

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

# **Matthew**

## **The outcast that found grace**

### **Lesson 1: Matthew met Jesus**

#### **Reading: Matthew 9:9-13**

Matthew was a tax collector. He worked for the Roman Inland Revenue Department. Few of us enjoy paying taxes; however, the Jews enjoyed it far less than most. Not because they didn't want to give up their hard-earned wages so much as having to hand the money over to a foreign power.

Rome had invaded Palestine, and so the Jews had to render taxes to Caesar. That was bad enough. However, to rub salt into the wound, not only were Jews appointed to do the 'dirty' work for the Romans, they were also empowered as their clerks and were able to add on whatever they thought they could get away with as their supplementary wages.

This meant that any tax collector was not only regarded as a collaborator with Rome, the hated occupying enemy, but also a cheat and liar. Understandably, the Jews considered tax collectors the lowest of the low, outsiders and criminals. Definitely, objects of God's wrath. Many of the tax collectors were indeed wealthy, due to their unscrupulous dealings with their fellow-countrymen.

Wealth gained through deception, taking advantage of others, or unethical transactions succeeds only in producing guilt, shame and loneliness. Matthew may have been very wealthy, but it was at the expense of his health.

Fortunately, God looks at us with eyes of compassion. He looked down and saw that Matthew was lost and lonely, helpless and hopeless. Money is not the answer to selfishness and pride nor does it necessarily produce lasting relationships.

Jesus passed by where Matthew was at work in his tax collector's booth. We are not told that Jesus gave Matthew any money, rather that He looked at Matthew and told him to follow Him, which Matthew evidently did.

What was there about Jesus that had that effect on Matthew? Matthew would have been a hardened businessman. He would have made demands on other people and they would have had to agree to them without question. Most people would have despised Matthew and when he gave them orders, Matthew would have been the butt of their curses.

What made this man, Jesus, different? What gave Him the right to tell Matthew what to do? From each of the Gospel records there appears no hesitation or delay in Matthew's response. He got up, left his work, his desk, his tax collector's booth and followed Jesus.

Not only did he leave work immediately, without giving notice or, indeed, without caring what his employers might have felt or required, he, additionally, threw a party inviting many of his erstwhile friends and colleagues so he could introduce them to Jesus and his disciples. It appears the invitation also included the religious leaders, for they were most put out that tax collectors and other undesirables had been invited to the feast.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

I am always intrigued how often we read that the reaction of the onlookers is judgemental of Jesus and His actions, rather than rejoicing at the dramatic change in the person who has come to realise who Jesus really was. That Matthew had radically changed is not in doubt, why then did the Pharisees fail to rejoice?

I love Jesus' reply, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* That means there is hope for me and you. We don't need to be perfect in order for Jesus to save us – we just need to answer His call to follow Him.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

I was at work, having a normal uneventful day when Jesus invaded my life. It changed my life forever. When you meet Jesus one to one, you will never be the same again.

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, I want to meet with You today. Please help me remember that I can meet You at work just as easily as I can meet You in church. Please give me a life-changing encounter with You. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Luke 19:1-10
- Acts 9:1-18
- Luke 5:1-11

### **Questions**

1. What difference did meeting Jesus make to Matthew?
2. Why is it important that Jesus calls 'sinners'?
3. In what ways do we change when we meet Jesus and realise who He really is?

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

### **Lesson 2: Matthew listened to the Beatitudes**

#### **Reading: Matthew 5:1-26**

Matthew reminded us that Jesus is unique. When Jesus spoke He taught with authority. He didn't point people away from Himself to others, He drew everyone to Himself. He claimed His teaching was better than the teaching that had been handed down to the people by their leaders. He claimed to be the sole source of truth. He went even further to claim that He was God.

That created a dilemma for both the people and the religious leaders. The people were attracted to Jesus' teaching and His powers of healing but were afraid of their leaders. The leaders wanted to discount the teaching of Jesus because He claimed to be God. However, the people were attracted to Jesus; and He had this 'annoying' habit of performing miracles, which tended to support His teaching and claims.

