

# JESUS RENTS A U-HAUL

A Watershed Moment in Matthew's Gospel

**M**ATTHEW WAS JUST ANOTHER average guy grinding it out, a beancounter eking out a living as a tax collector when he looked up from his cramped tax booth and locked eyes with a little-known itinerant preacher from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” the preacher said, and Matthew tells us flatly that “he got up and followed him.”

We can’t say exactly what happened to Matthew in that moment. How was it that Jesus could say, “Follow me,” and ordinary men would suddenly leave their homes and careers and friends and family to lay down their lives for an itinerant preacher they had never known? What we can say is that this was the real beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, a moment that literally changed the course of history.

We tend to think of the four Gospels, especially Matthew’s, as mini catalogs of pithy teachings and sayings, of sporadic healings and miracles and even exorcisms that Jesus did in a roundabout way on the road to crucifixion. And we lose out by reading them this way. Peter tells us that these men wrote their Gospels, these holy scriptures, as they were “moved by the Holy Spirit.” When we look at the Gospels closely, we see how the Spirit infused their idiosyncratic personalities with different shadows and echoes of a mystery that Paul tells us had been hidden throughout the ages. Each writer purposefully laid down particular accounts—healings, signs, run-ins with the Pharisees—while leaving others out completely, emphasizing different statements, sometimes of the same accounts, while de-emphasizing others. And they occasionally included small, unremarkable details to reveal a deeper story, one carrying fresh interpretations of ancient texts.

When we approach the Gospels as books weighted with multi-colored facets of redemptive vision, we come away with a keener understanding and appreciation of God’s character and the breadth of his mission to redeem his creation. Turning our eyes to Matthew’s Gospel in particular, we see a writer who sublimely demonstrates to us that this lonesome preacher who was passing by his tax booth that day was God Almighty’s long-awaited Messiah, appearing on the scene in the fullness of time.

**M**atthew tells us that Jesus moved from Nazareth to Galilee and emphasizes that he did so because John the Baptizer had been arrested.

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

What’s the backstory here? What is so special about Jesus packing up his stuff and renting a U-Haul to move some 30 miles away? Was it because he thought he was in danger? That wouldn’t make sense because he knew that he was

*We must pay attention not only to the content of the Gospel writers’ writings, but also why they emphasized some things over others.*

going to be crucified. Was it because he wanted to take a vacation, take a break from the ministry for a while and cut loose on the beach? Or did he just want a place closer to the water before he had to set his face like flint toward Jerusalem to be crucified? Why on earth would the Spirit of God move on Matthew to emphasize this seemingly mundane fact of Jesus' life and ministry?

The answer ties back to Matthew's earlier writing about John: In those days John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew is signaling to us that John isn't your average televangelist, standing in the shoes of the preacher that Isaiah had prophesied about some six hundred years before.

*This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*

We usually stop there and fail to grasp the significance of Matthew's allusion to Isaiah. That is because he does what most other New Testament writers did. He quotes a snippet, but has the weight of the whole passage in mind. The rest of Isaiah's prophecy reads:

*Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain,*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all the people shall see it together;*

*for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

Isaiah speaks of the glory of the Lord being revealed to "all the people." In Matthew's day, the Word had been shut up to Israel alone.

Israel's Pharisees and Sadducees, curious about this ragtag Elijah preaching down by the river, came to suss out the fanfare emerging from all of his baptisms. When John saw them approaching, he tore out of the water.

*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Don't you dare presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones!*

John's tirade hints at Matthew's rationale for Jesus' move. Israel had relied on her Jewishness, her "circumcision according to the flesh," ever since God had appeared to Abraham on the plains of Ur. Yet John was calling to repentance not just natural-born Jews, but Gentiles too. "These stones," he calls them. In a word, Israel was not to rely on her natural heritage for salvation. The forthcoming real circumcision was to be of the heart, not of the flesh, as Moses prophesied in Deuteronomy 30.

John threw down the gauntlet:

*Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

The fig tree symbolized Israel all throughout the Old

Testament, and now John said she was going to be felled. This was all part and parcel of John's kingdom-of-God-is-now-at-hand message. It was this preaching that got him arrested.

Matthew ties Jesus' move to Galilee to this snuffing out of John's message. And he does so by anchoring it to yet another prophecy in Isaiah, one about a people sitting in darkness who are liberated by a newly born crown prince.

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

Like before, Matthew quotes a snippet, but it carries the weight of the entire prophecy behind it.

*But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.  
In the former time he brought into contempt the land of  
Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time  
he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond  
the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a  
great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness,  
on them the light has shined.*

*You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.*

*For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

*For all the boots of the trampling warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for fire.*

*For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.*

*He will establish and uphold it with justice and with  
righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

This poem was originally about the past humblings of the Northern territories of Israel by the Assyrians through the hand of divine judgment. The Assyrians had hit the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali especially hard, taking their people into captivity. Isaiah prophesied about the turning of that captivity: Joy erupts when a crown prince is born who thereafter leads the people into an everlasting peace. Interestingly enough, this stanza about liberation, wasn't fulfilled, at least not in Isaiah's day.

Matthew recasts the poem as a spiritual liberation in the Messianic age. He takes Isaiah's "in the latter time" and envisages Jesus as the prophesied crown prince liberating those in darkness. In Old Testament times, Zebulun and Naphtali were the territories closest to first-century Galilee. The Jews in Jesus' day, in fact, harbored contempt for Galilee because it was populated mostly by Gentiles, those who were "outside the commonwealth of Israel without hope and without God in the world." Matthew highlights Jesus' move to Capernaum by the sea as a signal that a light has dawned for those sitting in darkness. In other words, the Gospel was now coming to the Gentiles as foretold in Isaiah's own holy writings.

Once Jesus made his move to Capernaum, he picked up John's message, the one that got him killed.

*From that time on, Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for  
the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

God had promised Abraham that through him all the families of the earth would be "blessed," not just his own. John had rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for shutting up the Gospel all to themselves. God, John said, was able to produce sons of Abraham out of "these stones," hard-hearted Gentiles who weren't natural descendants of Abraham. Jesus' move to Capernaum was a sign that that is exactly what he intended to do because the Jews had blocked the promises of God.

*And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed,  
heirs according to the promise.*

Judgment was coming to Israel; the Gospel was coming to the Gentiles. ■

SEE THE GLOSSARY AT [BREATHMAGAZINE.COM/GLOSSARY](http://BREATHMAGAZINE.COM/GLOSSARY) FOR BRIEF EXPLANATIONS OF BIBLICAL TERMS FOUND IN THIS ISSUE.