

The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew
Mark
Luke

Volume II:
*From the Desert
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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• CHAPTER FIVE •

From Capernaum to the Mount

Chapter 4 carried us through the events of a remarkable Sabbath day. It began as Jesus taught with authority in the synagogue, where he exorcized an unclean spirit that had inflicted itself on one of God's people. The powerful work extended from this public setting to a private moment, as he healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law of a fever in her home.

But that privacy did not last long. Soon, many came to Jesus at sundown to be healed of diseases and afflictions. In the morning, when all of this is done, Jesus will withdraw to pray.

There will be a pattern. Throughout our synoptic journey, we will see Jesus weave his way in and out of public encounters and private moments. These social shifts are often paired with geographic ones.

The transitory nature of Jesus' ministry, while perhaps not remarkable to us, would have been unsettling to the first-century Mediterranean world. Jesus does not set up some stable healing shop; nor does he become the resident sage of Capernaum. We will soon come to understand his

immediate surroundings “to the other cities” of verse 43. His broader geographic vision will expand steadily throughout his gospel, then exponentially when he writes Acts of the Apostles.

1. The commentary suggests the scribes’ revision from Judea to Galilee is a technically accurate way of painting a broader literary and theological picture. What do you think?
2. What might underlie the other revisions Luke makes? Do you prefer his omission of any reference to exorcism during the preaching mission at this stage of the story line? Or, do you prefer Mark’s version? Why?

Roman Provinces



Matthew expands the transitional section by adding a segment that he finds at Mark 3:7–8. Relocating it here, Matthew sets the stage for the Sermon on the Mount, the great theological and literary passage that will occupy the last seven chapters of this volume. But before the sermon begins, Matthew must first gather the grand audience that will hear the most famous oration of Jesus of Nazareth.

† *Matthew 4:23–25 Preaching in Galilee*

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. ²⁴So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.

²⁵And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

1. In the introductory paragraph to Matthew's version of this passage, we addressed how the evangelist drew on material from Mark to set the stage for the Sermon on the Mount. Take a moment to look closely at all three versions of the preaching mission in Galilee. Consider each change and addition Matthew makes, and what motivation might lie behind it.

As we saw in our discussion of Luke 4:42–43 and the digression that followed, the theme of the kingdom of God is being strongly proclaimed at this stage in the journey. Here, Matthew places it in the context of Jesus teaching and healing the people. Barclay comments that teaching, preaching, and healing are the three major components of Jesus' earthly ministry. Matthew lists them in precisely this order, a literary device that reflects what he considers to be the proper priorities of the kingdom of God.

And, as we observed earlier, Matthew is supremely the teaching gospel. In both form and content, the message is stressed again and again that the kingdom of God (which Matthew often calls the kingdom of heaven) is grounded on the firm foundation of teaching and proclaiming the word.¹³

Preaching the kingdom of God is the declaration of accepted truths; it is similar to a member of the clergy giving a sermon to a community of the faithful today.

Teaching elaborates on the meanings of these truths. Christian education and formation help one delve deeply into them, and then expand or apply the teachings. But this educational exercise is not merely academic. It empowers one for ministry through enhanced understanding of the message of Jesus.

Healing is a less common ministry practice today than it was in the early church.¹⁴ We will explore Jesus' miracles of healing as we move more deeply into our synoptic journeys. For now, we will note that healing is not always just about relieving a physical malady; it is as much, or more, about healing our inner selves. One can be cured—which is sometimes nothing more than having the symptoms of ill health removed or relieved—without being healed. To heal is to make whole.

¹³In Mark, the healing of the sick and the exorcism of demons are the most powerful signs of the kingdom. Matthew typically subordinates these acts of personal restoration to theological and spiritual instruction.

¹⁴We see repeated references to healing those who suffer in the early chapters of Acts of the Apostles (Acts 3:1–11; 5:12–16). This emphasis on healing suggests that it continued at that time as an extension of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Many churches are renewing their focus on healing ministry. Some, especially in the Pentecostal tradition, firmly embrace faith healers, whose spiritual prayers and practices evoke the hope of physical miracles. Other churches practice a form of healing ministry that is more about acknowledging our need for the divine presence than about physical relief or restoration. When we open up to our need for God, we experience the presence that can heal our wounds and make us whole.¹⁵

Isn't Jesus' ministry today, mediated to us through the Holy Spirit, strikingly similar to what it was 2000 years ago? We hear the good news proclaimed. We instruct and are instructed. We are being made whole and are called to carry that wholeness into the broken world.

And to the world that wholeness goes, even in this passage, from the earliest days of Jesus' ministry. Matthew invites us to focus our attention on the broad array of peoples who are gathering around Jesus. The first reference to his expanding message is subtle and, when understood from the vantage point of his original audience, even contains a hint of the melancholy. Matthew speaks of how Jesus went "throughout Galilee, teaching in *their* synagogues and proclaiming the good news."

The word "their" is telling. Earlier, we explored Matthew's seeming antipathy toward the Jews.¹⁶ We looked at how it came to be that this most Jewish-oriented of our Gospels, containing multiple references to OT prophecy and displaying a deep knowledge and honor of Judaic law, custom, and tradition, still seems at times to be hostile to the theological fountain from which the Jesus movement sprang.