Like a lot of people today, the people living then wanted to believe that what Jesus said was good and what He did was wonderful but ignore the fact that He claimed to be God. Why go all that way? Why not just be a good man, with some good ideas that we can take or leave as we feel appropriate? Why spoil it all by pretending to be God? What does that achieve? It only antagonises a lot of people who think you are quite nice.

Jesus didn't leave us the choice of deciding whether His teaching was good or bad. The only choice He gave us was to accept it or reject it, to act upon it or not.

He said some very hard things. *Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God.* The poor in spirit are those who have come to the end of themselves and are crying out for help and mercy. According to Jesus, they are the ones He can help.

*The meek will inherit the earth.* No, not the weak; the meek. Those who have surrendered their ambitions to the will of God. Those who are no longer earth focused but heaven centred.

*The pure in heart will see God.* Purity is not boring, as this world suggests, but a prelude to experiencing the greatest privilege a human being can ever receive.

Over and over Jesus said, *"You have heard it said... but I tell you..."* He extended the Law of Moses, from actions to thoughts. So we can no longer hide behind the fact that we have not committed the offence when, in fact, our attitudes and thoughts condemn us.

That produced a whole new dimension to living. We can no longer carry on living in isolation or in complete indifference to others and believe that it has no effect on our relationships. What I think about you colours all my judgments about you and all my attitudes towards you. I want to put you 'in a box' for my convenience and then I can control our relationship. Regardless of my flawed judgment, I feel superior and thus treat you as I feel you deserve.

Jesus went on to say later, *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."* Hard words. The problem is that if Jesus is who He claimed to be – God incarnate – we need to pay close attention to what He said, because sooner or later we will be judged according to it.

Our lives are governed more by our attitudes than the circumstances of life. We can't change the circumstances and life can be very unfair and hard. However, we can and do control our attitudes

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

and it's our attitudes that need to be re-aligned with Jesus' teaching.

Yes, Jesus' teaching was both radical and challenging. It was 2000 years ago and still is today. If we put His teaching into practice our relationships would change dramatically, our marriages would be enriched, our families would be strengthened and our taxes would be reduced. (I'm sure Matthew wouldn't have missed the significance of the last part of that sentence if he were still alive today.)

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

Jesus' teaching was from a totally different perspective. He turned our thinking on its head. He showed us that we had to learn to live differently, no longer self-centred but others-centred. He didn't ask us to follow conventional thought; He taught us a new way – the Way of Truth.

### **Prayer**

Father, please forgive me for thinking I can ignore my bad attitudes towards others. Please help me re-focus on the way Jesus taught us, for Your Name's sake. Amen.

### **Additional Readings**

- Philippians 3:2-11
- 2 Peter 1:3-11
- James 2:14-26

### **Questions**

1. What difference did Jesus bring to the Old Testament Laws?
2. Why should we be prepared for a radical change to our thought processes?
3. In what ways do you need to change your attitudes?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 3: Matthew remembered the Lord's Prayer**

#### **Reading: Matthew 6:5-15**

One of the attributes I love about Christianity is that it is real. The Bible reveals real people with real problems, failures and successes. God didn't hide the poor or wrong choices the people made, even when they were those we would see as role models. They were all real people who had the same struggles you and I face. The Bible records the good, the bad and the ugly scenes and consequences. It was equally true in the New Testament as it was in the Old Testament.

We find Jesus constantly challenged His listeners to avoid hypocrisy. He reminded them, time and time again, that knowing the truth is of no value if it is not evident in the way we live. Christianity is not a set of rules, but a life of obedience in response to a loving relationship.

Our relationship with God is not based upon a set of religious regulations or a means to gain acceptance with God or the praise or respect of others. It is purely the result of love. God loved us so much He sent Jesus to deal with the barrier that stood between God and us. That enables us to have a relationship with God. However, Jesus accomplished much more. Many people know God, but only Jesus allows us to have a relationship with God as Father.

