

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Matthew

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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MONARCH
BOOKS

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Introduction: The Revolution Has Begun

*Above his head they placed the written charge
against him: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."*

(Matthew 27:37)

Jesus of Nazareth sparked a massive revolution. A lot of people miss that fact. They are so used to the long-haired, blue-eyed, white-robed storybook Jesus that they imagine he was about as tame and domesticated as many of his churches today. But he wasn't. Jesus was a radical, dangerous revolutionary who made big waves and powerful enemies. He was not killed for preaching pithy parables, but because he claimed to be King.

Jesus chose an incendiary word to announce his Revolution. The word *kingdom* has lost its edge in our world of democratic republics and constitutional monarchies, but in the first-century Roman Empire it was explosive. That was a world where kings could execute their enemies without a trial and slaughter hundreds of babies on a whim.¹ It was a world where kings brooked no rival and where sedition was quickly silenced. It was a world where few messages were more dangerous than the claim that "*the kingdom of heaven is near*".² If Jesus was King, it meant that Caesar was not. This was inflammatory talk of the highest order.

After three years, Jesus was arrested and put on trial for his life. He stood before the Jewish Sanhedrin, before Herod and before Governor Pilate, who was the Roman emperor's man in

¹ Matthew 2:16; 14:3-11; Luke 13:1.

² Matthew 3:2, 4:17 & 10:7.

Palestine. He was accused of treason because he claimed to be King, and his enemies insisted that "*anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar*".³ He was tortured and crucified under the charge that he was "*the King of the Jews*";⁴ and when he died his tomb was guarded by a group of Roman soldiers. Scoreline: the Roman emperor *one*, Jesus of Nazareth *nil*. The King of the Jews was dead and the Revolution was over.

Well, not exactly. In fact, not at all. Three days later the corpse disappeared and rumours began to spread that he had been raised back to life. What was more, his followers began to preach that his death had not only failed to prevent the revolution, it had somehow always been part of the plan through which he would bring it to pass. Within a generation, the Jewish state was dead but their King had spread his rule across the Roman Empire. Within three centuries, even the Roman emperor himself worshipped at Jesus' feet and proclaimed him King of kings. Now, 2,000 years later, he is still by far the most loved, most worshipped, most followed and most obeyed person in the world. Google his name and you will find 170 million websites to visit. Type his name into Amazon.com and you can choose from 405,000 books about him. Search in any Western town or village and you will find a church that bears his name. The end of the Revolution? No, just the beginning.

Matthew was one of Jesus' original twelve followers. He had once been an eager employee of the Roman Empire, but when he heard Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God he quickly deserted Emperor Tiberius to follow King Jesus.⁵ Matthew invested his life in Jesus' Revolution, and he wants us to do the same. That is why he wrote his gospel.

³ John 19:12-15.

⁴ Matthew 27:11, 29, 37, 42.

⁵ Matthew 9:9. Matthew was a tax collector who worked the Capernaum road on the trade route between Damascus and Egypt. He had chosen to serve the Roman occupiers of Palestine, and was a small cog in the massive Roman fiscal machine.

Matthew wrote the fullest and most systematic account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He groups his material by theme rather than by strict chronology, because he wants us to respond to five central acts in the drama of King Jesus. He uses the Greek word *basileia*, or *kingdom*, fifty-six times in his twenty-eight chapters, stressing the revolutionary call of Jesus the King and of his Kingdom. He divides each of his five acts into Jesus' *words* and Jesus' *deeds*, so that we will not mistake Jesus for a mere lecturer in religious philosophy, but grasp that he is the King-on-a-Mission and that he wants to enlist us as his willing followers. Matthew's structure is:

Chapters 1-4

Prologue: The Coming of the Kingdom

Chapters 5-9

Act One: Kingdom Lifestyle (*words* in chapters 5-7, *deeds* in chapters 8-9)

Chapters 10-12

Act Two: Kingdom Mission (*words* in chapter 10, *deeds* in chapters 11-12)

Chapters 13-17

Act Three: Kingdom Message (*words* in chapter 13, *deeds* in chapters 14-17)

Chapters 18-22

Act Four: Kingdom Community (*words* in chapter 18, *deeds* in chapters 19-22)

Chapters 23-27

Act Five: Kingdom Judgment (*words* in chapters 23-25, *deeds* in chapters 26-27)

