

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 5, Matthew 2-3

Podcast Audio Overview

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All right, you sent in Dr. Keener's lecture on Matthew chapters 2 and 3. And wow, getting ready for this deep dive, it's been fascinating, just seeing how a fresh perspective can make even these Bible stories that we've heard so many times feel brand new. Absolutely, yeah. Dr. Keener, he's got this way of digging up all these historical and cultural details, and it really, I don't know, it just changes how you read a text.

Yeah, like for example, the Magi. We've all heard that story, that they show up at the manger, but I never really thought about why Matthew would include them in his gospel, like Persian astrologers. Right, and you have to remember that Matthew is writing; his main audience is Jewish.

And at that time, astrology was often associated with paganism and sorcery and all that. So it seems a little out of place. Yeah, yeah.

Kind of scandalous, really. Exactly, and yet, there they are, right at the beginning of his account of Jesus's birth. And what's really fascinating is that Matthew doesn't even try to downplay what they do, their astrology.

Right. He seems to almost be saying that God is working through their knowledge of the stars to lead them to Jesus. So God is using something that in Judaism was generally considered taboo to reveal himself to the Gentiles.

Exactly, and I think it really challenges us to think about how God might be working in ways that we just don't expect, even through things that we might not totally understand or agree with. It's a good reminder to just stay open to how God might be moving, even in places where we wouldn't expect it. Absolutely.

Okay, so kind of switching gears a bit, let's talk about Herod. Okay. I mean, Dr. Keener didn't hold back? No, he didn't.

Describing his reign of terror. He didn't. Herod was, I mean, he was ruthless, eliminating anybody he saw as a threat.

Even his own family wasn't safe. Wow. And yet, at the same time, he's also in charge of building the Second Temple, which is this huge, huge project that expands the temple and makes it beautiful.

And that really solidified his image as a pious Jewish king. It's such a weird, I don't know, contradiction. He builds this amazing temple, a symbol of Jewish faith and identity.

And at the same time, he's massacring innocent children in Bethlehem because he's threatened by this possibility of another king. It's that tension, right, between being really devout and then being completely paranoid. That's really at the heart of Herod's story.

He wants to be seen as this devout Jew, a supporter of the faith. But his actions show this deep insecurity and this willingness to use violence to stay in power. And Dr. Keener, he pointed out this parallel between what Herod did and what Pharaoh did in the Exodus story.

Right. Herod, the king of the Jews, acting like a pagan tyrant, and the Magi, who are probably pagans themselves, they're the ones coming to worship the true king of the Jews. Wow.

So it's almost like Matthew's intentionally flipping things around. Yeah, I think so. You know, highlighting the irony of it all.

And then it makes me think about the scribes and the chief priests. They knew the prophecy about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem, but they just sat on it. They didn't.

It's interesting, isn't it? Yeah. I mean, they had the knowledge, but they didn't have the faith, or maybe the courage, or maybe even the will to actually do anything about it. It makes you wonder, what good is knowledge if you don't do anything with it? Exactly.

And it makes you think, are we in danger of being complacent in our own faith? It's not enough to just know the right answers. We have to live it out. And it makes the Magi's response even more remarkable.

They traveled this incredible distance, putting themselves at risk, because they believed what they saw in the stars; they put their faith into action in a way that the religious leaders didn't. Okay, so we have this reversal of expectations, right? With Herod acting like a pagan, and the Magi acting like faithful Jews, and then you have the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt, which feels like another kind of reversal, like an anti-Exodus almost. Absolutely.

I mean, the Exodus story, it's all about God freeing his people from slavery in Egypt. And here, Egypt becomes the place of refuge for Jesus, protecting him from Herod. And it makes you think about all the different ways God can use things, even places and situations that seem bad; he can use them for his purposes.

And Dr. Keener even mentioned how that image that we all have of the pyramids, it doesn't really fit with the story. That's right. Because the pyramids, they're way down in southern Egypt.

And the Holy Family, they would have fled north to the Delta region, which was like way more cosmopolitan. There was a lot of Greek influence there, and a big Jewish community. So less about the pyramids, more about this multicultural melting pot.

Exactly. And I think that detail adds another layer of meaning. It's hinting at this idea that God's salvation is for everyone, not just for a select few.

It's almost like foreshadowing of Jesus's mission later on, right? Breaking down barriers, welcoming everyone into God's kingdom. Wow. Okay.

So then we have the return to Nazareth after Herod dies. And it seems like this very insignificant village, but Matthew really goes out of his way to connect it to prophecy and God's plan. He does.

Which is interesting, because when you read about Nazareth in the other gospels, it's often like, look down on it, like this backwater town. Remember in John's gospel, Nathanael asks, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Right. I mean, that sums it up perfectly.