Matthew emphasised this by recording that when Jesus taught His disciples to pray the first thing Jesus told them was that they were to address God as their *'Father'*. That, in itself, was an amazing gift of grace. It also reveals the intimacy granted to us. No longer was God to be kept as a distant aloof Being. Instead, He was to be held in the highest respect and yet within the most intimate of relationship. We would use the term, *'Daddy'*. Paul uses the Aramaic word, *'Abba'*.

It is as if we have been ushered right into the throne room of God and granted an audience with Him, with Jesus standing right beside us so as to make sure we are not the least bit afraid.

Jesus then went on to describe the other side of God. He turned from the immanence of God to the transcendence of God, by adding *"in Heaven"*. Yes, we do have the ultimate intimacy with Him. However, we also need to remember that God is in Heaven. He is the Creator and sustainer of the universe. He is both omniscient and omnipotent. There is nothing He cannot accomplish that is within His will and character.

So when we pray, we need to remember that the One to whom we pray not only loves us, cares for us and has our best interests at heart. He is also able to perform whatever is needed, including a miracle or two if required. He is far from impotent. He created the worlds out of nothing. He is able to deliver us from our fears and despair. He is neither deaf nor indifferent. *"With God nothing is impossible."*

Having established who God is, Jesus moved on to the focus of our prayers. The Kingdom of God. Not my wish list or my self-centred carnal desires, but the Kingdom of God to come on earth as it is already functioning in Heaven. Where righteousness, peace and joy reign supreme.

That spiritual dimension is then realised in the natural. *"Give us today our daily bread."* God is interested in every aspect of our lives. He knows what we need before we ask Him. However, He wants us to know that it is perfectly in order for us to seek His daily provision. God is concerned about the little issues of life as well as the big issues. Nevertheless, He wants us to acknowledge that the very breath we breathe has been given by Him. Without Him we can do nothing.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

Jesus then encouraged us to keep short accounts with both God and others. We all make mistakes everyday. We say, think or do things we regret, and fail to do things we ought to. Jesus reminded us to own up and ask for forgiveness. It keeps us humble and releases us to have open, deep and lasting relationships. It also allows God to bless us as we remove every hindrance that would create a blockage to receive His blessing.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

Jesus expects us to pray. He wants us to talk to Him just as we would a friend, not with special words but the overflow emanating from our hearts, remembering He has all authority and power in Heaven and on earth. Our prayers should not originate out of our selfish desires, but through reflecting His character and desires.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for granting us the privilege of praying to You as our Heavenly Father. Thank You that we don't have to make an appointment or go through an intermediary, since Jesus has already opened the way for us to come straight to You. Thank You for caring about the things that concern me – the big things and the small things, and that nothing is too hard for You to sort out for me. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Daniel 6:1-10
- Philippians 4:4-9
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

### **Questions**

1. What difference does knowing God as Father make to our relationship with Him?
2. Why do we need for God to supply our daily needs?
3. How does knowing God is omnipotent affect the way we pray?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 4: Matthew and the Parable of the Sower**

#### **Reading: Matthew 13:1-23**

Matthew revealed to us that Jesus was probably the most wonderful communicator that had ever lived. Although He was almighty God, He spoke in a way that the most simple of people could understand. It often amazes me how some people seem to think that if they can appear very clever and use words few others use or understand, their message will be considered profound and of utmost importance. Similarly, some people seem to think that using ancient English will bring people to God and enable them to better understand His holiness.

Jesus was radical. He was God but He laid all that aside so that He could come and relate to those He had created. He memorised the same Scriptures that they had, and then used them to help the people understand what God was really like.

Additionally, He used everyday pictures and revealed profound spiritual insights so the people could grasp His meaning. It is true that some couldn't see the wood for the trees; however, Jesus would explain any difficulty so the full meaning was understood. Those who were religious often missed out, and I think that was because they refused to accept that Jesus was God, or that God would try and communicate in such a simple way.

The same is true today. Many people struggle with Christianity and the good news it conveys because they feel it just can't be that simple. Jesus dying on a Cross 2000 years ago in a tiny country 25,000 kilometres away can't be relevant for me today. Becoming a child of God by just believing He died in my place is far too simple to be true. So I will ignore it. The only problem is that by ignoring it I remain in my present state, without God and without hope.

