

Journey through the New Testament

Understanding the Purpose,
Themes, and Practical Implications
of Each New Testament
Book of the Bible

William F. Cook III
THOM S. RAINER, SERIES EDITOR

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Contents

Introduction: Beginning Our Journey Together	1
PART I: The Gospels and Acts	3
1. Matthew: Jesus Is the Son of David	5
2. Mark: Jesus Is the Son of God	20
3. Luke: Jesus Is the Savior of the World	33
4. John: Jesus Is God	47
5. Acts: “To the Ends of the Earth”	56
PART II: The Letters of Paul	71
6. Romans: The Righteousness of God	73
7. 1 Corinthians: Twenty-First-Century Problems in a First-Century Church	82
8. 2 Corinthians: The Glory and Heartache of Ministry	91
9. Galatians: Justification by Faith	99
10. Ephesians: God’s Glory in the Church	108
11. Philippians: Rejoice in the Lord	118
12. Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ	125
13. 1 Thessalonians: Future Hope in a Hostile World	134
14. 2 Thessalonians: Be Steadfast	143
15. 1 Timothy: Fight the Good Fight!	148
16. 2 Timothy: Final Words	155

17. Titus: Engage in Good Works	161
18. Philemon: A Call to Forgiveness	167
PART III: The General Letters and Revelation	173
19. Hebrews: Jesus Is Greater	175
20. James: Saving Faith Works	186
21. 1 Peter: Hope for a Suffering Pilgrim People	195
22. 2 Peter: Beware of False Teachers	203
23. 1, 2, and 3 John: Assurance of Salvation	211
24. Jude: Defend the Faith	226
25. Revelation: Come, Lord Jesus!	231
Acknowledgments	243
Notes	245
About the Author	247

INTRODUCTION

Beginning Our Journey Together

GOD'S SPIRIT USES God's Word to conform God's people into the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Whether you are preparing for vocational Christian ministry or are just beginning your acquaintance with the Bible, this book is for you.

Although *Journey through the New Testament* introduces readers to the "second half" of the Bible, don't think of it as a traditional introduction. Many New Testament introductions provide comprehensive background information on each book, discussing details of authorship, date, and provenance. *Journey through the New Testament* focuses more on the content of each book and asks readers to use it with an open Bible. We live in a biblically illiterate culture, which means we must work hard to master the content and major themes of each New Testament book.

I am both a seminary professor and a pastor. I have taught ministerial students for more than thirty years and have served more than twenty years as lead pastor at the Ninth and O Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. These dual roles have provided me the opportunity to train future servants of the church while implementing in the local church what I teach my seminary students. All ministerial training should glorify Christ and build up the church.

The church of Jesus Christ needs men and women saturated in biblical truth. Everything that ministers of the gospel do should begin with the Word of God. We regularly read today about the fall of once-influential Christian leaders who knew the Word of God intellectually, but who did not allow the Word of God to daily transform their lives. This is why I ask you to read this book with an open Bible. As you read, look up every Scripture passage and cross-reference. As you read *about* Matthew's Gospel, for example, also read the *text* of Matthew's Gospel. Measure my words by God's Word. I want to help you become better equipped to serve the church of Jesus Christ.

The church needs competent servants in the Word who have a passion for God and who also love the church. A calling to gospel ministry is wonderful but not easy. Satan, a roaring lion, seeks whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). John the apostle describes the church's archenemy as a dragon, making war against the saints (Revelation 12:17). God has not abandoned us to our foe, but rather indwells us by his Spirit, gives us access into his presence, and provides us with the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). God is still looking for men and women ready to be used for Kingdom advancement.

PART I

The Gospels and Acts

THE FOUR GOSPELS and the book of Acts make up nearly 60 percent of the New Testament.¹ The Gospels focus on the life of Christ, while Acts recounts the expansion of the church. The word *gospel* means “good news.” The four Gospels present the Good News concerning Jesus Christ. Each Gospel tells the story of Jesus from the author’s own perspective. The four Gospels resemble each other at certain points, while at other points look quite distinct.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—known as the synoptic Gospels—resemble each other much more than John’s Gospel. In fact, approximately 90 percent of John’s Gospel is unique to him. The word *synoptic* means to look at something from a common perspective. Though the first three Gospels have much in common, they still present Jesus’ life from their own distinctive vantage points. For Matthew, Jesus is the long-awaited

Jewish Messiah, the Son of David. For Mark, Jesus is the powerful, miracle-working Son of God. Luke presents Jesus as the Savior of all people. John, writing last, declares that Jesus Christ is God. As you read the Gospels, pray that the Holy Spirit will develop in you a greater love for Jesus and a greater passion to take his message across the street and around the world.

