulfilled according to Matthew came from Isaiah 9:1-2:

Matthew 4:15-16	Isaiah 9:1-2
<p>“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light, and those who were sitting dwelling in the land and shadow of death, upon them a Light dawned.”</p>	<p>“But there will be no <i>more</i> gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make <i>it</i> glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them.”</p>

Interestingly, the perspective of Isaiah 9:1-2 in describing the location of Zebulun and Naphtali is from those coming to Israel, not from the nation itself.

To say “by way of the sea, on the other side of the Jordan” speaks of the point of view of someone coming from the East, beyond the Jordan River, toward the Mediterranean Sea. Just as judgment would come to this land with the coming of the Assyrians, salvation would come to these people with the coming of the Messiah.

Isaiah 9:1-2 speaks of the salvation and deliverance of the land of Israel which will be ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Salvation to the Gentile land is a precursor to the gospel of the kingdom going to all the nations (Matthew 28:19). This is why from the time of His arrival in Galilee, Jesus’ public ministry would consist of preaching the gospel of repentance, for the kingdom of heaven was at hand.

“From that time” is a key turning point in Matthew’s Gospel, occurring only one other time, in Matthew 16:21. In both cases, it cues the reader to recognize a major ministry shift. In Matthew 16 it comes after the culmination of the Jewish rejection of Jesus where He tells His disciples of His movement to Jerusalem to die and be raised up on the third day. Here Jesus began His public ministry. Prior to this moment, Matthew records Christ’s ministry to specific individuals but now His ministry is widespread to the multitudes.

Jesus’ opening words of His public ministry were identical to the initial words of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:2: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Repentance is at the core of the message of the kingdom. It is included in Jesus final commission in Luke 24:47: “that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” It is fundamentally a change of mind that manifests itself in a change of will.

When Jesus said the kingdom of heaven was at hand He did not mean it would be established at that moment but that the King had arrived to offer the kingdom to Israel. As prophesied, He would be rejected and the establishment of the kingdom would wait until a later time known only to the Father (Acts 1:6-7).

The summoning of Jesus’ disciples (4:18-22)

Jesus called the disciples by the Sea of Galilee. The Hebrews referred to large lakes as “seas” and the Sea of Galilee was the Sea of Chinnereth in the Old Testament (Numbers 34:11; Joshua 13:27). It was also known as the lake of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1), which was named after the plain on the north side of the sea. During Roman times it came to be known as the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1) in honor of the Roman emperor.

This calling of the disciples is not Jesus' first encounter with them. The initial recorded encounter is found in John 1:35-42, with Andrew, a disciple of John, who then recruited his brother Peter to follow Jesus. Philip and Nathaniel were added as well in John 1:43-51. This calling involving the two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew (4:18-20) and James and John (4:21-22) occurs likely a year afterward.

This calling is different in that it is clearly a permanent commitment. Peter and Andrew continued their life as fishermen after the initial call to follow Jesus but now they left their occupation and embarked upon a life of following Jesus instead. This does not mean they lost interest since when Jesus calls them in Matthew 4:19, they immediately respond. This is different from the crowds that followed Jesus who would come and go as they chose.

Luke's account of this final calling is preceded by the miracle of catching a large quantity of fish (Luke 5:1-11), which certainly would have had a dramatic effect on these fishermen. Their response to the miracle of the fish was to leave everything and follow him. This miracle is the setting for Jesus' words "follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

The phrase "fishers of men" harkens Jeremiah 16:16: "I am going to send for many fishermen,' declares the Lord, 'and they will fish for them.'" Rather than the fishermen of Jeremiah's day gathering Israel for the coming exile, here fisherman will deliver men from spiritual exile. Since fishing involved casting large nets for large numbers of fish, we should consider fishing for men to be laborious rather than leisurely.

In similar fashion, Jesus also came to two other brothers, James and John, who were in a boat with their father Zebedee. James and John were more often referred to by Matthew as "the sons of Zebedee" (Matthew 20:20; 26:37; 27:56) in his Gospel. As professional fishermen they were repairing their nets in order to return to the arduous work of fishing the Sea of Galilee. Upon being called by Jesus they immediately left their business also.