Jesus knew that His message was vital, life giving and fruit bearing. However, He was also aware that many who would hear it would struggle with its profundity. That is why He told the parable of the sower, or what I would call the parable of the soils.

The message, the seed, the good news was the same for everyone who heard it. The difference was revealed by the response from the people hearing the message. The first group, represented by the pathway, are the people who believe the message is far too simple to be true and so they let it go without considering it.

The next group, represented by the gravel and rocks, are those who hear the word and think it is the best thing since sliced bread and go rushing off on a high, as with a new addiction, but they do not consider the ramifications of the message or let it change their lifestyle. It's just another new thing in their lives that loses its appeal, and so they leave it and go chasing the next guru, fad or high.

Then there are the people represented by thorns. They seriously consider the message and start out with joy. They see the difference it can make to their lives and begin to embrace it. However, as they begin to realise the changes they will have to make they have second thoughts. They see how the call of Christ to follow Him means they have to give up their ambition to be successful and wealthy. They see a need to be fully focused on Jesus and His Kingdom, instead of having wealth, happiness and their ticket to Heaven. They see that it is not an optional extra to their normal life but an all-encompassing lifestyle, and because their focus is on toys, achievement and impressing others, Christianity loses its appeal and they sadly let it fade away.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

The good soil is represented by those people who hear the message, embrace the changes they need to make and are so excited by their new found freedom, peace and joy that they cannot keep to themselves but have to tell others and help them to follow through on the message so they too would reap its true rewards. Yes, they help many others come to faith and grow into fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

We all want to sow our seed among the good soil, and that will always be the best. However, it is often not until the seed grows that we find out what kind of soil it was sown into. Even when the seed falls into good soil there is still work required from us to help it mature to its full potential.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for sowing Your seed into my life. Please make me the good soil so that I can produce a good harvest for Your glory. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Acts 2:22-47
- Acts 24:10-27
- Romans 10:5-17
- Ecclesiastes 11:1

### **Questions**

1. How can we change the soil?
2. Why can't we change the seed?
3. In what ways can we help ensure the best possible harvest is reaped?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 5: Matthew understood the significance of the woes**

#### **Reading: Matthew 23:1-39**

Matthew highlighted the fact that Jesus had the insight and ability to differentiate between the sin and the sinner. Jesus loved sinners. In fact, He claimed to have come to save sinners. Which is a bit of a worry, if we claim that we are not sinners.

On the other hand, Jesus was extremely adamant that sin had to be dealt with. Unlike us, He didn't try to hide it, sweep it under the carpet or pretend it didn't exist. Neither did He change the rules or law so it no longer counted as sin. He recognised it for what it was and eventually dealt with it.

Another point about Jesus is that he seemed to be more worried about issues that we ignore and less worried about things we find offend our sense of self-righteousness. How often do we find that those things in others we abhor reflect the very things we display? That is probably why we try and avoid mirrors. It's also why when we do things that shock others we hide behind the exclamation – *"Oh, I know it's terrible, but that is not the real me. I don't know what caused me to do it."*

The people of Samaria shunned the woman who had been married many times; however, Jesus offered her living water. The people wanted to stone to death the woman caught in adultery (how did she do it on her own, I wonder); Jesus didn't condemn her, but told her to go and sin no more.

The religious leaders condemned Jesus for associating with tax collectors, publicans and sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, continued to mingle with them yet denounced the religious leaders for their hypocrisy.

However, we need to notice that Jesus did not tell the people to rebel against or criticise their religious leaders. He encouraged the people to follow what their leaders told them, yet at the same time warned them not to follow the example of their lifestyles.

Jesus rebuked the leaders for their pride, their arrogance, their hypocrisy and their desire to be held in the highest place and to be treated as superior to everyone else. He chastised them for their attitudes and miss-representation of God, and their misinterpretation of the principles of the Law.

He tried hard to get them to realise that the Scriptures could not contradict each other. A Scripture that said you must honour God could not be taken out of context so people could treat their parents disrespectfully or without compassion.