The book of Acts picks up where the Gospels leave off, especially Luke's Gospel. Luke, a traveling companion of Paul, wrote both the third Gospel and Acts. Acts traces the spread of the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome. Along the way, Luke tells stories to help his readers trust God to do great things through them.

Matthew

Jesus Is the Son of David

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW serves as a doorway from the Old Testament into the New Testament. If the author is the apostle Matthew (Levi), it could not have been written by a more unlikely candidate. Before Matthew followed Jesus, he worked as a tax collector (Matthew 9:9). His fellow Jews would have hated him because of his collaboration with Rome.

But the question remains: Did Matthew write the first Gospel? Strictly speaking, the writer is anonymous, unless the superscription (“According to Matthew”) was part of the Gospel from its beginning. More likely, scribes added the superscription around AD 125 to distinguish it from the other Gospels. Whether the superscription formed an original part of the Gospel or was added early in the second century, it provides strong evidence for Matthew’s authorship. In addition, the early church writers

unanimously affirmed Matthew as the author of the Gospel. It is hard to imagine the early church attributing the Gospel to a former tax collector—one of the lesser-known apostles—unless he wrote it.



The broken lines indicate modern boundaries.

Key Places in Matthew

The Big Picture

What do we know about Matthew? Not much, but we can gain some insights about him from reading his Gospel. Since the Jewish people despised tax collectors and typically thought of them as traitors because of their collaboration with Rome, Matthew would have felt distant from most of his countrymen and disenfranchised by the Jewish religion. Matthew's authorship demonstrates Jesus' power to change the lives of the most unlikely of people, even tax collectors.

Who was the target audience for Matthew's Gospel? It appears the author intended it for Jewish-Christian readers. Matthew quotes the Old Testament approximately fifty times, with another seventy or so allusions to it. Matthew's "fulfillment formula," where he specifically indicates that certain events happened "to fulfill" biblical prophecies, suggests a Jewish audience (Matthew 1:22-23; 2:15; 2:17-18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 27:9-10).² We also see this Jewish-Christian perspective in the Gospel's emphasis on Jesus as the "Son [descendant] of David." Matthew uses the phrase eight times in referring to Jesus (Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:41-45). Seven of these occurrences do not appear in the parallel material in Mark and Luke. Mark uses the title three times, and Luke uses it four. Oddly enough, those who recognize Jesus as the Son of David are consistently pictured as helpless or outcast (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 20:30).

Matthew's use of "Kingdom of Heaven" instead of "Kingdom of God" provides another example of the Gospel's Jewishness. Matthew uses "Kingdom of Heaven" thirty-four times, while Mark and Luke never use it. Heaven indirectly refers to God, since Jewish people had an aversion to referring directly to the

supremely holy God. The two phrases, however, are used more or less synonymously.

Though Matthew's Gospel is written from a Jewish-Christian perspective, it is intended ultimately for all Christians everywhere, which the Gospel makes clear in several ways. The first visitors mentioned by Matthew to worship the Christ child, for example, were Magi from the East (Matthew 2:1-12). In the parable of the wheat and the tares recorded in Matthew 13, the sower (Jesus) sows his seed (the sons of the righteous) in his field, which is the world. The Gospel concludes with Jesus' famous Great Commission to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:16-20). Furthermore, at strategic places in the Gospel, Jesus ministers to Gentiles (Matthew 8:5-13; 15:21-28). The only two references to Jesus expressing amazement at someone's faith both involved Gentiles (Matthew 8:10; 15:28). Finally, we find many implicit references to a future Gentile mission (Matthew 4:12-17; 12:18, 21; 21:43; 24:14; 25:32; 26:13). All of this to say, the Gospel is for all people in all places.