The suggestion in those early pages, and an idea that will be revisited throughout this series, is that the Jewish Christians of Matthew's community had recently been excommunicated from the "synagogue across the street." They experienced painful rejection by other faithful Jews. In this separation, we can sometimes see isolation—even anger. The story scripture tells is not always about people in a state of objective reflection; it also includes those in emotional and personal crisis.¹⁷

¹⁵At my own church—Trinity Parish in downtown Asheville—those who serve at the healing station on Sunday receive and pray with parishioners. Regardless of whether a participant expects a physical miracle, he still seeks God's aid in being made whole.

¹⁶See pp. 11–13, *supra*.

¹⁷One wonders how broad and deep was this sense of separation between Jewish Christians and other Jews. We see Paul's experience of it as an overarching theme in his Letter to the Romans. Paul believed that Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah opened the doors of the household of God to the gentile world. The joy is made complete after the full number of Gentiles enter, and Israel then experiences its own restoration (Romans 11:11–12).

Matthew's reference to "their" synagogues points toward that experience of separation. It is no longer "our" synagogue, or even "the" synagogue; it now belongs wholly to someone else.

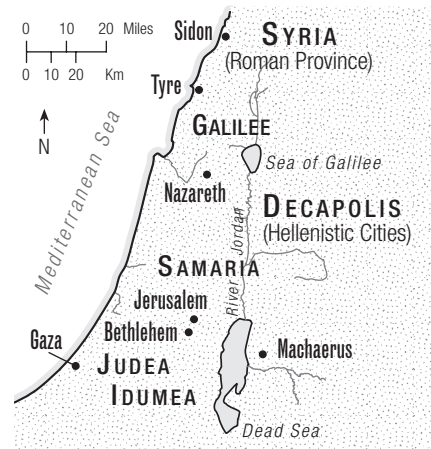
Yet even in that void—the empty space felt by the Matthean community in its separation from the synagogue—we see room to enter. That empty space is where "the good news of the kingdom" is still preached today.

And it is preached far and wide. Here, we see its beginnings. We learn that Jesus' fame has spread throughout Syria, a Roman administrative area that reached north to Turkey, south to Egypt, all along the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and well into the east.

As we consider the size of that space, let us also consider the smaller areas within it. Matthew lists these places by name: Judea (with its largely Jewish population); Galilee (a cross-cultural mix of Jews and Gentiles); and the Decapolis (an area of ten Hellenistic, or Greek-oriented, cities to the east of the Jewish areas). Jerusalem (called by name in the text) is in the heart of Judea. And, while the Decapolis is "beyond the Jordan," there are other places in that area as well—rural expanses dotting the countryside.

Mark's and Luke's parallel texts, found later in their Gospels (*see* Mark 3:7–10, Luke 6:17–19), make the crowds even more cross-cultural. Between them, they also list Idumea (to the south of Judea), and the predominantly gentile coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. From these places, people are coming to hear Jesus. The cumulative effect of these passages shows that all of Jesus' world is taking note of what he is doing; and inevitably is being drawn toward him.

Preaching in Galilee



1. This is at least the fourth instance in which Matthew, writing to a predominantly Jewish Christian community, embraces groups of Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. Earlier references include the naming of gentile women in Jesus' genealogy and the adoration of the Magi, members of a priestly class

from Persia. The OT reference to people who sat in darkness among the Gentiles having seen a great light also encompasses outsiders. Why might Matthew bring “outsiders” into the fold at this early stage of the narrative?

2. Matthew’s gospel will culminate in the Great Commission where Jesus directs his followers to make disciples of all nations. The directive embraces the entire human family. How did the early church respond to that call? How do we?
3. Sometimes, we think of mission work and evangelism as occurring in a vacuum—of Christians bringing the light of the gospel to people living in darkness. Yet, in much of the world, there are millions of adherents to other great religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Untold numbers of those adherents are principled people of faith. How should Christian missionaries relate to these groups?
4. The book *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell explores how trends reach epidemic proportions. “Mavens,” who are experts in the fine details of life, evaluate information, products, and services. They pass the data they gather on to others with whom they are closely associated. “Connectors” are those who maintain wider networks of more casual acquaintances. They pass the word broadly about information, products, and services. “Salesmen” are the world’s persuaders. Articulate and convincing, they tell people about the merits of the emerging information or new products or services. Is it possible that Matthew’s passage reflects this type of network? Did the mavens experience and observe, telling their nearest and dearest? Did these include connectors, who passed the word on to their larger networks of people? Did the salesmen persuade those in their sphere of influence to seek out Jesus? Is it possible that the word of Jesus has created a first-century equivalent of a “tipping point,” a place where something catches on like wild fire?
5. Consider whether a “tipping point” has been reached in the ministry of Jesus, as the previous question suggests. If so, what type

of information is being passed? Is it the “good news”? How is it being described? What is the product being promoted? Jesus’ healing abilities, perhaps? How does word about that get around?

6. The human response to Jesus appears to have been both highly personal and broadly shared. But where does that experience lead? Is it like a flame, burning brightly and then forgotten? Is it like some popular, faddish product that we enjoy, then discard? Or, does the story of Jesus lead us deeper? Do Jesus’ proclamations of the kingdom of God, and his offer of a healing touch, reach beyond our immediate needs? Do they lead us into true citizenship in the kingdom of God? If so, how is it all accomplished?
7. How do we make the transformations that the kingdom requires? How do we go from being mere consumers of spiritual services to becoming citizens of the kingdom, and then on to becoming servant-leaders who live out its high calling?



† *Luke 5:1–11 The miraculous catch of fish*

¹Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon,

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

⁵Simon answered,

“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”