

Love your enemies

The scribes and Pharisees had distorted God's command, 'You shall love your neighbour' (Leviticus 19:18) to mean that we should hate our enemies. The Bible teaches no such thing! The Jews had narrowed down the meaning of 'neighbour' to those whom they loved (cp. Luke 10:27–37). Jesus cut right across such thinking when he said, 'Love your enemies' (44). This is one of the most difficult commands to keep especially when it is professing Christians who hate us or harm us. Satan is spoiling their lives and we must overcome their evil with good (Romans 12:20–21). If they are not believers, remember that they are enslaved by Satan, lost and bound for hell. Love has won many a hostile sinner to Christ. Our attitude to others must not be determined by what they do to us.

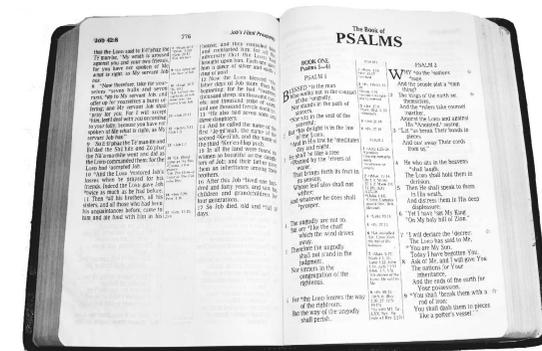
A child generally bears the family traits and likeness. The saying goes, 'Like father, like son.' Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, etc. ... that you may be sons of your Father in heaven' (44–45). We must be like our heavenly Father who shows his love every day to his enemies ('the evil' and 'the unjust'; 45). If we only love those who love us, we are no different to the ungodly (46–47). How are we to love our enemies?

- In our words: *Bless those who curse you.*
- In our actions: *Do good to those who hate you.*
- By praying for them: *Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you* (44). Let us remember that the Lord Jesus prayed for his enemies who nailed him to the cross (Luke 23:34).

Jesus said, 'Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect' (48). We are children of our Father in heaven and we reflect his perfection by loving our enemies. Verse 48 is not suggesting that we can attain moral perfection in this life. If this were possible, we would not need to mourn over our sin. The demand that our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees is far reaching (20). **What is our attitude to our enemies? Do we pray for those who have hurt us?**

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



January 2019

Bible readings from Psalms 3 to 8
Gospel of Matthew chapters 1 to 5

Dear Friends,

I stress throughout Pilgrim Bible Notes the necessity of reading, knowing and understanding the Word of God. This is emphasised throughout Scripture (eg. Psalm 119; 2 Timothy 3:15–17 1 Peter 2:2). I am saddened however that many, many Christians in Britain do not read good Christian books and evangelical publishers and bookshops are struggling for lack of sales. We have a wonderful heritage of Christian literature and there are many, many excellent books that cry out to be read.

I do recommend certain Bible commentaries in the Bible notes, but there are various types of books on which to feast yourself:

Biographies – I love Christian biographies and find them such a blessing and encouragement. Some that I read fifty years ago were such a great help that I turn to them and read them again.

Church history books help us to appreciate what many of God’s people suffered because they were faithful to Christ. We also learn of the battles for truth and the lessons of the past which helps us be wiser in the present.

Apologetics answer the attacks of atheists and warn against false religions. If we are to be more effective in our witness for Christ to non-Christians, we need to know how they are astray from the Bible. John Blanchard has written many excellent apologetic books.

Sermons. The sermons of C.H. Spurgeon and Dr. D.M. Lloyd-Jones have blessed millions and are still in print. There are also other sermons from great preachers of the past.

Evangelistic booklets. Read them and pass them on to unbelievers. I also read books for pastors and preachers which most Christians would not read. Other books such as hymns and their stories, Christian poetry and testimonies are also useful.

I also read books by non-Christians which can be very challenging and helpful because they confirm the truths that we hold dear. I am not a great reader of fiction.

May you find much joy and encouragement from reading.

Alec Taylor

30 JANUARY

Matthew 5:38–42

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth

In the remainder of this chapter, the Lord Jesus demonstrates how *love is the fulfilment of the law* in our relationship to our enemies (Romans 13:10). The Old Testament legislation ‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*’ was given to ensure that the punishment was appropriate to the crime. The Pharisees denied God’s Word by using this law to sanction the taking of personal revenge (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus is here warning us that we must not seek personal revenge when we are wronged. This does not mean that if we are the victims of crime, we should not press charges against the criminal. Evil-doers must be punished in the civil courts (see Romans 13:1–7 which follows teaching forbidding the taking of personal vengeance in chapter 12:17–21). When criminals are not adequately punished (‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*’), law and order breaks down and criminals are left free to inflict their evil deeds on more victims.

To be slapped on the cheek was a great insult which could be punished by a very heavy fine. Jesus is not telling us to invite further suffering, but to respond to insults by being gracious (39). In New Testament times, a court was not able to deprive a person of his cloak as payment for a fine (the cloak was also used as a blanket at night). Jesus said that we should not insist on our rights: ‘*Let him take your cloak also*’ (40). The Jews hated the Roman practice which compelled them to carry a soldier’s load for a mile (a thousand paces). Jesus said that his followers should go the second mile with the load (41). You can imagine the influence of such a witness on the soldier who would normally be met with sullen resentment. **There is much talk today of standing on our rights. Jesus calls us to self-denial in our reaction to those who have wronged us. Pray for grace to turn the other cheek when you are wronged.**

The Lord Jesus goes on to tell us to give to him who asks us and to freely lend our possessions (42). This does not mean that we should encourage those who are lazy (cp. 2 Thessalonians 3:10) but that we must help those who are in genuine need (1 John 3:16–18).

Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'

The heading printed over these verses in the New King James Version says, 'Jesus Forbids Oaths.' That is too simplistic an interpretation of these verses. The belief that these verses forbid the swearing on oath in a court of law is not based on a correct interpretation of Scripture. The high priest placed the Lord Jesus under oath at his trial (26:63–64) and Abraham made his servant swear on oath (Genesis 24:2–4, 8–9).

God's law states that the name of the Lord must not be used falsely when swearing on oath (Leviticus 19:12; cp. Deuteronomy 6:13). The scribes and Pharisees had developed a perverse theology of oath-taking. They taught that certain oaths were solemn and binding, especially those in which God's name was invoked, but others were not binding. They would swear by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, by the head, by the temple, etc. (34–36; 23:16–22). This was an escape clause to allow lies and deception but Jesus here forbids this evil practice.

We are now reaping the harvest of godlessness in Britain. There is an epidemic of lies among us. A senior civil servant coined the phrase that he was being 'economical with the truth' when he lied in court. Many thousands of employees take paid sick-leave when really they are quite able to work. They lie to their doctor and to their employer. Many leading politicians are liars and deceivers.