What was the historical setting for the writing of Matthew's Gospel? Though we cannot know for certain, the content of the book may help us find the answer. Throughout the Gospel, we see Jesus and the religious establishment in intense conflict. Jesus more strongly condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 23 (36 verses) than the parallels in Mark (3 verses) and Luke (3 verses). Matthew condemns the Sadducees in equally strong terms (Matthew 3:7; 16:6, 11, 12; 22:23, 34). By comparison, Mark and Luke refer to the Sadducees only one time each. None of the other Gospels attacks the Jewish leadership as harshly as does Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 3:7-10; 5:20; 7:29; 8:11-12; 13:11-17; 16:6, 12; 21:33-45; 22:1-10; 23:2-8, 13-26). Considering the focus on Jesus' condemnation of the religious

establishment and its opposition to Jesus, Matthew may have written to Jewish Christians facing similar opposition.

Though it is impossible to date Matthew's Gospel with precision, a date in the 60s is likely. If the Temple had already been destroyed, why would the author fail to mention it as a fulfillment of Jesus' words in Matthew 24? Most scholars believe that Matthew wrote his Gospel from Antioch of Syria. A large Jewish population there became a center of missionary outreach for the apostle Paul. Nothing of importance, however, depends on the Gospel being written in Antioch.

Unlike Luke and John, Matthew states no specific purpose for writing. He may simply have wanted to preserve an accurate account of Jesus' words and deeds for future generations, as the original eyewitnesses began to die off. Considering the content of the Gospel, however, it seems likely he wrote to strengthen his readers' faith in Jesus in the face of rising persecution.

What features make Matthew's Gospel distinctive among the four Gospels? Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the Son of David and his strong denunciation of the religious leaders stand out. Matthew also shows a keen interest in eschatology (the study of last things). Jesus' Olivet discourse in Matthew (on the destruction of the Temple and Jesus' second coming) is 97 verses long, while it is 37 verses long in Mark and 31 verses in Luke. Of the four Gospels, only Matthew uses the term *parousia* ("coming"), Paul's favorite term to refer to Christ's second coming (Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39). Matthew also makes several eschatological references to final judgment. Several times Matthew uses the phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" to symbolize eternal punishment (Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30), while Mark and Luke use it only once apiece. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the king says to those on his left (the goats), "Away with you, you

cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons” (Matthew 25:41).

Matthew also has an ecclesiological interest (ecclesiology is the study of the doctrine of the church). Only Matthew’s Gospel uses the word “church” (Greek, *ekklesia*) (Matthew 16:18; 18:17). The structure of the Gospel, with its five blocks of Jesus’ teaching, would make it easy for the church to teach (catechize) new believers. Matthew also gives some preliminary instructions on the process of church discipline (Matthew 18:12-20).

Matthew’s comprehensive Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ discourses, with five large blocks of Jesus’ teachings alternating with narrative material.

- Narrative (Matthew 1–4)
- Discourse 1: The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)
- Narrative (Matthew 8–10)
- Discourse 2: Mission Discourse (Matthew 10)
- Narrative (Matthew 11–13)
- Discourse 3: Kingdom Parables (Matthew 13)
- Narrative (Matthew 14–17)
- Discourse 4: Community Life (Matthew 18)
- Narrative (Matthew 19–22)
- Discourse 5: Condemnation and Prophecy (Matthew 23–25)
- Narrative (Matthew 26–28)

Each discourse concludes with a phrase like, “When Jesus had finished saying these things” (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Matthew used these phrases to transition from discourse to narrative material. Matthew’s arrangement of the discourses made instructing young believers in the teaching of Jesus very convenient.

Outline

1. The Birth of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:1–2:23)
2. The Words and Works of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 3:1–18:35)
3. The Journey to Jerusalem of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 19:1–20:34)
4. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 21:1–28:20)

Digging Into Matthew's Gospel

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1:1-2:23)

Matthew begins by recounting selected events surrounding Jesus' birth, although technically he never describes the birth itself. The first chapter establishes Jesus' identity. The genealogy retells Israel's history in three stages of fourteen names: from Abraham (the father of the Jewish people) to David (Israel's greatest king); from David to Josiah (Israel's last free king); from Jehoiachin (also known as Jeconiah and the first king during the Babylonian captivity) to the Messiah. The number fourteen is the numerical value of David's name (in Hebrew) and highlights Jesus' connection to David. The main point of the genealogy is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of David. Notice the names of five women, a highly unusual practice in a Jewish genealogy.