Chapter 28

Epilogue: The Proclamation of the Kingdom

Matthew's gospel is a revolutionary pamphlet, which shook the ancient world and still shakes the world today. A few years ago, I took a sleeper train across western China as part of a backpacking holiday and fell into conversation with an old man and his son, who spoke good English. When I felt the time was right, I reached into my bag and offered them a Chinese Bible, which I had smuggled into the country. The old man caught sight of it and held it in his hands like a prized jewel. "Where did you get this book?" he demanded, before telling me his story. His father had been an itinerant evangelist during the great upheavals of the 1960s. One day, the communists had discovered that he was preaching the Gospel. They confiscated his Bibles, took him to a prison camp, and ordered him to recant his faith. The old man – still a bewildered young boy when the soldiers came – told me that he had never seen his father again. He and his mother had been blacklisted by the local party officials, and he had grown up in gruelling poverty because his father proclaimed that Jesus was King and therefore Mao Zedong wasn't. I shall never forget the look on that old Chinese man's face as he was reunited with a Bible after forty years apart. His face reminds me that Jesus of Nazareth is a dangerous revolutionary who demands that we give up our whole lives to follow him, and no one else.

I have written this book to take you on a tour of Matthew's gospel and to bring you face to face with Jesus as Matthew knew him. It doesn't aim to cover every verse, but I pray that its sixty short chapters will draw you deeper into God's Kingdom and the radical message of King Jesus.

Get ready for an adventure with Jesus Christ. The Revolution has begun.

One of Us (1:1–17)

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.

(Matthew 1:1)

Celebrities on the TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* receive expert help in tracing their family tree.¹ A wide range of people have appeared on the show, but they all have one thing in common: they all want to learn that their ancestors were good, worthy and noble. Jeremy Clarkson's face lights up when he discovers that his ancestor was the inventor of the Kilner jar. Jerry Springer says a silent prayer as he visits the place where his Jewish grandmother was gassed by the Nazis. Patsy Kensit weeps when she discovers that her granddad was a criminal who barely knew her father. People trace their family tree because they hope to find great ancestors and a fine lineage.

Matthew starts his gospel with Jesus' family tree, and it's not pretty. More than that, Matthew seems to go out of his way to demonstrate that it's not pretty. He is descended from Judah and his daughter-in-law *Tamar*, who dressed up as a prostitute to trick her backslidden father-in-law into having sex with her.² He is the descendant of *Rahab*, the prostitute of Jericho, who was saved when her city was destroyed because she hid two spies on the roof of her brothel and lied to protect their lives.³ He

¹ The BBC series has proven so successful that the British show has been exported all around the world. Lisa Kudrow, who played Phoebe in *Friends*, presents the American version of the show on NBC.

² Genesis 38.

³ Joshua 2. Rahab was saved from the ruins of Jericho in c.1406 BC and Boaz was born over 200 years later, so the Greek *ek tēs rachab* means "whose

is descended from *Ruth*, the widowed migrant-worker from the Gentile nation of Moab, whose people were so corrupt that they were excluded from the presence of God.⁴ He is the descendant of *Bathsheba*, the mother of Solomon, who committed adultery with David and became his queen even while her murdered husband's grave was still fresh. Matthew emphasizes this sin by referring to her as "*Uriah's wife*";⁵ and then adds to his list *Rehoboam, Jehoram, Ahaz* and *Manasseh*, the wickedest kings of Judah. Finally, he tells us that Jesus was the son of the Virgin Mary, conceived so miraculously that even her fiancé thought that she was guilty of illicit sex before marriage.⁶ When the actress Patsy Kensit discovered her own family tree, she told the BBC that "*It hit me so hard, I stopped washing my hair and wearing make-up.*" She would not have coped with a sordid family tree like Jesus.

So what is Matthew's point here? He wants us to grasp that Jesus is the Son of God,⁷ the promised Messiah who ushers in the Kingdom of God,⁸ so what possible benefit can he derive from starting with this terrible ancestry? Actually, he does so in order to make a very important point, and unless we grasp what he is saying we will misunderstand the very nature of "*the kingdom of God*".

Every film-maker and novelist knows that the opening scene is the crucial moment in which they either win or lose

ancestor was *Rahab*", not "*whose mother was Rahab*".