A Scripture that demanded you honour God with your wealth and everything God had entrusted to you was not in conflict with or superior to a Scripture that encouraged justice, mercy and faithfulness to others.

People matter to God much more than things. Attitudes are as important as actions. It doesn't matter what you say your values and priorities are if they are not seen in your lifestyle. We do what our priorities are. If you want to know what your priorities are look back over your calendar in the last week. If you want to know what your attitudes are really like ask your spouse, partner, children or work colleagues.

If you want to know what your values are, look back over the last five years and write down your highlights and then review them in the light of what you thought your values were. Leaders don't

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

fall because they lack values; they fall because they don't realise what their true values are.

Please notice the love behind all of Jesus' reprimands. We get a glimpse of it at the end of the chapter when He cried in agony, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, but you were not willing."* Yes, their actions were wrong but He still reached out to them in love. The tragedy was they didn't respond but crucified the King of Love and Prince of Peace.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

Rules and regulations will never make disciples. Hypocrisy stands in the way of helping people accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour. We need to retain the integrity of the plain and simple message of the Cross and live lives that demonstrate the difference Christ can make.

### **Prayer**

Father, please forgive me for making Christianity seem like a religion rather than a wonderful, fulfilling and intimate relationship with You, my Creator and my Saviour. Amen.

### **Additional Readings**

- Jude 3-21
- Revelation 3:14-22
- James 1:19-27

### **Questions**

1. What difference is there between the Christian religion and a relationship with God?
2. Why was Jesus so vehement in his denunciation of the lifestyle of the religious leaders?
3. What are your values and priorities in life?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 6: Matthew noticed the difference between the sheep and the goats**

#### **Reading: Matthew 25:31-46**

Matthew is the only Gospel writer to include this part of Jesus' teaching. I guess part of the reason is that he was primarily addressing the Jews, the chosen people of God. However, as Christians, we have now been grafted in and included as the people of God, we will do well to study Matthew's gospel and live according to it.

Whilst we all love to quote the golden rule, "*Love your neighbour as yourself,*" we seem to easily forget its implications. We prefer to quote it to others who have treated us less than the way we had hoped. Added to that is the problem many face and that is – we don't love ourselves. Oh yes, we often become self-centred and demanding, and think in so doing we love ourselves when, unfortunately, the reverse is often the reality.

The fact remains that until we understand and receive the unconditional love of God it is impossible for us to love ourselves. Without that realisation we are troubled by two opposing forces. One desire is to make God love us and so we set out to do all we can to earn His love. However, we find that we can never achieve that and so end up exhausted and in despair. The other desire is to prove we love ourselves. Unfortunately, that usually reveals itself in us living an indulgent lifestyle that panders to our selfish desires and leaves us feeling even more guilty before God.

At the same time we try and prove our love for others by helping them notice what we do for them and seeking their appreciation. Initially, we are satisfied, but as the value of any thanks is short-lived we have to resort to more aggressive approval seeking. This eventually causes the ones we love the most to reject us (as it is from them we seek our most valued approval). That fuels our sense of rejection and the feeling that no-one, including God, loves us. We do things for others from the wrong motive. We give to get, not merely to give.

Jesus brought a new dimension. Firstly, He proved that He loves us unconditionally, by dying on the Cross to pay the penalty for our selfishness and rejection of God – our sin. He died for us when we didn't care about Him in any way. He continues to extend His love towards us even when we effectively throw it back in His face. There is nothing we can do to make Him love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make Him love us less.

However, we only benefit from that love when we receive it through faith. Once we have received His love, that sense of forgiveness and freedom enables us not only to forgive others when they hurt us, but it also enables us to see people differently from the way we have in the past. Suddenly they become important and on equal footing to us. They become 'family' regardless of ethnicity or social standing. I learn to see them as a prince or princess of the King.

With that appreciation in mind, I want to help and bless them in any way I can. Not for what I can get out of it but purely as a way to benefit them and cause them joy. I get a new sense of purpose and self-satisfaction through helping and serving others.