Christians must be different! Jesus said, '*Let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No."*' (37; cp. James 5:12). We must always be truthful, honest and reliable. We must never make promises that we know we cannot keep. God sees us and hears us! **If you are deceiving others by duplicity, lies or half-truths, shame on you! Repent of your sin and seek cleansing and forgiveness through the blood of Christ.**

*Holy Spirit, truth divine!
Dawn upon this soul of mine;
Word of God and inward Light
Wake my spirit, clear my sight.*

(Samuel Longfellow)

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise; they are printed in italics. **If you have a different translation of the Bible, you will still be able to use these notes.**
- The number in brackets eg. (6) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (23:16) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Matthew, this would be Matthew chapter 23, verse 16.
- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).
- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word 'confer'.

The word 'Lord' in the Old Testament

The Hebrew words translated '*Lord*' are:

- 'Adon' which is used with reference to men (Genesis 42:33; 45:8–9), and with reference to God (Joshua 3:11,13; Psalm 8:1).
- 'Adonai' literally 'my Lord' (Exodus 4:10; Psalm 68:19).
- 'Yahweh' ('Jehovah'), the sacred name for God, considered by many Jews as too sacred to utter. They regularly used 'Adonai' in its place. 'Yah' is a contracted form of 'Yahweh' (Isaiah 12:2; 26:4). The word '*Alleluia*' or '*Hallelujah*' (Revelation 19:1–6) means 'Praise Yah'.

Dale Ralph Davis writes with reference to Exodus 3:12,14: 'In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence and "Yahweh" captures and summarizes that thought – **he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be.** "Yahweh" means the God who is present to help ... "Yahweh" is a personal name, while "the LORD" is a title ... there's a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can't convey' (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE – PSALMS 1–12, page 8).

NB. Our Bible translators have made it possible for us to recognise when 'Yahweh' is used in the Old Testament. 'Yahweh' is printed '*LORD*', whereas 'Adon' or 'Adonai' are printed '*Lord*'.

I cried to the LORD with my voice, and he heard me

The title of this psalm indicates that it was written when David was a fugitive after Absalom's rebellion (see 2 Samuel, chapters 15 and 16). His own son had seized the throne of Israel and the heartbroken king poured out his soul to God. David was in deep trouble and he felt overwhelmed by the opposition to himself. He prayed, '*LORD, how they have increased who trouble me! Many are they who rise up against me. Many are they who say of me, "There is no help for him in God"*' (1-2). The Lord Jesus experienced similar taunts as he hung on the cross (Matthew 27:41-44).

The child of God must expect to pass through periods of trouble and difficulty. Some who despise our Christian faith may say that our religion is useless and that God has failed us. Satan will also whisper doubt and despair into our minds. At such times we should cry out to God as David did. He had many enemies '*but*' That little word in verse 3 makes all the difference! He had the Almighty God as his Friend and Protector! David's enemies had questioned God's care for him saying, '*There is no help for him in God*' (2), but he cried to the Lord for help. David had left Jerusalem, the '*holy hill*' where the tabernacle was situated. He testified, '*I cried to the LORD with my voice, and he heard me from his holy hill*' (4).

There was help for David in God and there is always help for us in God. When we are sorely tried and troubled, we may be tempted to ask ourselves, 'What's the use of praying?' This is the very time we need to pray though we are torn apart by loss, heartache or disappointment. The Lord will hear us!

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit!
O what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.* (Joseph M. Scriven)

Whoever divorces his wife ...

(Additional reading:- Matthew 19:1-10)

Millions of people in the western world have rejected God's ordinance of marriage. They move in together to live as 'partners'. Over a third of all marriages in Britain end in divorce. The terrible effects of this rejection of God's Word has brought misery and instability to many. God is saving those who were divorced and remarried when they were unbelievers. We must not treat them as if they had committed the unpardonable sin but rather welcome them into our churches. Space forbids a thorough treatment in these notes of the Biblical teaching on marriage, divorce and re-marriage.

The Lord Jesus said, '*Whoever divorces his wife ...*' for any reason apart from sexual immorality (31) disobeys the Word of God. Moses allowed a man who found some uncleanness in his wife to divorce her (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Moses permitted divorce in such cases because of the hardness of their hearts, *but from the beginning it was not so* (19:8). This was a solemn measure to protect the rejected wife from destitution and to prevent unlawful divorce. The Pharisees misused this concession, allowing divorce for very flimsy reasons (cp. 19:3). Those marrying anyone found to be guilty of adultery also became guilty of adultery. Jesus indicated that the wronged partner would be allowed to remarry. Situations later arose in churches where a spouse deserted the marriage for no valid reason. The other marriage partner was allowed divorce and re-marriage (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).

Marriage is a covenant (Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14) in which solemn promises are made before God, including the promise to remain faithful until parted by death. The wicked influences of the world have crept into the church and adultery among professing Christians is becoming common. In what kind of spiritual state are we if we can so lightly break those sacred promises and disregard God's Word? **Let us seek God's grace each day to be faithful to his Word and to the one to whom we have committed ourselves in marriage.**

Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her

The Lord Jesus now refers to the seventh commandment (27) and shows that adultery begins in the heart (28; cp. 15:19) and is set in motion through the eyes (Genesis 39:7; 2 Samuel 11:2–4; 2 Peter 2:14). Jesus said, ‘*Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart*’ (28). There would be few marriages without a mutual attraction between men and women, but we must be most careful not to allow physical attraction to become the occasion of sinful desire.

Sex is a wonderful gift, but it is only permitted within marriage! Adultery breaks not only the seventh commandment but also the eighth (stealing another person’s spouse) and the tenth (coveting someone else’s wife/husband). Sexual sin no longer shocks the majority of people. Television programmes, films, videos, books and magazines which encourage sexual lust and adulterous thoughts are produced by the million. Christians are not immune from this sin! Sinclair Ferguson aptly points out that ‘sexual relations have become the door through which many professing Christians walk to their destruction.’ (KINGDOM LIFE IN A FALLEN WORLD, page 119)

The Lord Jesus went on to say, ‘*If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell*’ (29). Jesus does not mean us to take this or verse 30 literally! We could still sin with the left eye, even if deprived of the right. What he means is that if you are having problems with sin, you must take urgent and drastic action. You must avoid anything that you know will encourage adulterous thoughts and desires. If you have books that do this, burn them! Cancel the newspaper that peddles sordid stories, get rid of your television if you cannot control the programmes you watch. Beware of using the internet to download pornography; your sin will find you out! **The way of adultery leads to misery and hell (30) but the way of purity leads to heaven and to seeing God (8). Be sure to keep yourself on the path of righteousness.**

The LORD sustained me

Trouble and trials can cause sleepless nights. David had every reason to lose sleep. He had lost his throne and many had turned against him. He cried out to God, who heard him and brought peace to his troubled soul so that he could sleep. He woke up refreshed, declaring, ‘*The LORD sustained me*’ (5). The same Hebrew word translated ‘*sustained*’ is found in Psalm 37:17, 24 where it is translated ‘*upholds*’: *The LORD upholds the righteous*. This is a wonderful truth which should encourage us. We are often painfully aware of our own weakness, but the almighty, strong God upholds us. David also expressed his confidence for the future, ‘*I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around*’ (6).