The remainder of Matthew's narrative on Jesus' birth and infancy is built around five Old Testament quotations (Matthew 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23). These quotations reveal how Jesus' birth and

infancy fulfilled key scriptural prophecies. Chapter 1 thus introduces Jesus as the son of Abraham, the son of David, and Immanuel (“God with us”). Chapter 2 discloses that even the places where Jesus lived fulfilled Old Testament prophecies: Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth.

The Words and Works of Jesus the Messiah
(Matthew 3:1-18:35)

In this longest section of the book, Matthew moves from Jesus’ infancy to his adulthood. The other Gospels also include a description of the ministry of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-12). Matthew describes John’s food and clothing in a way reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. Of all the Gospels, only Matthew explains John the Baptist’s hesitancy in baptizing Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17). From his baptism, God leads Jesus into the wilderness to confront the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). Only Matthew specifically mentions Jesus relocating to Capernaum and how his Galilean ministry fulfilled the Scriptures (Matthew 4:14-16, cf. Isaiah 9:1-2). Jesus launches his Galilean ministry by calling four disciples (Matthew 4:18-22). Crowds gather around him quickly as he travels throughout Galilee, preaching and performing miracles (Matthew 4:23-25).

Chapters 5–9 demonstrate the authoritative nature of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and in his powerful miracle-working ability (Matthew 8–9). The Sermon on the Mount is the most famous sermon in the history of the world. In it, Jesus establishes the ethical standards for Kingdom living. One does not live out these truths *to become* a Christian, but Christians desire to live out these truths *by the power* of God’s Spirit. We can divide the sermon into three sections: an introduction (Matthew 5:1-16); the body (Matthew 5:17–7:12); and the conclusion (Matthew 7:13-29).

Following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew presents a series of nine miracle stories (three groups of three, covering ten miracles), interspersed with two examples of Jesus' teaching on discipleship. Unlike Mark, Matthew groups his succinct account of these miracles thematically rather than chronologically. Jesus heals outcasts in the first set of stories (Matthew 8:1-17), followed by a rejected call to discipleship (Matthew 8:18-22). In a second group of miracle stories, Jesus demonstrates his authority over nature, demons, and sickness (Matthew 8:23-9:8). In a second call to discipleship, Matthew contrasts a positive response to discipleship with the pettiness of the Pharisees (Matthew 9:9-17). In a third set of miracle stories, Jesus heals a sick woman, raises a dead girl to life, and heals two blind men and a man rendered mute by demons (Matthew 9:18-34). One may wonder at this point, *How could anyone oppose someone who performs such miracles?*

In preparation for his mission discourse, Jesus tells his disciples that while the harvest is great, the workers are few. Prayer to the Lord of the harvest is the only proper response to a need for workers (Matthew 9:35-38). Matthew then lists the names of the twelve disciples whom the Lord will send out (Matthew 10:1-4). This prepares readers for Jesus' second discourse.

We can divide Jesus' mission discourse into two sections. First, Jesus gives instructions to the Twelve for an immediate "short-term" mission excursion (Matthew 10:5-16). Jesus' instructions focus on teaching the disciples to trust in God's providential care. The remainder of the discourse concentrates on the church's future mission work (Matthew 10:17-42). Jesus does not hide from the disciples that they will encounter great opposition (Matthew 10:17-25); they must fear God and not people (Matthew 10:26-31). Their allegiance to God must supersede every other relationship (Matthew 10:32-42).