Yeah. But Matthew, he wants us to see Nazareth not as this unimportant place, but as the place God chose for Jesus to grow up. So how does he do that? Well, he uses these subtle literary techniques like wordplay to connect Nazareth with the prophecies about the Messiah.

Okay. For example, the Hebrew word for branch, *netzer*, it was used as a title for the Messiah in Isaiah 11.1. Interesting. Which talks about this future king who will come from the stump of Jesse.

Okay. And the name Nazareth. It could be a play on that word.

Wow. Suggesting this connection between Jesus and this prophecy. That's a really clever way to elevate Nazareth's significance.

Yeah. It's almost like Matthew is saying, don't underestimate this place. God is doing something incredible here.

Right. And it's not just about symbolism. Dr. Keener also talked about how historically it makes sense that Joseph and Jesus would have been carpenters in Nazareth.

Right. Because of the rebuilding going on in Sepphoris. Exactly.

Yeah. After that revolt. Okay.

And that detail, it really grounds the story. Yeah. You know? Yeah.

It gives us a glimpse into their everyday life. Right. And it also highlights how humble their beginnings were.

Right. I mean, this isn't a king born in a palace. Yeah.

You know, surrounded by luxury. Right. This is a king born in this really ordinary place.

Yeah. Raised in a working-class family. It sets the stage for a very different kind of Messiah, for sure.

Yeah. Yeah. So we've got Jesus growing up in this seemingly insignificant town.

But meanwhile, out in the wilderness, John the Baptist is making quite the scene. Talk about a contrast. Right? John's out there living on locusts and wild honey.

Right. Wearing clothes made of camel hair. Wow.

Preaching this message of repentance that's really shaking things up. It's like he's straight out of the Old Testament. Like a prophet like Elijah.

Exactly. Yeah. And that wilderness setting is so important.

Yeah. You know, it makes you think of Moses up on Mount Sinai. Right.

Or Elijah facing down the prophets of Baal. Right. It's this place of testing.

Yeah. Purification. Right.

Divine revelation. Yeah. It's also a place where, you know, these radical prophets.

Right. They could operate outside of the control of the authorities. Which makes sense, given how John's message was really challenging the status quo.

Yes. He was not afraid to call out the hypocrisy of the religious elite. He really went after the Pharisees and Sadducees.

He did. You know? Who thought they were good with God just because they were descended from Abraham? Yeah. Children of Abraham.

Right. They thought that was enough. Yeah.

But John, he insisted that real repentance wasn't about your ancestry or just going through the motions. Right. It was about a change of heart.

Yeah. And turning away from sin. And his baptism was such a powerful symbol of that.

You know? That inward transformation. Yeah. Like, it wasn't just a ritual.

Right. It was this public declaration of repentance. Yeah.

And a commitment to a new way of life. It's interesting how Matthew highlights the different ways that John is perceived. Okay.

You know? Like, Josephus, writing for a more Greek audience. Yeah. He portrays John as this kind of moral philosopher.

Okay. Yeah. But the gospels, they paint a much more Jewish picture.

Right. A prophet, like Elijah, preparing the way for the Messiah. And that's what makes John's declaration about the one coming after him so powerful.

Yeah. I mean, he says, I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Yeah. That's loaded with meaning. First of all, untying sandals, that was like the lowest job.

Yeah. In Jewish culture, only slaves did that. Right.

So John is saying, I'm not even worthy to do that for Jesus. So it's more than just humility. It's recognizing Jesus's authority.

Yeah. Like his divinity. Absolutely.

And then he talks about baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire. Yes. It's such a vivid image.

Yeah. But it's a bit ambiguous. Yeah.

What does that fire represent? Right? I mean, on the one hand, fire can symbolize purification. Yes. Refinement.

Uh-huh. But on the other hand, it can also represent judgment and destruction. Right.

And I think that ambiguity, it's intentional. Okay. It creates this sense of anticipation.

Right. Maybe even a little bit of fear. Yeah.

Who is this one coming after John? Right. And what will his arrival mean for those who hear his message? And it's interesting how John's statement kind of sets the stage for Jesus's own baptism. Oh, yeah.

You think John would be excited to baptize the guy he's been talking about? Right. Right. But he actually hesitates.

Huh. I never really thought about it that way. He even says, I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? Wow.

That's really something. Yeah. It's a powerful moment.

He's recognizing how important Jesus is. Right. Yeah.

Yeah, totally. But then Jesus insists. He says, let it be so now.

It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness. Fulfill all righteousness. What do you think he meant by that? Well, scholars, they've been trying to figure that out for centuries.

Yeah. It's a little cryptic. Right.