David’s call upon God to ‘*arise*’ (7) was a battle-cry used by Israel on their journey to the promised land (Numbers 10:35). David uses the past tense in verse 7 because he was confident of the Lord’s deliverance: ‘*For you have struck all my enemies on the cheekbone; you have broken the teeth of the ungodly.*’ Absalom was defeated and David was restored to his throne (2 Samuel chapters 18 and 19).

When all seems hopeless, let us remember that *salvation belongs to the LORD* (8; cp. Jonah 2:9). God sovereignly works to save us and to bring us through every trial, and his blessing will be upon us (9). **The Lord doesn’t promise us a life free from problems, trouble or difficulty, but he does promise to be with us in all our circumstances, good or evil (eg. Hebrews 13:5–6). Let us rejoice in him and give him thanks.**

*A sovereign Protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand.
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles, and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend;
And walls of salvation surround
The soul he delights to defend.* (Augustus Toplady)

The LORD has set apart for himself him who is godly

Spurgeon describes this psalm as ‘another choice flower from the garden of affliction’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). We read here of David calling on God in a time of distress: ‘*Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness!*’ (1). Let David teach us how to be confident that God will hear our prayers.

- He focuses his thoughts on God’s character and he affirms that God is his ‘*righteousness*’ (1). He is slandered and persecuted but he knows that God will vindicate him and show him to be right. Dale Ralph Davis observes: ‘Biblical prayer seems to ponder God a good deal more than we are prone to do’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE, page 52).
- He encourages himself by remembering past deliverances as he prayed for divine help: ‘*You have relieved me when I was in distress*’ (1).
- He remembers that God has chosen him: *The LORD has set apart for himself him who is godly. The LORD will hear when I call to him* (3; cp. Psalm 3:4). God gave his own Son to die for us. He is our heavenly Father and he will hear us when we call upon him (cp. Romans 8:32; 1 John 5:14–15).

David also speaks to certain groups of people (2–6); we will be considering these verses tomorrow. He is not only confident in prayer but he enjoys great gladness in his heart (7). He acknowledges that this gladness comes from God: ‘*You have put gladness in my heart*’ (7). The believer sorrows over his own sins and for his fellow Christians suffering persecution; he also sorrows over the plight of those who are lost. Trials and troubles bring sorrow, but we also have joy and gladness for all the blessings of salvation.

The Lord watches over the godly and cares for them (8). We cannot lose our salvation and God is with us in all kinds of danger. God has given us eternal life and no one is able to snatch us from his hand (John 10:27–30). **We are much blessed; let us praise him!**

First be reconciled to your brother

In his statements, ‘*You have heard it said ... but I say to you*’ (21–22, 27–28, 31–34, 38, 43–44), the Lord Jesus goes beyond the letter of the Law to the spirit of the Law. Those who murder are worthy of death, but murder and other sins begin in the heart (cp. 15:19). Murder in the heart may show itself in sinful anger against another person and it often leads to murder with the tongue (character assassination, 22). ‘*Raca*’ is an Aramaic word of contempt meaning ‘empty head’ or ‘blockhead’. The Greek adjective ‘*mōros*’ translated ‘*fool*’ in the same verse (22) means one who is morally worthless.

Scripture warns us against fools (eg. Psalm 14:1; Proverbs 1:7), but Jesus here has in mind the deliberate belittling and despising of someone coming from hatred in our hearts. If we do this, we have all the seeds of murder within and we are *in danger of hell-fire*. You may wonder how a Christian could be in such danger? The point is that if we continue with such sinful attitudes, we must question our salvation.

Jesus goes on to give two illustrations to show the importance of our relationship to others. If we have offended a brother or sister, our worship is not acceptable to God until we have put matters right. Jesus said, ‘*First be reconciled to your brother*’ (23–24). He then speaks of two men going to court to settle a dispute that they have between them. It is far better to settle the matter before they reach the court (25–26). Sinclair Ferguson points out that ‘animosity is a time bomb; we do not know when it will “go off”. We must deal with it quickly, before the consequences of our bitterness get completely out of control’ (KINGDOM LIFE IN A FALLEN WORLD, page 118).

These verses are very solemn and searching. Are you nursing hatred (murder) in your heart? Are you filled with hatred or pride so that you despise certain people? Are you refusing to be reconciled to someone in your church? **Oh, beware! Your Christian life will be blighted if you continue in such a state.** – ‘*First be reconciled to your brother.*’

*Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness
of the scribes and Pharisees ...*

The teaching of the Law and the Prophets was essential to the Jewish religion but the scribes and Pharisees had wrongly interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures. They opposed the Lord Jesus, believing that he was seeking to destroy the Law and the Prophets. Jesus made it quite clear that he came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets (17). He did this by his perfect life, and the words of the prophets were fulfilled by his death and resurrection for sinners (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46). He solemnly declared (*‘For assuredly, I say to you ...’*) that the Law must be fulfilled to the very jot (the smallest Hebrew letter) and tittle (the tiny hook which distinguishes one Hebrew letter from another). He stressed the importance of all the commandments (18–19; cp. 22:34–40).

When we follow Christ we are not free to indulge in sin but we are free from the power of sin so that we are able to obey God. The Lord Jesus said, *‘Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’* (20). Their religion was very shallow and was only concerned with outward show; it may have impressed men, but it did not impress God (6:1–5, 16; cp. 23:5, 25–28). They glorified themselves (eg. Luke 18:9–14) and undermined God’s Word with their man-made traditions (eg. 15:3–9). The scribes and Pharisees were proud and self-righteous but we must never be like that. God knows our hearts!

Christian righteousness comes from a transformed heart through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26–27). It leads to humility and it glorifies God (3,16). The remainder of the Sermon on the Mount shows just how different our righteousness must be from that of hypocrites or followers of false religion. **Do you belong to the kingdom of heaven? If you do, you will be concerned to lead the righteous life that Jesus taught us to live!**

LORD, lift up the light of your countenance upon us

David speaks to certain groups of people in verses 2 to 6 of Psalm 4:

- He warns the slanderers who spread lies about him asking them, *‘How long ... will you turn my glory to shame?’ How long will you love worthlessness and seek falsehood?* (2). He tells them that *the LORD has set apart for himself him who is godly* (3). Dale Ralph Davis helpfully points out that David ‘shows us here that the weapon against slander is to remember how God regards you, to hold on to what he has said about you’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE, page 54). When we are slandered, we should remember that God loves us and has chosen us and nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:31–39).
- He speaks to those who are angry. *‘Be angry and do not sin’* (4; cp. Ephesians 4:26). It is right to be angry about injustice and other forms of wickedness, but anger can easily lead us into a sinful rage. Righteous anger is controlled and is never motivated by pride or selfishness. Most human anger is sinful, especially when we lose our temper and say or do things which we may later regret. We can avoid sinning when we are angry by keeping our thoughts to ourselves and by keeping our mouths shut. *‘Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the LORD’* (4–5).
- There is also advice for those who are in despair, saying. *‘Who will show us any good?’* (6). They are discouraged by various troubles and wonder what trial will next come upon them. David takes part of the benediction so well known to God’s people and turns it into prayer. *‘LORD, lift up the light of your countenance upon us’* (cp. Numbers 6:24–26). **Let us always turn care into prayer. Casting all your care upon him, for he cares for you** (1 Peter 5:7).

The LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man

David calls upon God to hear his words and his meditation (1). The word ‘*meditation*’ suggests that David gave a great deal of thought to his prayers. This is a rebuke to us because our prayers are often hurried and shallow. Listen to Spurgeon on ‘*Consider my meditation.*’ — ‘If I have asked that which is right, give it to me; if I have omitted to ask that which I most needed, fill up the vacancy in my prayer’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). The word translated ‘meditation’ can also mean ‘groaning’. David groaned because of wicked people and their behaviour. There are times when we cry in anguish from the heart and we do expect the Lord to hear us because he is our King and our God (2–3). We belong to him and he loves us (Romans 8:31–35).

God’s attitude to the wicked is different (4–6)! David says to God, ‘*You hate all workers of iniquity ... the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.*’ Dale Ralph Davis writes: ‘No tame God here! How vigorous God is in his righteousness! Verses 5b and 6b sort of blow up the myth about God “hating sin yet loving the sinner.” He does not hate the evil done but evildoers (5b); he does not detest merely bloodthirsty deeds but bloodthirsty men (6b). What holy, praise-worthy hatred! You do not pray to a bland blob! And because David knows what Yahweh loves and what he hates, he has real hope that he will come to his rescue’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE, page 64).

The hatred of God towards sinners magnifies his mercy to them and encourages us to pray for them. Wicked Manasseh provoked God to anger with his idolatry, rebellion and murders (2 Kings 21:16) but God had mercy on him (2 Chronicles 33:12–13). We once had no regard for God and were wicked, but he has had mercy on us (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). The Lord Jesus commands us to love our enemies and to do good to those who hate us (Matthew 5:44). ***Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out! (Romans 11:33). Let us worship and adore him!***

Let your light so shine before men

The Lord Jesus described the attitude of the world to Christians in the last Beatitude. He goes on to use the emblems of salt and light to describe the influence that believers should have on the world. He said, ‘*You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world*’ (13–14).

- *You are the salt of the earth* (13). Salt is used to combat decay and it is rubbed into meat to preserve it; this is still the case where we do not have fridges and freezers. This world is corrupt and rotten through sin and rebellion against God. We see and feel the effects of this all around us with misery and suffering that this corruption has brought.

The influence of godly men and women restrains moral and spiritual decay. The profane conversation of unbelievers is often restrained when they know that a believer comes among them and that some will apologise for their bad language. We are not to react against the corruption around us by withdrawing from the world into evangelical ‘ghettos’. If salt loses its taste, it is useless; we must keep ourselves from being tainted by the world (James 1:27) if we are to point people to the Lord. The world will not be changed for the better by political programmes, but by Christians living as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

- *You are the light of the world* (14). Jesus is ‘*the light of the world*’ (John 8:12; 9:5), and his people possess his light and so themselves become lights (Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 2:14–15). Light is an emblem of the knowledge of God (Psalm 36:9) and it brings goodness, righteousness and truth (Ephesians 5:9), joy and gladness (Psalm 97:11–12; Isaiah 9:2–3). Darkness is a symbol of ignorance, depravity and despair (4:16; Ephesians 4:17–19; 5:11–12). We must not hide our light but shine brightly in the darkness around us. Are you ‘*salt*’ and ‘*light*’ in your home, in your place of work? **Seek, with God’s help, to live so that your light will shine in this dark world. Your light is desperately needed!** *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven* (16).

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

The last Beatitude is longer than the others but is different in that it does not describe the character of believers, but what happens to them. The Christian must be a peacemaker but a righteous life often leads to conflict as Jesus points out in verse 10. Many Jews believed that suffering and persecution were an indication of God's displeasure (cp. Luke 13:1–5). Jesus contradicted this, saying, '*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.* He warned his disciples to expect persecution. He moves from the third to the second person in verses 11 and 12: '*Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you.*'

Jesus warned that the world will hate us (John 15:18–20) and the apostle Paul wrote, '*All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*' (2 Timothy 3:12). We must expect to suffer for Christ (Philippians 1:29; 1 Peter 4:12–14). John Bunyan was imprisoned for his faith and he wrote his great classic 'Pilgrim's Progress' from his prison cell. He illustrated the fact that Christians will suffer for their faith when he described the trial and martyrdom of Faithful in Vanity Fair. Persecution comes in different ways – some Christians are reproached and slandered (11), some lose their employment and others are imprisoned or killed.

How can we rejoice when we suffer for Christ? We know that the Lord is with us in all our trials. Jesus said, '*Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*' (12). The Christian's suffering is not for ever and heaven awaits us (Romans 8:18). Paul and Silas were flogged and fastened in stocks in a filthy dungeon but they prayed and sang praises to God (Acts 16:22–25). **Have you been complaining about God's dealings with you? Are you passing through a time of trial? Start counting your blessings and think about all the benefits that are yours in Christ. You will soon find yourself rejoicing in God and praising him!**

Let those also who love your name be joyful in you

The wicked are contrasted with the righteous (4–12) as in the preceding psalms. God is holy and he hates wickedness. Among the sins mentioned in these verses are pride, falsehood, deceit, violence (5–6), evil speaking and rebellion against the Lord (9–10). Those who love the Lord also hate these sins and will keep themselves from them.

David was encouraged by remembering the wonderful mercy of God and he worshipped God *in fear* (7), that is with awe and reverence). There is nothing flippant about spiritual worship. He was also very much aware of his need to depend upon God and he prayed, '*Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before my face*' (8). This is how we should pray when we are being tested and tried. We need always for God to lead us in his righteousness.

The godly man loves the house of the Lord (7–8); he trusts in God and he loves the name of God (11). The name of God speaks of his holy character and the Christian loves him for all that he is in his glorious Person. Holiness, faith and love for God never bring misery, but great joy and the blessing of God (12). We must be sober (1 Thessalonians 5:6,8; Titus 2:6,12; 1 Peter 1:13; 5:8); this means to be serious-minded but it should never shut out joy from our lives. We can be serious as well as being joyful! The kingdom of God *is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 14:17). *Let those also who love your name be joyful in you* (11).

David prayed for God's people (11) but he also prayed against his enemies (10). When God judges the wicked, he puts things right; this is our confidence (cp. 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10). **The Lord is our Defender and he surrounds us with his favour as with a shield** (12). **We can therefore rejoice in the Lord always** (Philippians 4:4)? **Are you a joyful Christian?**

My soul also is greatly troubled

This is the first of the Penitential Psalms (the others are Psalms 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143). In this psalm we find David in very deep distress because of personal sin. He writes, '*My bones are troubled ... my soul also is greatly troubled*' (2–3). He knew that he deserved God's anger and prayed that the Lord would not chasten him in his *hot displeasure* (1). When God chastens us, he does so for our correction because he loves us (Hebrews 12:6).

David keenly felt the effects of his own sin upon him. He mourned the loss of God's presence and he prayed, '*But you, O LORD — How long? Return, O LORD, deliver me!*' (3–4). David was aware of his own weakness and he called on God to have mercy on him (2,4). He wanted to praise God and his voice would not be heard if he were in the grave (5).

