

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 8 - Matthew--Kingdom

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're basically putting on our detective hats. We've got a first-century mystery on our hands, and our goal is to figure out why on earth the Gospel of Matthew was written in the first place.

Yeah, that's the big question, right? Why was this thing written? And let me tell you, the answer is way more interesting and, honestly, more complex than you probably think. You see, the thing is, Matthew, whoever he was, never comes right out and tells us why he's writing. It's not like there's a preface saying, "Here's my goal."

So that means it's on us. We have to follow the breadcrumbs, piece together the clues from inside the text itself to crack this case. Okay, so where do we start? Well, like any good detective story, we start at the scene of the crime.

And in our case, that means looking at who Matthew was writing for. Our first major clue is his original audience, a community that was, to put it mildly, in the middle of a massive identity crisis. Okay, really try to picture this.

You're a Jewish Christian in the first century. You're still going to the synagogue, right, with your family, your neighbors. But you're also part of this new Jesus movement.

So on one side, you've got your fellow Jews looking at you sideways, questioning if you're still one of them. And on the other side, the church is suddenly filling up with non-Jews, Gentiles. I mean, you'd be totally confused, caught right in the middle, asking yourself this huge question.

Are we still the real people of God? It was an absolute pressure cooker situation, and that's exactly who Matthew was writing to. So with that crazy amount of pressure, how does Matthew even begin to help? Well, the main piece of evidence, the smoking gun, if you will, is how he talks about Jesus. This isn't just a biography.

You know, Jesus did this, then he did that. No, it's a carefully crafted argument designed from the ground up to answer his community's deepest fears and questions. And Matthew builds this argument by painting five really powerful portraits of Jesus.

Each one is a crucial piece of our puzzle. He shows Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of David, the unique Son of God, the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament, a new and even greater Moses, and the ultimate wise teacher. See what he's doing? Each one of these was a direct message to his audience, basically screaming, Hey, Jesus isn't a break from our history.

He's the grand finale. Just take that new Moses idea, for example. I mean, the parallels are just, wow, they're so intentional.

Just like baby Moses escaped a king who was trying to kill all the baby boys, so did baby Jesus. And just like Moses went up Mount Sinai to get the law, Jesus goes up on a mountain to give his most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew is basically showing his readers, look, Jesus is reliving Israel's entire story, but this time he's getting it right.

He's not just like Moses; he's greater than Moses. Okay, so once Matthew has firmly established who Jesus is, he starts connecting the dots for his readers. And this is where it gets really interesting, because this powerful portrait of Jesus leads to something totally radical, a complete redefinition of what it even means to be one of God's people.

And here's the absolute game changer. Matthew is arguing that if Jesus is the true Israel, the fulfillment of it all, then being one of God's people isn't about your ethnicity anymore. It's not about being Jewish, and it's not even about perfectly following the old law of Moses.

Nope, it's now defined by one thing: your faith in Jesus. And that one shift, well, it blew the doors wide open for absolutely everyone. And just like that, the crisis that community was feeling suddenly starts to make sense in a whole new light.

The inclusion of all these non-Jews, the Gentiles, well, it wasn't some mistake or a weird detour from the plan. It was part of God's plan from the very beginning. That's why Matthew makes a point to include the Gentile wise men right at Jesus' birth, and why he ends his entire book with Jesus' final command to go and make disciples of all nations.

He's trying to reassure them, saying, hey, this new, inclusive family, this is exactly how it was always meant to be. But, you know, this leads to the biggest question of all, the final piece of our mystery. If Jesus is the promised King, the Messiah, then where's his kingdom? What's going on? Okay, first things first, let's get our terms straight.

When Jesus and Matthew talk about the kingdom of God, they're not talking about a place on a map with borders and a capital city. It's not a physical country. They're talking about God's dynamic, powerful, active reign and rule, his power breaking into the world and into people's lives.

And this idea has some seriously deep roots in the Old Testament. It really starts all the way back in Genesis with the idea that humanity was created to represent God's rule on earth. Then it gets more specific with the promise to King David that one of his descendants would come and establish that rule forever.

And then the prophets just ran with that idea, building up this incredible expectation for a future king who would finally come and make everything right. So fast forward to the first century when Jesus shows up. People were expecting one thing: a single, massive, dramatic event.

They thought the Messiah would arrive, kick out the Romans, put an end to all the suffering and evil of this present age, and boom, immediately start the age to come. This new era of God's perfect rule. They saw it as a clean break, one and done.

But that's not what happened, was it? And this created a huge puzzle for everybody. Jesus came; he did incredible miracles; he taught like no one they'd ever heard, but the Romans were still there. People were still suffering and dying.

So the question was, if he's the Messiah, why didn't the world just flip a switch and become perfect overnight, as everyone expected? And right here, this is the master key that unlocks Matthew's gospel and, frankly, most of the New Testament. Jesus revealed that the kingdom wasn't coming all at once; it was coming in two stages. It has already arrived with his first coming; it has broken into our present world, but it's not full or complete; everything is made new, and fulfillment is not yet here.

That's what we're waiting for when he returns. All right, we've gathered all the evidence, we've looked at all the clues; let's put it all together. It's time to close this case.

So now we can see it clearly. Matthew wasn't just writing down stories about Jesus; he was creating a foundational blueprint for this new, messy, inclusive community. He was giving them an identity, a purpose, and a way to understand their totally unique place in history, living in this strange but powerful overlap of the ages, between the already and the not yet.

And when you have this key, even Jesus' most famous teachings, like the Sermon on the Mount, suddenly click into place. It's not some impossible list of rules designed to show you how much you fail. No, it's a description of the kind of person you can become, the kind of life that's actually possible for someone who is a citizen of the kingdom that has already arrived.

And with that, our case is closed. Matthew wrote to give a community in deep crisis a new identity, and a roadmap for how to live in the tension of their time. And his solution leaves us with a really powerful question for ourselves.

If we are also living in this time between the already and the not yet, how should that change the way we see our world and our purpose in it?