However, Jesus went further. He presented His proposition like a double-edged sword. He suggested that every time we bless, help and go out of our way to care for others we are actually doing it to Him. Please notice not 'for' Him but 'to' Him. We are to see other people as 'Jesus' on earth. Then Jesus presented the other edge. Whenever we refuse or fail to bless, help or go out of our way to care for others we are rejecting Jesus. We have not done to 'Him'. Ow, that hurts and

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

strikes home, doesn't it? And we are not allowed to hide behind, "*But I didn't see You, Jesus*". Because He will just reply, "*That person you failed to help, care for and love was ME, Jesus.*"

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

Jesus expects us to live out the teaching He left us so that we care for those around us and treat everyone with the same love and respect Jesus would. We are all of equal value in the sight of God and Jesus takes our attitudes and lifestyle seriously.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please keep reminding me about what I am to do on earth and that everyone I meet is a potential prince or princess of the King. For Your Name's sake. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Matthew 7:15-29
- 1 Corinthians 3:10-15
- Galatians 3:26-28
- Galatians 6:1-10

### **Questions**

1. What difference should the fact that Jesus is coming again make to the way we live?
2. Why is it important that we live like the sheep rather than the goats?
3. How can we train ourselves to see everyone we meet as 'Jesus' on earth today?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 7: Matthew and the ‘problem’ of the resurrection**

#### **Reading: Matthew 28:1-15**

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all recorded the fact that when Mary Magdalene went to the grave early on the morning of the first day of the week, the stone, set to guard the entrance, had been rolled away; the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb. John added that the burial cloths, that had been wrapped around Jesus’ body, were left inside the tomb.

So we know that Jesus died on the Cross, was buried in the garden tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea and arose from the dead on that resurrection morning. So what is the problem?

The problem of the resurrection is that it proves that Jesus was who He claimed to be – God. Regardless of the title you use – Son of God, Son of Man or Word of God – Jesus proved that He is God by rising from the dead. What made matters worse was that He said He would do just that. He claimed that three days after His death He would rise again.

But what is the problem with that? He said it, He did it and so He was right. He is therefore who He claimed to be – He is God. Simple enough. So what is the problem?

There is no problem if you are prepared to accept Jesus as God. It follows that God made the world, saw it was on a road to ruin, primarily through the selfishness and self-centredness of the people and their rejection and independence from God, and so stepped into time. Jesus invaded the earth in order to rescue it and restore the relationship God had intended for all people to enjoy.

There is a problem, however, if you reject Jesus Christ as God? But why would you want to do that? Mainly, because if Jesus Christ is God, I have to have another look at everything He said. You see, if Jesus really is God, then what He said is not up for debate but obedience. I no longer have the right or authority to accept some of what Jesus said and reject the rest. I can no longer say that it is O.K. for some people to believe it, accept it and live by it but it isn’t for me. If Jesus is God and His teaching is truth, then, as with all truth, it is true for everyone. It cannot be partially true but is totally true. It also means there is Someone who has a claim over my life, since He gave up His life for me.

Consequently, it is much more convenient to say Jesus is a good man, who did good things and said good things and leave it at that. Let Him be just a normal prophet who lived a good life, helped people and then died and remained dead like all the rest, so I can get on and live my life the way I want to without being answerable to anyone else.

There is a problem, however, if Jesus rose from the dead. It must mean He is not just another man or prophet – He must be much more. The beauty about a resurrection is, of course, that there is no body left in the grave. So no-one can prove it. Therefore all you have to do is make up a story to cover your tracks and that is exactly what Matthew tells us the religious leaders did. They decided to pay off the guards who saw the resurrection and tell them to explain that the reason for the disappearance of Jesus’ body was that the disciples came and stole it while they were asleep.

Hence we have the problem of the resurrection. The religious leaders wanted to explain it away and chose lies in order to do so. It would have been so much easier just to have produced the body of Jesus. That would have stopped the disciples dead in their tracks. The problem was, of course, that they could not produce the body because it was no longer in the tomb. The reason it was not in the tomb was not that the disciples had taken it away but that Jesus was now alive and

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

moving about at will.