We live at a time when there is very little weeping or mourning because of sin and the loss of God's presence. There is much emphasis on joy (and we should rejoice – see yesterday's notes), but there can be no genuine joy unless the Holy Spirit has first ploughed up our hearts, convicting us of sin and bringing us to repentance. The Christian life is a battleground! We have to contend with attacks from the devil, from the world, and from the remains of sin within our own hearts. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8). God's grace is wonderful in every way and we should rejoice in free forgiveness, but remember that it is not cheap. It cost the Lord Jesus death on the cross to save us! If we have a casual attitude towards our own sin and never grieve over it, God will surely chasten us if we belong to him.

David closes with confidence in the face of his enemies. He told them that the Lord had heard his weeping and would receive his prayer (8–9). **The Lord never turns away the penitent believer. Have you been backsliding in heart? Are you grieving over your sin? Return to the Lord and he will forgive you and restore to you the joy of your salvation.**

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God

We were once without hope because we were alienated from God (Ephesians 2:12). When we come to faith in Christ, we rejoice in the mercy of God, who *delights in mercy* (Micah 7:18). We too should *delight in mercy*. If we are lacking in compassion and if we are not ready to forgive those who have wronged us, we are not right with God! *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy* (7). Let us seek always to be kind, sympathetic, merciful and forgiving (Colossians 3:12–13).

Jesus went on to say, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (8; cp. Psalm 73:1). The word 'heart' as used in this verse is to do with our whole being and includes our affections, emotions, mind and will. The human heart is a cesspit of iniquity (Mark 7:21–23) but the godly are poor in spirit and mourn over their sin. Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead so that we could be cleansed from our sin (1 John 1:7). To be pure in heart is to keep ourselves from sin and hypocrisy (cp. Psalm 24:3–4); it makes us love our fellow Christians (1 Timothy 1:5; 1 Peter 1:22). The pure in heart shall see the Lord Jesus in heaven. *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure* (1 John 3:2–3).

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (9). Christians enjoy peace with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). God is *the God of peace* (Hebrews 13:20) and Jesus is *the Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6). A peacemaker is not a coward who opts for peace at any price. We must seek to turn those who do wrong from the error of their ways. We must go out of our way to live at peace with others, but never at the expense of truth or of compromise with sin. (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14). If we are to be peacemakers, we must always keep our tongues from gossip and we will always endeavour *to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:3). If our hearts are not pure, if we are not right with God, we will not be channels of Christ's peace. **Are you a peacemaker or a troublemaker? God knows your heart; what does he see there?**

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

The third Beatitude echoes Psalm 37:11. What does it mean to be ‘meek’ (5)? It means having a gentle and submissive disposition which accepts God’s dealings with us as good, without murmuring or resisting (cp. James 1:21). It is being submissive when we are provoked, being willing to suffer wrong rather than to inflict it. We must not confuse meekness with weakness. Moses was very meek, but he was not weak (Numbers 12:3). The Lord Jesus is meek, but he is also ‘*the Lion of the tribe of Judah*’ (Matthew 11:28; Revelation 5:5).

All of God’s elect must be meek and commit themselves to the righteous Judge when they are wronged (Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 2:20–23; 3:15). Abraham and Isaac are examples of this (Genesis 13:8–9; 26:15–22). Jesus said, ‘*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*’ (5). The prophecies of the Old Testament about the ‘earth’ find their ultimate fulfilment in the new earth which the meek shall inherit (2 Peter 3:13).

Millions search for happiness, security and peace in our troubled and uncertain world, but they do not seek for righteousness! Jesus said, ‘*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*’ (6). What is this righteousness? It is being right with God and leading a holy life which is pleasing to him.

The words ‘*hunger and thirst*’ indicate desperation. Do you have an intense desire to be holy? If you have, it will show in your life! You will love the secret place of prayer and you will delight in the Word of God – reading it, hearing it preached, and obeying it. You will be eager to worship with God’s people and you will shun everything that would hinder your walk with God (eg. questionable or sinful activities, keeping evil company).

The pathway of blessing according to Jesus is not to be found in chasing after sensational spiritual experiences, but in hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Those who thirst for the things of God will be filled! How are you doing?

My defence is of God

David probably wrote this psalm when he was a fugitive, when King Saul was seeking to kill him (1 Samuel, chapters 19–26). Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin and the title of this psalm indicates that Cush, a Benjamite had slandered David. Slander destroys a good reputation and is capable of inflicting deep wounds (2). The Lord Jesus warns us that there are those who will seek to harm us by spreading lies about us (Matthew 5:11–12). Spurgeon suggests that this psalm may be called ‘The Song of the Slandered Saint’. He rightly observes: ‘It is only at the tree laden with fruit that men throw stones. If we would live without being slandered we must wait till we get to heaven’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

What should we do if we are victims of malicious lies?

- We should pray. David committed his cause to the Lord. We should not bottle up our troubles but bring them to the Lord in prayer, asking him to vindicate us (1).
- We should examine our own heart. David was not self-righteous and he called down a curse upon himself if he were really guilty of the things that were being said about him (3–5).
- We should be encouraged that *God is angry with the wicked every day* and that he will certainly judge them (11–16). David’s enemies were raging against him and he called on God to deal with them in his anger (6).
- When we are slandered, we should encourage ourselves that God is for us and that he cares for us. With David we can say, ‘*My defence is of God, who saves the upright in heart*’ (9–10). **Let us always come to the Lord in prayer when we are slandered or persecuted. He is righteous and he will deal with our enemies. Let us sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High (17).**

*Rejoice, believer, in the Lord,
Who makes your cause his own!
The hope that’s built upon his Word
Can ne’er be overthrown* (John Newton)

Oh, let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end

Have you noticed the recurring theme of enemies, oppressors and wicked people in these psalms that we have been reading? We live in a rebel world where there is hatred for God and his Anointed, the Lord Jesus (Psalm 2:1–3). Jesus warns us that we too will be hated in this world by those who hate him (John 15:18–25).

The persecution of Christians has perhaps been greater in the past fifty years than in any time since the apostolic era. The Lord's people are being imprisoned, tortured and killed in some countries and opposition to God's laws and his people is becoming more vocal and strident in Britain and other western countries. Christians have lost their jobs and livelihood because of their refusal to bow to the evil practices of modern society.

Do you feel sorrow for God's oppressed people and anger at the increasing wickedness and corruption seen in all levels of society? Do you ever pray like David prayed? – *'Oh, let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, but establish the just'* (the 'righteous'; 9). David's enemies were raging against him and he called on God to deal with them in his anger (6). Dale Ralph Davis comments, 'As David makes plain in verses 6b–8a, there is a doctrine that brings hope to tried and battered servants of God and it is the doctrine of judgment ... There is a time coming when God will put things right' (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE, page 87).

Those who are guilty of vile atrocities and seem to escape human justice for their wickedness will be not escape divine judgment. Let us praise God for his justice and pray much for our oppressed and persecuted Christian brothers and sisters.