After Jesus predicts future opposition, Matthew begins to describe rising opposition to Jesus' ministry. In chapter 11, the opposition seems more implied than overt, but in chapter 12 the opposition becomes obvious. We see some examples of this rising opposition even in John the Baptist, when he asks Jesus, "Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?" (Matthew 11:1-19). Jesus pronounces doom on cities that saw his miracles but refused to believe (Matthew 11:20-24). In chapter 12, the hostility increases significantly. The Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of breaking rabbinical Sabbath regulations (Matthew 12:1-14). They accuse Jesus of being in league with Satan (Matthew 12:22-37). The intensity of opposition continues to rise as the scribes and Pharisees demand that Jesus perform a sign to prove his authority (Matthew 12:38). When Jesus compares his enemies to a house indwelt by a demon (Matthew 12:39-45), he hints that his opponents are more than human. The chapter concludes with a description of those who do the will of God as Jesus' true family (Matthew 12:46-50).

Jesus tells several Kingdom parables explaining the growing chasm between himself and his opponents (Matthew 13:1-52). First, Jesus addresses the crowds (Matthew 13:1-35), and then he speaks privately to his disciples (Matthew 13:36-52). The two longest parables in the discourse are the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9; 16-23) and the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43). These parables explain part of the reason for the rising hostility to Jesus. Sandwiched between the telling of the parable of the sower and its interpretation is Jesus' explanation of why he teaches in parables, revealing his purpose in his quotation of Isaiah 6:9-10. The parable of the wheat and the tares teaches that as Jesus sows Kingdom seed (the sons of righteousness), the devil sows tares (the sons of the devil).

The parable illustrates the “behind the scenes” battle taking place in Jesus’ ministry.

The parables describing opposition to the Kingdom culminate in the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth and Antipas’s execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 13:53–14:12). Still, opposition does not stop Jesus from performing astonishing miracles, such as the feeding of five thousand and walking on water. (Peter’s role in the story is unique to Matthew 14:13–36.)

Jesus challenges the traditions of the elders and condemns their unholy hearts (Matthew 15:1–20). By contrast, Jesus casts a demon out of a Gentile woman’s daughter in response to the woman’s faith (Matthew 15:21–28). After another feeding miracle—this time, a crowd of four thousand consisting mainly of Gentiles (Matthew 15:29–39)—Jesus returns to Galilee, where conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees continues (Matthew 16:1–12). The high point of this portion of the Gospel is Peter’s dramatic confession at Caesarea Philippi, followed immediately by Jesus’ first passion prediction (Matthew 16:13–28).

On the Mount of Transfiguration, God declares Jesus to be his “dearly loved Son” (Matthew 17:1–9). Later the disciples’ failure to cast out a demon provides a teachable moment for Jesus to instruct them on the importance of faith (Matthew 17:14–21). After Jesus casts out the demon, he again predicts his coming death and resurrection (Matthew 17:22–23). The section concludes with the story of Jesus paying the Temple tax, recorded only in this Gospel (Matthew 17:24–27).

Jesus’ community discourse focuses on the importance of four major characteristics for healthy community life in the future church: humility (Matthew 18:1–5); holiness (Matthew 18:6–9); a willingness to pursue those who wander from the fold (Matthew 18:10–14); and forgiveness (Matthew 18:15–35).

***The Journey to Jerusalem of Jesus the Messiah
(Matthew 19:1-20:34)***

Jesus leaves Galilee to begin his fateful journey to Jerusalem (Matthew 19:1). He performs few miracles along the way, keeping his focus on his teaching. He covers a significant range of topics, revealing both his wisdom and his depth of scriptural understanding. Topics include marriage, divorce, celibacy (Matthew 19:1-12), children (Matthew 19:13-15), the danger of possessions (Matthew 19:16-26), and the promise of future reward (Matthew 19:27-30). The parable of the vine growers demonstrates God's grace in salvation (Matthew 20:1-16). Jesus' third passion prediction (Matthew 20:17-19) precedes James and John's failure to understand Jesus' teaching on servant leadership (Matthew 20:20-28). This portion of the narrative concludes with the healing of two blind men in Jericho, who identify Jesus as the Son of David (Matthew 20:29-34).