Ironically, the disciples seemed as scared of the resurrected Jesus as the religious leaders. It wasn't until after Jesus ascended into Heaven and released the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that their fear was swallowed up in power.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

Take it from me: Jesus died, was buried and, on the third day, arose from the tomb and lives forever. Don't try and explain it away, rationally or otherwise, because the facts stack up – I saw Him alive. When you try and explain it away you only display your own folly. When you accept the truth you can begin to understand reality.

### **Prayer**

*Father, I thank You for arranging for Matthew to record the facts about the resurrection so we can understand it and accept it as truth. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- John 20:24-31
- Hebrews 7:23-28
- 1 Corinthians 15:1-21

### **Questions**

1. What different stories have you heard explaining away the resurrection of Jesus?
2. Why are we afraid to accept Jesus' resurrection as a fact of history?
3. How does Jesus' resurrection affect the way you live your life?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 8: Matthew recognised the coming of the Messiah**

**Reading: Matthew 1:18-25; Matthew 2:1-12**

I love the way Matthew recorded the entrance of Jesus into this world. He didn't spiritualise it or make it mystical. He seemed almost to bend over backwards to show how 'normal' it all was. The people involved were normal human beings going about their normal lives in the accepted customs of the period.

Matthew introduced us to Mary as a young virgin, who was engaged to be married to a man called Joseph. They had not indulged in pre-marital sexual intercourse; indeed, such a concept probably never entered either of their minds. Rather they were looking forward to getting married and, in the meantime, would continue to live their lives in faithfulness and purity.

However, God intervened and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived and became pregnant. We can only imagine Mary's struggle in trying to determine how she was going to explain to Joseph what had happened to her. From Matthew's account it seems she had not been very successful, since he recorded that Joseph decided to annul the engagement in order to save face and to do so quietly to try and diminish the anxiety for Mary.

God intervened again, and this time Joseph had a dream in which he was told not to be afraid of making Mary his wife, because what she had told him was correct. He confirmed that the baby boy Mary was carrying had indeed been conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. God added that Joseph was to name the boy, Jesus, as He would save His people from their sins.

I love the fact that Matthew was so specific about that. Joseph was not just told that a boy would be born, but that he must name him Jesus. Not only that, but He was to be called Jesus because He was a child of destiny. His life's purpose was described in His name. Every time anyone mentioned His name, Jesus, they and He, would be reminded that He came to die for the sins of the world.

Matthew added a reminder from the ancient prophets. He referred to Isaiah who had prophesied that a *virgin would have a son, called Immanuel, meaning 'God with us'*.

After Joseph woke up from his dream, he went and got Mary, and took her home as his wife. Matthew added that they did not have any sexual union until after Jesus was born.

So we see how Matthew dealt with the difficult issues. Firstly, he specified that Mary was a virgin. He had no difficulty recognising and accepting Jesus' miracle birth. Secondly, Matthew highlighted the fact that Mary would become an unmarried mother. An unusual and definitely scorned upon situation. It was a real and potentially painful experience, being snubbed by friends and family, and yet it was recorded in Scripture. Thirdly, Joseph was put in a highly embarrassing and delicate position. He loved Mary, but she appeared to have misbehaved. Despite that, he still showed his love for her, wanting to do what was right but without disgracing or hurting her more than he had to.

Again, Matthew was prepared to believe in miracles. An angel visiting Joseph to provide the answers and the direction he required. Matthew went further. He was determined that people needed to know the Son born to Mary was not only conceived by the Holy Spirit but was indeed the Promised Messiah – the one who would save them from their sins. Not only was Jesus to be their Saviour, but as Matthew pointed out, Jesus was also their God – Jesus, Messiah, Immanuel.