*Thy kingdom come, O God,
Thy rule, O Christ begin!
Break with thine iron rod
The tyrannies of sin.*

(Lewis Hensley)

Blessed are the poor in spirit

The Beatitudes (verses 3 to 12) describe the blessedness of those who belong to God's kingdom (cp. 4:23). The only people who find true and lasting happiness are the godly (see Psalm 1). The Lord Jesus places the emphasis on 'being' rather than 'doing'. Our attitude is all important! The Beatitudes do not stand in isolation from each other, but are inter-connected, eg. If we are to 'mourn' over sin, we must be 'poor in spirit.' Those who 'mourn' over sin will surely 'hunger and thirst for righteousness.'

The world says, 'Blessed are the rich' but the Lord Jesus declares, '*Blessed are the poor in spirit*' (3). This blessing has nothing to do with material wealth but with the recognition of our spiritual poverty. The church of Laodicea was rich and self-sufficient but they were really in a poor and wretched spiritual state (Revelation 3:17). By contrast, the church of Smyrna was poverty-stricken, but in spiritual things they were rich (Revelation 2:9).

Those who are 'poor in spirit' are very much aware of their need as sinners. They cry, '*God be merciful to me a sinner!*' (Luke 18:13). Their pride has been broken and they have a humble and contrite spirit (Isaiah 57:15). Hendriksen observes, 'They realise their own utter helplessness (Romans 7:24), expect nothing from self, everything from God' (COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW, page 269). How different this is from the false gospel of self-esteem which is being peddled today! God's kingdom is for '*the poor in spirit.*'

How can those who mourn be blessed (happy)? The mourning in the second Beatitude is not that of bereavement. It is the mourning and grieving over sin of those who have recognised and felt their spiritual poverty (cp. Psalm 51:4). It is the godly sorrow produced by repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10) that leads to forgiveness of sin. **Those who mourn over sin are blessed because they know the precious comfort of God. Are you poor in spirit? Do you mourn over your sins and those of a rebellious, wicked world?**

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5 to 7)

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus both preached, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (3:2; 4:17). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes the character of those who belong to that kingdom and how they should live. His standards are very high, impossibly high for unbelievers. William Hendriksen helpfully suggests the following divisions for the sermon:

1. The Citizens of the Kingdom (5:2–16)
 - a. Their character and blessedness (2–12)
 - b. Their relationship to the world (13–16)
2. The Righteousness of the Kingdom (5:17 to 7:12)
3. An Exhortation to enter the Kingdom (7:13–27)

NB. Some of our readings in the Sermon on the Mount contain no more than two or three verses. Do read the cross references given in the notes which expand on the teaching of the verses in question – you will then find that you have enough of God's Word to take in for the day. I suggest that you do look up the references in the notes, however, at all times and not just for Matthew chapters 5 to 7. You will then receive greater profit from the readings. Never rush your Bible readings but prayerfully wait on God as you turn to his holy Word.

Recommended books on the Sermon on the Mount

I heartily commend Studies in the Sermon on the Mount (2 volumes) by Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as the most helpful and practical books explaining and applying the Sermon on the Mount. My copies were published by Inter Varsity Fellowship in 1962.

Kingdom Life in a Fallen World by Sinclair Ferguson (Nav Press).

The Beatitudes for Today by John Blanchard, published by Day One is an excellent exposition of the Beatitudes and also has some background information regarding the Sermon on the Mount and a warning against Dispensationalism which teaches that the Sermon does not apply to Christians today.

What is man that you are mindful of him?

Psalm 8 is a wonderful expression of worship, adoration and admiration for the living God, the Creator of the universe. David looked out at the night sky and he was overwhelmed at the vastness of God's creation (1–3). He was filled with a great sense of reverence and awe and he exclaimed, 'O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!' (1). The name of God speaks of his glorious character and we should think much about him. Have you noticed the way in which the Muslim has great reverence for the name of his god, Allah? How much more should we speak reverently of the triune God!

God has given strength out of the mouths of babes and infants to silence his enemies (2).. This strength may refer to praise. David expresses his amazement that such a great and exalted God should care for man: 'What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?' (4). How very wonderful! God made man mortal, a little lower than the angels but has crowned him with glory and honour, giving him lordship over creation (4–5).

This psalm also speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ. – *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour* (Hebrews 2:9; cp. 1 Corinthians 15:27). God sent his holy Son into this world, to take human flesh and to die for sinful man. 'What is man that you are mindful of him?' **Gods grace is wonderful! Let us worship him and adore him! O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!** (1, 8).

*How wondrous are the works of God,
Displayed through all the world abroad!
Immensely great, immensely small!
Yet one strange work exceeds them all.*

*Almighty God sighed human breath!
The Lord of life experienced death!
How it was done we can't discuss,
But this we know, 'twas done for us.*

(Joseph Hart)

MATTHEW

19 JANUARY

Matthew 4:12–25

Matthew was one of the twelve disciples (10:3; Acts 1:13). He was a tax-collector before he followed Christ (9:9; cp. Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:29 where he is called Levi). He wrote his Gospel (good news) to convince his Jewish readers that the Lord Jesus was indeed the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. He refers to the fulfilment of over sixty Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus (eg. 27:35).

Matthew's Gospel is sometimes called 'The Gospel of the Kingdom' because of its frequent references to the kingdom of heaven. There are five great teaching passages which are followed by '*when Jesus had ended these sayings*' or similar words (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). These passages are contained in chapters 5 to 7; 10; 13;18; and 24 to 25. They are linked by action passages found in chapters 8 to 9; 11 to 12; 14 to 17; and 19 to 22.

Outline of Matthew

- | | | |
|---|---|---------------|
| 1. Birth of Jesus | – | 1:1 to 2:23 |
| 2. Baptism and temptation of Jesus | – | 3:1 to 4:11 |
| 3. Ministry of Jesus in Galilee | – | 4:12 to 18:35 |
| 4. Journey to Jerusalem | – | 19:1 to 20:34 |
| 5. Jesus in Jerusalem | – | 21:1 to 25:46 |
| 6. Events leading to the death of Jesus | – | 26:1 to 27:26 |
| 7. The crucifixion of Jesus | – | 27:27–66 |
| 8. The resurrection of Jesus | – | 28:1–20 |

Commendation: Many commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew have been published since that of William Hendriksen which was written in 1973 (published by Banner of Truth). I find Hendriksen thorough in his scholarship and warm in his application of the text and I still find him invaluable in all of his commentaries.

Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men

A year had passed since the temptation of Jesus (events recorded in John 2:1 to 4:43 took place before we come to verse 12 in this chapter). Jesus had encountered hostility and rejection in Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum (13: Luke 4:28–31). He preached in Galilee as prophesied by Isaiah (14–16; cp. Isaiah 9:1–2). His ministry was accompanied by many different kinds of miracles, demonstrating his power over sickness and demons (23–25). Herod Antipas had imprisoned John the Baptist but the Lord Jesus was now preaching the same message of repentance to far greater crowds (17; cp. 3:1). Wicked men may silence God's messengers, but they cannot silence God!

Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist before following Christ. Both he and Peter had followed Christ before John's imprisonment (John 1:35,40–41). Jesus now called them to leave their fishing business and to devote their time to a far greater work than catching fish, that of soul-winning. He said, '*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*' (19). Together with James and John, they responded '*immediately*' (20–22).

Millions of people still sit in spiritual darkness (16). Their minds are blinded by Satan, the god of this world, so that they cannot see or understand the glorious gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:3–4). **Are you deeply concerned at the plight of those who are lost, who have no hope unless they turn to our precious Saviour?** Do you long to win souls to Christ? Do you feel inadequate in your attempts to witness to others? Take heart from the words of the Lord Jesus, '*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*' Follow Jesus as a disciple and submit to his will as it is revealed in the Bible. Seek to lead a godly life and he will prepare you and use you in his service.

*O strengthen me, that while I stand
Firm on the Rock and strong in thee,
I may stretch out a loving hand
To wrestlers with the troubled sea!*

(F. R. Havergal)

All these things I will give you if you will ... worship me

Following his Baptism, the Holy Spirit led the Lord Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. He overcame temptation when hungry and weak after fasting for forty days and forty nights (1–2). He resisted the temptation to avoid the path of suffering and the cross. Let us consider the way in which the devil tempted Jesus:

- He tempted Jesus to doubt the Father’s power to sustain him and to take matters into his own hands. God had said at his baptism, *‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’* (3:17). Satan said to Jesus, *‘If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread’* (3). Jesus could have performed a miracle to satisfy his own hunger, but he did not do so. In Eden, Satan appealed to the appetite of Adam and Eve by dangling the forbidden fruit before them and they had an abundance of food in the garden. They failed when tempted, Jesus conquered temptation in a barren wilderness..
- The devil then tempted Jesus to sinfully presume on God the Father’s care of him if he were the Son of God. He took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple said, *‘Throw yourself down.’ For it is written, “He shall give his angels charge concerning you ...”* (5–6).
- He showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. He promised, *‘All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me’* (9). How preposterous of the devil to tempt Christ to worship him! The Lord Jesus knew that he had to go the way of the cross to conquer and to take possession of these things (Philippians 2:5–11; Revelation 11:15).

Satan still attacks God’s Word and tempts us to doubt it. He will misuse the Word of God, as he did with Jesus (6). He will lead us into careless presumption if we do not take care, and he will offer us the world to turn us away from Christ. How did Jesus respond to the enemy? He used the Word of God, quoting from Deuteronomy on each occasion. If you build yourself up in God’s Word of you will be stronger in the face of temptation. **You do not have to give in to temptation. You do not have to sin (Romans 6:14)!**

She was found with child of the Holy Spirit

The Jews knew that the Messiah would come from the line of David (2 Samuel 7:12–13; John 7:40–42) and Matthew begins his gospel by tracing the human descent of the Lord Jesus from Abraham and through David (1). The genealogy contains forty-two generations which are divided into three groups of fourteen (17). Lists of names do not normally make interesting reading, but there are some significant names in this family tree. It contains the names of three Gentile women – Tamar (a Canaanite), Rahab and Ruth (3,6). Christ came to save Gentiles as well as Jews (eg. John 3:16; Ephesians 2:11–18). Others in the list were begotten through adulterous relationships – Perez and Solomon (3,6). The sinless Lord Jesus was identified with sinful men!

The family tree begins and ends with a supernatural birth. God enabled barren Sarah to conceive Isaac in her ninetieth year (Genesis 17:17–19). The word *‘begot’* comes to a halt in verse 16 because the Lord Jesus was not begotten by Joseph. Though he was not the natural father of Jesus, he was the legal father. Mary conceived the Lord Jesus through a supernatural work of God. – *She was found with child of the Holy Spirit* (18,20). The virgin birth of Christ was prophesied in the Old Testament (23; cp. Isaiah 7:14).

The Lord Jesus Christ has always existed! He is the eternal Son of God who was with God in the beginning, becoming a man to save sinners (John 1:1–2,14). The Bible says, *God was manifested in the flesh* (1 Timothy 3:16). *In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily* (Colossians 2:9). **Let us think about this and give him our heartfelt praise!**

*Let earth and heaven combine,
Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine
The incarnate Deity;
Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.*

(Charles Wesley)

He will save his people from their sins

Betrothal in Bible times was far more binding than engagement in the western world today. Vows were made in the presence of witnesses but the couple did not live together as man and wife until after the wedding feast which was usually held several months later. It was during this interval that Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant. Can you imagine the shock and shame that Joseph must have felt? The sense of shame at pregnancy outside of marriage is now sadly absent in the western world. Joseph not wanting to have Mary punished for immorality, planned a quiet divorce from the betrothal (19).

His plans were changed after the angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit (20). He exercised great faith and obedience in taking Mary into his home as commanded by the angel (24–25). Both Mary and himself would have to face the reproach of being branded as immoral people (cp. John 8:41).

The angel told Joseph that Mary would bear a son, saying, ‘*You shall call his name JESUS, for he will save his people from their sins*’ (21). The name ‘*Jesus*’ is from the Greek ‘*Iēsous*’ which is taken from the Hebrew ‘*Jeshua*’, meaning ‘*Jehovah is salvation*’. The Lord Jesus is also called ‘*Immanuel – God with us*’ (23). He came to save poor sinners so that God would be with us and for us instead of being against us. How wonderful!

It is important that we understand that though the Lord Jesus is the *Saviour of the world*, that is Jew and Gentile; (1 John 4:14), not everyone will be saved. He did not come to save everyone but he came to save his people (21; ,his elect’). The Good Shepherd gave his life for his sheep (John 10:11,15). Everyone for whom Christ died will be saved. Theologians call this doctrine ‘*Particular Redemption*’ or ‘*Limited Atonement*’. Jesus died for us because he loved us in particular before he made the world! **Doesn’t this encourage you to love him, to worship him and to obey him?**

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased

John baptised people who had repented of their sin (2,5) so you can imagine his surprise and hesitation when the Lord Jesus asked him for baptism (13–14). Jesus answered him, saying, ‘*Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness*’ (15).

Why did the Lord Jesus submit to baptism when he is sinless and therefore has no need to repent (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5)?

- Baptism speaks of identification. When a believer is baptised, he is identified with Jesus in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4). The sinless Lord Jesus took human flesh to identify himself with sinful mankind, being born under the law (Galatians 4:4). The law of God curses and condemns the sinner. Our sin was laid upon Jesus who has redeemed us from the curse of the law through his death at Calvary (Galatians 3:10–13). God the Father punished him for our sin (Isaiah 53:6). – *He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- Baptism also speaks of suffering. The baptism of Jesus not only symbolised his identification with us, but also his suffering and death to take away our sin. He spoke of a baptism and cup of suffering that he had to endure (20:22; Luke 12:50).

We see the involvement of the whole Trinity in the baptism of Jesus. As the Son came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove and the Father spoke from heaven, ‘*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*’ (16–17). The Father loves the Son (John 3:35) but did not spare him as he died on the cross for sinners (Romans 8:32).