⁴ Deuteronomy 23:2–4. Ruth's story is told in the Old Testament book that bears her name.

⁵ The NIV translates this as "*David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,*" but the Greek says literally that "*David was the father of Solomon by the [wife] of Uriah.*" The Law of Moses commanded that David and Bathsheba should be executed for their sin. See Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22.

⁶ Matthew 1:18–19.

⁷ Matthew 4:3, 6; 8:29; 14:33; 26:63–64; 27:40, 43, 54.

⁸ Matthew 1:1, 17; 2:4; 16:16; 22:42; 23:10; 24:5; 26:63–64. The word *Christ* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah*.

their audience's attention. Matthew knew that. God knows that. And yet God inspired Matthew to begin his gospel, and the New Testament itself, with a genealogy that reads like a *Who's Who?* of the villains of ancient Israel. He knew that it would capture the attention of Matthew's original Jewish readership, but he also wants to use them to teach us two important principles that lie at the heart of his Kingdom Revolution.

The first thing he wants us to grasp is that his Kingdom is about *God coming down to save humankind*. If that sounds obvious, remember that religion is not about this at all. Religion is always about *humankind stepping up to reach God*. Matthew reminds us in verse 23 that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is very different from religion. Isaiah prophesied that *"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" – which means 'God with us'*, and Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is *God-With-Us*, God really and truly with us. He did not come down reservedly, willing to become a man in a palace, or a Jewish nobleman with impeccable family credentials. He exchanged the highest glories of heaven for the lowest depths of humanity. He humbled himself all the way, to become *God-With-Us* and to pave a way for *Us-With-God*.

Jesus' abject humanity is not incidental to the Gospel; it is essential to the Gospel. Because he became fully human (while remaining fully God), he was able to save the human race by undoing through his righteous life all that Adam lost through his sin.⁹ Hebrews 2:17 tells us that Jesus *"had to be made like his brothers in every way"* in order to deal with sin, and Paul tells us that we will only be raised from the dead and live forever with God because Jesus has been bodily raised as our human forerunner.¹⁰ The fact that God has stooped down to become the man Jesus is one of the reasons why he is not simply *one way*

⁹ Luke 19:10; Romans 5:18–19; 1 Corinthians 15:45.

¹⁰ This is what the Old Testament word *firstfruits* conveys in 1 Corinthians 15:23.

to God but the only way to God. *"For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."*¹¹

The second thing that God wants us to grasp is that his Kingdom is about *God's grace to people who deserve nothing* but his anger and judgment. Jesus is the Seed of Abraham, the moon-worshipping Mesopotamian whom God chose to be his prophet and the ancestor of the Saviour of the World.¹² Jesus is the Son of David, the shepherd-boy God chose and anointed to found a dynasty of kings – a man who sinned but who knew how to repent.¹³ Jesus is the descendant of Zerubbabel, the man who was next in line for David's throne but whose claim was now so defunct that his heir Joseph was working as a manual labourer in the building trade.¹⁴ Matthew wants us to grasp that Jesus came to a human race steeped in sin, so that he could outweigh our sin with even more of God's grace.

So Matthew's opening words are not a dull series of names to endure, like a long list of credits before the real action begins. They are a clue, right from the outset, that God's Kingdom is different, and far better than, the one people were expecting. He was not born into a palace to rub shoulders with the rich and mighty, but into a dirty stable to rub shoulders with sinners, Gentiles, outcasts and rejects – anyone who is humble enough to cry out for a Saviour and believe that they have found him in the carpenter's boy from Galilee.

He is *God-With-Us*, the humble Saviour who dived deep into the human problem as the divine infiltrator, and who worked God's solution from the inside out.

¹¹ 1 Timothy 2:5.

¹² Genesis 12:2–3, 7; 22:18; Galatians 3:16.

¹³ 1 Chronicles 17:11–14; Psalm 89:35–36; Isaiah 9:6–7; Jeremiah 23:5–6.

¹⁴ Matthew makes it clear that Jesus was the biological descendant of Mary but not Joseph (the Greek *ex hēs egennēthē* means that he was *born of her*), yet he gives us Jesus' legal ancestry via Joseph because it was through his adoptive father that he was the perfect heir to the throne of David. He even misses out a few names in order to stylize the genealogy as 14/14/14 generations – twice the biblical number of perfection.