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

Matthew then closed the evidence by saying that Joseph and Mary did not have sexual intercourse until after Jesus was born. There was no possibility that Joseph was the father of Jesus. But Joseph would become the father of the siblings.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

Every time you use the name Jesus, you are in fact reminding yourself that He was called *Jesus* because He will save His people from their sins.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for Your plan of salvation. Thank You for sending Jesus to save me from my sins. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Isaiah 9:1-7
- Psalm 2
- Colossians 1:15-20
- Philipians 2:5-11

### **Questions**

1. What difference can Jesus make to Christmas?
2. Why do we celebrate Christmas?
3. In what ways will you show that you are a disciple of Jesus this Christmas?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 9: Matthew recorded the Great Commission**

#### **Reading: Matthew 28:16-20**

It seems to me that Matthew never forgot his first encounter with Jesus and the difference it made in his life. As he recounted his experiences with Jesus, he did so with passion and purpose. He looked at life as it was and saw the difference Jesus did or could make.

When he recorded the incident that he used to close his gospel, Matthew remained true to his character. He remembered the day he and the other ten disciples met with Jesus on the mountain in Galilee. He described the pleasure and delight they felt that resulted in their worship of Jesus. Yet he didn't exclude the comment that some even had doubts there and then. Yes, he wanted to show the joy he had experienced, and yet, to record the event truthfully, he had to be honest and admit that there were some who had doubts.

I read that in complete amazement. How could anyone have any doubts when standing right in front of their eyes was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in all His resurrection glory? Get real. And yet Matthew recorded some did have doubts even then.

Maybe that is why Jesus commenced His commissioning, as we call it, with those doubt-shattering words – *All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to Me*. Wow, that is some authority, isn't it? I think that could well have been part of what Jesus intended to proclaim. However, I think there is another equally significant reason. He knew what He was going to say next and He also knew how slack we would be in carrying it out.

Yes, the commission was to 'go and make disciples'. What saddens and surprises me as I travel around the nation is this. I often ask Christian leaders, "*What is the definition of a disciple?*" I am all too frequently greeted with silence. And yet, Jesus told us to go and make disciples. If we don't know what a disciple looks like, how can we make one?

I believe there are at least 12 hallmarks of a disciple. As church leaders, we should recognise the hallmarks of a disciple and make sure we are teaching and training them so everyone in our congregation is aware. Time and space do not grant me the privilege of describing them all in this short column; however, the ultimate hallmark I have identified is that a disciple makes other disciples. In other words, I do not really know that I am a disciple of Jesus Christ until I have at least made one other disciple.

Nevertheless, I don't know for sure that person is a true disciple until they have made a disciple as well. And they don't know they have made a disciple until the person they are trying to make into a disciple has made their own disciple. So, as I understand it, I don't really know I am a true disciple of Jesus Christ until I make another disciple who has in turn made another, who has made another. Is that four 'generations' of disciples before I know if I am one?

It seems we have an aversion to talking about evangelism and it has crept into disciple making as well. And yet, that is what the Great Commission is all about, isn't it? It is the last command Jesus left us and yet we seem so reluctant to take it seriously. Maybe that is because there is no quick fix, there are no easy solutions and there are no such things as instant disciples. Perhaps someone should invent a suitable pill or spray to help us. Otherwise, it will all come back to the hard yakka of living like Jesus day in and day out, and taking 'Timothy' along with us.

Surely, there is no greater privilege or thrill than that associated with making disciples. What is

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

more, it is what Jesus is looking for, and what delights His heart, the heart of Father and gets the angels rejoicing in Heaven. What could be better or more worthwhile?

The rest of what Matthew recorded Jesus said that day helps us make disciples and reminds us to carry on doing it until we die or when Jesus returns, which ever occurs first.

### **Matthew would say to us today...**

You came to faith in Christ through someone sharing their faith with you. They passed the baton on to you. Who will you pass it on to next?

### **Prayer**

*Father, please lead me to the people You have prepared for me to share my faith story with and help me make them a true disciple of Jesus Christ. I ask this, in Jesus' Name and for the extension of His Kingdom. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Mark 16:14-20
- Acts 1:1-8
- Luke 8:34-39

### **Questions**

1. What difference does the Holy Spirit make to our witnessing?
2. Why is the Great Commission sometimes referred to as the 'Great Omission'?
3. How many disciples have you made?