We are much aware of our own sinfulness, failure and shortcomings, but if we are saved, we are ‘*in Christ*’ and we are clothed in his righteousness. We are no longer condemned for our sin (Romans 8:1,34). The Father accepted his perfect sacrifice so that we could be *accepted in the beloved* (Ephesians 1:6). **Let us rejoice and give thanks for our wonderful salvation!**

Bear fruits worthy of repentance

Jesus was probably born towards the end of 5 BC (the calendar has been changed since). It was probably AD 26 when he began his public ministry at the age of about thirty (Luke 3:23). John the Baptist's ministry of preparing the way for Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament (3; cp. Isaiah 40:3).

William Hendriksen writes, 'Everything about John was startling: his sudden emergence, manner of dress, choice of food, preaching, and baptizing' (COMMENTARY OF GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, page 196). John's preaching in the wilderness attracted great crowds of people whom he baptized in the River Jordan after they repented and confessed their sins (3–6).

The Pharisees who prided themselves in their religious zeal, and the Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead also came for baptism. John said to them, '*Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come*' (7) He warned them not to rely on their religious pedigree for salvation but to *bear fruits worthy of repentance* (8–9). John also warned them of God's judgment and wrath (7,12).

'Repentance' is a radical change of mind and heart which completely turns around the direction of our lives. Our repentance is not real if it fails to bear fruit, including the forsaking sin and the leading of a life of obedience to God's holy Word. Have you truly repented of your sins? Does it show in your life by '*fruits worthy of repentance*'?

John declared that there was One coming who was far greater than himself. Jesus would baptize *with the Holy Spirit and fire* and he will punish sinners (11–12). Everyone who repents of their sin and trusts in Christ is baptized in the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13–14). The disciples waited for *the promise of the Father* which was given at Pentecost (Acts 1:4) but we do not need to seek for 'a second blessing'. **Every believer has the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9; Galatians 4:6). Let us live as those whose bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).**

They ... fell down and worshipped him

It is not correct to assume that the Lord Jesus Christ was born in the year zero AD. The men who plotted our calendar were not infallible. The wise men came to Jerusalem during the reign of Herod the Great who died late March/early April in the year 4 BC. This means that the Lord Jesus was born in 5 BC or at the beginning of 4 BC.

There is no evidence in the Bible that there were three wise men or that they were kings. We are not told how many of them came to seek Jesus but we do know that they came from the East, probably Persia or Chaldea (Iraq). The early church father, Origen, suggested that there was a symbolism in the three types of gifts that they brought to the infant Jesus – 'gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and incense, as to God' (see W. Hendriksen's COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW, page 172). It is evident that they were aware of prophecies that a great King would be born to rule the Jews. The Lord led them to Jerusalem and it was he who led them to make the journey. He helped them by providing the star which ultimately led them to their destination.

The wise men travelled far and were diligent in their search to find the Lord Jesus. They knew that they were travelling to see more than an ordinary infant. They came *to worship him* (2). Jesus was no longer in the stable, but in a house and when they found him, *they ... fell down and worshipped him* (11).

If you are not a Christian and if you are really eager to find the Lord, he will not send a star to guide you, but he will bring people into your life and order your circumstances so that you will be led to him. Keep reading your Bible which is God's holy Word. When you have questions about the Christian faith, ask those who are mature Christians to help you. The Lord Jesus promises, '*Seek, and you will find*' (7:7). **Jesus is God and he is worthy of our worship.**

O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

King of the Jews

Matthew wrote his Gospel to convince his Jewish readers that the Lord Jesus was the promised Messiah (see the introduction at the beginning of these notes). The Lord Jesus came as the *'King of the Jews'* (2) but he is also to be worshipped by Gentiles (eg. the wise men). Herod the Great, who was king at the time of the birth of Jesus, had been given the title *'King of the Jews'* by the Romans. You can imagine his alarm and consternation to hear the question of the wise men, *'Where is he who is born the King of the Jews?'* and to hear that they had seen his star in the East (2).

Herod knew of the promise of the Messiah and he summoned the chief priests and scribes to tell him from the Scriptures where the Messiah would be born (4–6). His craftiness in asking the wise men to return and tell him where they found Jesus so that he could worship the infant was also a family trait. The Lord Jesus referred to his son, Herod Antipas as *'that fox'* (Luke 13:32). Herod's plan to kill Jesus was thwarted when God warned the wise men in a dream that they should not return to him (12).

We know from secular history Herod was a power-crazed tyrant who ruthlessly ruled Palestine for forty years. Anyone who posed a threat to him was exterminated. He executed his first wife, Mariamne and three of his sons. He engineered a drowning 'accident' to get rid of Mariamne's brother, Aristoboulos, a very popular high priest. Herod saw the Lord Jesus as a threat and his determination to kill Jesus led to the slaughter of the male children two years old and under (16).

The Lord Jesus came into the world to die for sinners, but it was not in God's purpose for him to be killed before the time that he had appointed (cp. John 8:20). Some thirty-three years later, the Son of God was rejected by his own nation and Pontius Pilate had the title, *'the King of the Jews'* put on the cross (John 19:17–22). **Are you like Herod who rejected Jesus or are you wise like those who sought Jesus, found him, and worshipped him?**

He shall be called a Nazarene

Joseph and Mary were still living in Bethlehem when the ritual of purification according to the law of Moses, 40 days after the birth, were completed (Luke 2:22–24; cp. Leviticus 12:1–4). Following this, the wise men came to worship Christ. Their visit would have been a great encouragement to Joseph and Mary, confirming the wonderful things spoken of Jesus by the angel (1:2–21; Luke 1:26–35). Their gifts would have provided for the family when they went to Egypt.

When the wise men departed, an angel told Joseph in a dream to take the infant and his mother to Egypt because Herod was seeking to kill him (13). Joseph showed his trust in the Lord by his unquestioning obedience to the angel (14; cp. verses 19–21). They left immediately by night, under cover of darkness. The prophet Hosea had likened Israel to a beloved son, called out of Egypt from the tyranny of Pharaoh (Hosea 11:1). The Lord Jesus who was also threatened by a tyrant king, was called out of Egypt to fulfil this prophecy (15).

Herod waited in vain for the wise men to return to him and was furious at their deception (16). He ordered the slaughter of the male children two years old and below (16). The weeping for the slaughtered infants is also a fulfilment of a prophecy which is set among verses full of hope (17–18; cp. Jeremiah 31:15,17). The wicked Herod died within months of this atrocity.

It appears that Joseph planned to remain with Mary and Jesus in Bethlehem, but on hearing that Herod's son, Archelaus was reigning over Judea, he moved back to Nazareth (22). Having been brought up in Nazareth, Jesus was *called a Nazarene* (23). This was a term of contempt (eg. John 1:46; Acts 24:5) which refers to his rejection (12:24; 27:21–23,63; John 1:11; 5:18). Verse 23 does not fulfil one particular prophecy, but the message of *'the prophets'* in general (eg. Psalm 22:6–8, 13; 69:8, 20–21; Isaiah 53:2,3,8; Daniel 9:26). **The Lord Jesus was despised, rejected and suffered a terrible death to save us from our sins. He is worthy of our love and obedience.**