Dr. Keener suggests that it's about Jesus identifying with us, with sinful humanity. Right. Even though he was without sin himself.

Right. By going through John's baptism, he's setting an example. Yeah.

Like he's not above it. Exactly. Even though he doesn't need to repent.

Right. And I think that's part of it, for sure. It's about humility, obedience to God.

Yeah. But I also think there's this sense that Jesus is like starting his mission. Oh, interesting.

Like, you know, kind of lining himself up with John's message, repentance, the coming kingdom. He's stepping into his role as Messiah. So it's both personal and public.

A statement about who he is and what he's here to do. Yeah. And then, of course, you have this incredible scene.

Right. Heavens open up. The spirit comes down like a dove.

It's so dramatic. A voice from heaven booms out. This is my son whom I love.

With him, I am well pleased. It's like a theophany, right? Exactly. It's God showing up in a visible way.

Right. And it's packed with Old Testament imagery. Oh, like what? Well, the dove, for example.

Uh-huh. It takes you back to the creation story. Right.

The spirit hovering over the water. Yeah, exactly. It suggests that something new is beginning.

Like a new creation. A new era.

And then that voice from heaven. Right. It sounds a lot like Psalm 2. It does.

Which is all about the king being crowned. Yeah. It's a clear statement about who Jesus is.

God's son, the Messiah, the king. Exactly. Matthew wants to make sure there's no doubt.

Yeah. I mean, this is what all the prophecy has been pointing to. It's the fulfillment of God's promises.

And it also echoes Isaiah 42, right? It does. Where it talks about the servant of the Lord. Yes.

The one chosen by God to bring justice and salvation. So Matthew's weaving together all these Old Testament threads. He's creating this incredibly rich tapestry of meaning around Jesus.

It's amazing how much he manages to pack into just this one event. He really is a master storyteller. Yeah.

And he assumes that his readers know the scriptures pretty well. Right. He's using a technique that was common among Jewish scholars.

What's that? It's called Gezer HaShava. Okay. It's basically connecting different passages to uncover these deeper meanings.

So it's like he's inviting his readers to play detective. Yeah, I like that. Right.

Connect the dots. See how everything fits together. Exactly.

Okay. So we've got this amazing confirmation of Jesus' identity at his baptism. Yeah.

And then boom, we're in the wilderness for the temptation. It's pretty wild, right? You'd think that after that experience of the baptism. Right.

He'd be on a spiritual high. Yeah. Immune to temptation.

But it doesn't really work that way, does it? Apparently not. The wilderness is a place of testing. Right.

And even Jesus, the Son of God, has to face these challenges. And Matthew puts this episode right after the baptism. Yeah.

He does. Yeah. Which is interesting.

It's almost like he's saying, look, even being filled with the Spirit doesn't make you invincible. Right. It equips you for the battles.

Right. Which are definitely coming. Exactly.

And the wilderness setting itself, it's important here. You know, it makes you think of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Yeah.

And tested and refined. Yeah. Matthew's drawing this parallel between Jesus and Israel.

Okay. Like Jesus is the new Israel. The faithful remnant.

Yeah. The one who will succeed where Israel failed. Wow.

That's powerful. So what are these temptations that Jesus faces? Yeah. The first one is turning stones into bread.

Right. Which, I mean, seems pretty understandable. Yeah.

He's been fasting for 40 days. Right. But it's about more than just physical hunger.

It's about trusting God to provide. Even when things are tough. Yeah.

And about resisting that urge to use his power for himself. Right. Not for selfish gain.

Exactly. The devil is trying to get Jesus to act on his own. Apart from God.

Yeah. To take matters into his own hands. So it's a test of his obedience.

Yes. His reliance on God. Okay.

What about the second temptation? Well, the devil takes Jesus up to the highest point of the temple. Oh, wow. And tells him to jump off.

Seriously? Yeah. Claiming that angels will catch him. That's a whole other level.

Yeah. This one's way more insidious. Right.

It's about testing God. Demanding that God prove himself. It's like saying, if you really love me, you'll do this for me.

Exactly. It's manipulation. Wow.

Trying to exploit God. And Jesus doesn't fall for it. No.

He quotes Deuteronomy. Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Right.

He's not going to play that game. Okay. Two down, one to go.

Right. For the last temptation, the devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain. Okay.

Shows him all the kingdoms of the world. Wow. All of them.

Yeah. All their splendor and glory. And he offers them to Jesus.

He does. All that power in exchange for worship. I mean, that's the ultimate temptation, right? It is.

Worldly power without God. Exactly. The temptation to compromise.

Yeah. To achieve success on the devil's terms. To take a shortcut.

Yeah. To bypass the cross. And honestly, it feels like that temptation is still so relevant today.