One difference between these two brothers and Andrew and Peter was that the text specifies that they also left their father as well. This is in contrast to a man in Matthew 8:21-22 who was unwilling to do this. Matthew emphasizes the importance of leaving one's family in following Jesus: "I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me." (Matthew 10:35-37; cf. 12:46-50; 19:29).

The prerequisite for being a fisher of men is to follow Jesus. This was a direct command, without negotiation. It involved physically following Jesus to places that they knew not, even at their own peril. They left their occupation, families and homes. Those who opposed Jesus would later oppose these disciples (John 15:18). But it also involved an ethical following of the teaching of Jesus.

Matthew himself also left his home and occupation (Matthew 9:9-10) and proceeded to invite many of his fellow tax collectors to his home to meet Jesus and the other disciples. He is a wonderful example of what it means to follow Jesus.

The summary of Jesus' ministry (4:23-25)

This early summary of the ministry of Jesus prepares us for His teaching in Matthew 5-7. The setting was throughout Galilee, which meant a large area west of the Sea of Galilee, roughly 40 miles wide by 70 miles long. It was populated by over two hundred towns with a total population of about three million people at the time. Jesus' ministry focused upon three things:

1. Teaching in the synagogues. These synagogues existed because of the dispersion of the Jews after the exile to Babylon. These were community centers in towns for religious worship and teaching and Jesus took advantage of them in order to teach the many who began to follow Him.
2. Proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. This was Jesus' message to those he would encounter as he traveled throughout Galilee (cf. Matthew 4:17). This is the means by which the multitudes came to be His followers and then were taught in the synagogues.
3. Healing every kind of disease and sickness. Jesus' healing ministry served to validate Jesus' teaching ministry. It also was the manifestation of His compassion (Matthew 9:35-36). Later Jesus would send the twelve out to also preach and heal (Matthew 10).

The healing ministry of Jesus brought large crowds from the early days of His public ministry. News spread throughout all of Syria, which was the region to the north of Galilee. Since Galilee was at the north of the land conquered by Joshua and later ruled by David and Solomon, and later became part of the northern kingdom of Israel, this is the first indication of Gentile people coming from a true Gentile land to bring them those who were ill.

Matthew would later describe a reason why Jesus healed diseases and illnesses in Matthew 8:17: "This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 'He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.'" This prophetic fulfillment Isaiah 53:4 was necessary to validate Jesus as the Messiah, as Jesus uses these miracles to prove to John the Baptist that He is indeed the Expected One in Matthew 11:2-5.

The description of the diseases and sicknesses that Jesus healed in Matthew 4:24 provides more detail. Specifically, the maladies include demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics.

Those who were demon possessed are included with those who are suffering various diseases or pains. This shows that demon possession was something a person was afflicted with, rather than something that a person caused themselves. The idea that we contract demons based on what we do, where we are, or what we come in contact with is not consistent with biblical revelation.

Epilepsy and paralysis were conditions beyond our diagnosis in modern times. Epilepsy was any condition that produced convulsions and paralysis was being unable to walk, regardless of the cause of the symptom. Large crowds came from far away: Jerusalem to the south, Judea to the southwest, the Decapolis to the east, and beyond the Jordan river to the east of Jerusalem, in addition to Syria to the north. These people (Jews and Gentiles) came from many, many miles in all directions, and walked up to a few days to see Jesus.

The excitement about Jesus' healing ministry will provide a platform for His teaching ministry. Those who heard him would have good reason to listen to Him and respond. This section introduces the Sermon on the Mount in the next three chapters. The crowds of people who heard this sermon were amazed at His teaching since He taught with authority, not like their religious leaders (Matthew 7:28-29).

Conclusion

Jesus called His disciples who immediately left everything to follow Him to reach the multitudes. When we respond to Jesus, we leave our former life for a life that Christ has given us. The Christian life is not for our own benefit but we are called by God's grace to do the works that He has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10). This certainly includes the work of reaching the lost with compassion rather than to avoid them in fear (Matthew 9:35-38). May we respond to such God given opportunities!