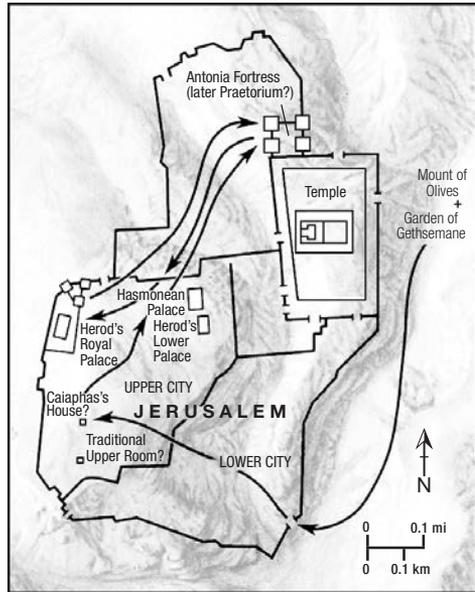
***The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah
(Matthew 21:1-28:20)***

Matthew devotes a significant amount of space to the final week of Jesus' life, thus revealing its importance in Matthew's thinking. The week begins with three prophetic acts: the Triumphal Entry; the clearing of the Temple; and the cursing of the fig tree (Matthew 21:1-22). The Temple clearing results in a series of heated exchanges between Jesus and various religious groups (Matthew 21:23-45). At every point, Jesus demonstrates that he is wiser and more insightful than his opponents.

Jesus' fifth discourse divides into two sections. First comes a condemnation of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matthew 23:1-36), concluded by Jesus' heartache over Jerusalem's rejection of him (Matthew 23:37-39). Next come predictions of the Temple's

destruction and his second coming (Matthew 24:1–25:46). Matthew also gives much space to the final hours of Jesus’ life: Chapter 26 begins by contrasting Judas and the religious leaders’ plot to kill Jesus, with an unnamed woman anointing him (Matthew 26:1-16). Jesus uses the Passover meal as a window to his impending work on the cross (Matthew 26:17-35). After these events, the pace quickens, beginning with Jesus’ agony and arrest in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-56), followed by several trials before the Sanhedrin and the Roman governor (Matthew 26:57–27:31), and culminating in Jesus’ crucifixion and burial (Matthew 27:32-66). Only Matthew’s Gospel describes Judas’s suicide (Matthew 27:3-10), an earthquake, and the resurrection of saints (Matthew 27:51-53).

Matthew’s resurrection narrative falls into four parts: the women’s discovery of the empty tomb (Matthew 28:1-7); the women’s encounter with the risen Christ (Matthew 28:8-10); the plot by the religious leaders and the Roman soldiers to explain away the empty tomb (Matthew 28:11-15); and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).



Jesus’ Trial

Living Out the Message of Matthew

All of the most important truths in Matthew are Christological. Matthew's Gospel is first and foremost about Jesus Christ. We see Jesus' significance in that while Jesus is David's Son, he is also David's Lord (Matthew 22:41-46). Jesus is greater than Abraham, as he is the head and founder of a newly formed people of God and the one who will bring God's blessings to all nations (Genesis 12:2-3; 15:4-6; Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus is greater than Moses. Both Moses and Jesus were born in treacherous times (Exodus 1:6-22; Matthew 2:16-20). They both went up on a mountain and brought God's Word to God's people (Exodus 19; Matthew 5-7). Jesus is the greater prophet Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15-18. Jesus brings a new and greater exodus, as he delivers God's people from Satan, sin, and eternal death. In addition, Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves him to be greater than Jonah (Matthew 12:41), and by his teaching, wiser than Solomon (Matthew 12:42). The church's Savior and Lord is worthy of worship and obedience, for the Old Testament Scriptures find their ultimate fulfillment in him.

References to Jesus' abiding presence with his people bookend the Gospel. In chapter 1, Jesus is called "Immanuel, which means 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23), and the book concludes with Jesus' promise, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). In Matthew 10:40, Jesus tells his disciples, "Anyone who receives you receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the Father who sent me." In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says, "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me.'" (Matthew 25:40). When two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, he is with them (Matthew 18:20). These words would have meant much to a people sent

out into a world inhabited by “wolves” to share the Good News (Matthew 10:16). No matter where God’s people are, and no matter what happens to them, Jesus has not abandoned them. He is always present with them!

Final words matter, and Jesus’ final words in this Gospel give a Great Commission to his disciples to make disciples of all nations. The one who sends the church out into the world has all authority. He not only sends them, but he also goes with them.