Oh, absolutely. You know, we see people compromising their values all the time. Yeah.

Cutting corners, exploiting others. Just to get ahead. It's sad, but it's true.

But Jesus shows us a different way. Yes, he does. He chooses to obey.

Even though it means sacrificing power and glory. Yeah. He reminds us that true power comes from submitting to God.

Not from dominating others. Right. Okay.

So, three temptations, three victories for Jesus. What do you think Matthew is trying to tell us with this episode? Well, on one level, I think it's a reminder that we're all in this spiritual battle. Yeah.

It's real. The devil is real. And he's trying to get us off track.

Right. But it's also a message of hope. Okay.

Yeah. Jesus shows us that we can win. Yeah.

By relying on God's word and his Spirit. It's encouraging, you know. Seeing Jesus stand strong.

Yeah. It gives me hope. Me too.

That we can do the same. Yeah. Even when we're struggling.

Yeah, absolutely. But remember, this is just the beginning. Right.

The real test is yet to come. Yeah. Yeah, the real test is yet to come.

And after that intense showdown in the wilderness, Matthew shifts gears. Yeah. We see Jesus, he's launching his public ministry.

Okay. And he starts strong, echoing John the Baptist's message. Oh, right.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Exactly. It's the same message, but now it's coming from Jesus.

Yeah. The one John was pointing to. And there's this urgency to it.

Mm-hmm. It's not some far-off event. Right.

It's happening now. The kingdom is here. Yeah.

And the person of Jesus. Wow. And repentance, you know.

Yeah. It's not just about feeling bad about what you've done. It's about changing your whole life.

Turning away from everything that goes against God's will. Yeah. Turning towards God.

It's amazing how quickly Jesus starts gathering his disciples. Yeah. I mean, we've got those four fishermen.

Yeah. Simon, Peter, Andrew, James, and John. They just drop their nets and follow him.

I know. It's such a powerful image. It's like these ordinary guys leaving everything.

Yeah. To follow this radical rabbi. What do you think they saw in Jesus? Yeah.

What made them so willing to change their whole lives? I mean, they barely knew him at this point, right? I know. It's like there had to be something about Jesus that just drew them in. Yeah.

His message. His presence. Yeah.

And the way Matthew describes it, it's almost like they were just waiting for this. Yeah. Waiting to be called to something bigger.

I love that image of them being fishermen. Yeah. Me too.

It's not just about fishing for fish anymore. It's about fishing for people. Bringing them into the kingdom.

It's a beautiful picture of evangelism, isn't it? Yeah. Totally. Casting out the net of the gospel.

Bringing people into a new life. And this is just the beginning. Right.

Matthew takes us on this whirlwind tour. I know. It's like a montage.

Of Jesus's ministry. Yeah. Teaching.

Preaching. Healing the sick. Even raising the dead.

That's incredible. And then, of course, you have the Sermon on the Mount. Right.

Where Jesus lays it all out. Dr. Keener calls it a manifesto of the kingdom. I love that.

It's the perfect description. Yeah. It's not just a bunch of rules.

It's this whole new way of living. Rooted in love, compassion, justice. It's definitely a high bar.

Yeah, but that's what makes it so challenging, so exciting. Right. Jesus isn't just making a few adjustments.

Yeah. He's completely changing the game. Redefining what it means to be righteous.

It's not about outward appearances. Uh-huh. It's about a changed heart.

A righteousness that goes deeper than the scribes and Pharisees. A righteousness that comes from love. Love for God, love for your neighbor.

Exactly. And it's not just about individual piety, either. Right.

Right. It's about how we live together. Yeah.

How we treat the poor, the marginalized. How we work for justice. Yeah, for peace.

The Sermon on the Mount, it's a call to radical discipleship. Absolutely. A call to live differently.

To be salt and light. In a world that needs it so badly. And it's just as relevant today.

So as we wrap up our deep dive into these chapters of Matthew, yeah. What's the one thing you hope our listener takes away from all this? I think the biggest takeaway is that Matthew's gospel, it's not just a book of stories. Right.

It's a call to action. Yeah. It's an invitation to meet Jesus.

Uh-huh. To be challenged by what he says. Yeah.

And to let his spirit change us. Beautifully said. You know, as I was preparing for this, yeah.

I kept thinking about that line from the Sermon on the Mount. Which one? Where Jesus says, Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Oh, that's a good one.

It's like a reminder, you know. Yeah. When we make God's priorities our priorities, yeah.

Nothing else falls into place. It does. So to our listeners out there, yeah.

Keep seeking. Keep exploring. Keep wrestling with these questions.

Yeah. And most importantly, keep following Jesus. He's worth it.

He is. Thanks for joining us for this deep dive. It's been a pleasure.