

Christ's Ministry (Work Done for God) on Earth Begins



SABBATH—APRIL 2

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 3:1–12; 2 Peter 1:19; Philippians 2:5–8; Matthew 4:1–12; Isaiah 9:1, 2; Matthew 4:17–22.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people’ ” (Matthew 4:19, NIV).

ONE OF THE GREAT STRUGGLES OF HUMANS has been to know the meaning and purpose of our lives and how to live them. After all, we are not born with written instructions on how to live, are we?

“I did not understand what the meaning of life was,” said a 17-year-old boy from a well-to-do family. He later became a drug user. “I still do not. But I thought that everyone else did, that there was this big secret that everyone was in on that I was not in on. I thought everyone understood why we were here, and that they were all secretly happy somewhere without me.”

Paul Feyerabend, an Austrian writer and philosopher¹ of science, confessed in his autobiography: “So one day passes after another, and it is not clear why one should live.”

But we find clear reasons for our lives in the Bible, the gospel, and the story of Jesus and what He has done for us. In Jesus—His life before He became a human, His birth, life on earth, death, ministry in heaven, and His second coming—we can find the answers to life’s most puzzling and important questions. This week, we will look at the beginning of Christ’s work here on earth. This is a life and work that alone can give full meaning to our own.

DEFINITIONS

1. philosopher—a person who studies ideas about knowledge, truth, the nature and meaning of life, and so on.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND “PRESENT TRUTH” (Matthew 3:2, 3)

Matthew 3 begins with the work of John the Baptist. His first recorded word in the Bible is “Repent [Turn away from sin]!” (Matthew 3:2). In one way, that is a summary of what God has been saying to people since the Fall: *Repent, accept My forgiveness, put away your sins, and you will find Redemption² and rest for your souls.*

And yet, no matter how far-reaching that message is, John’s message also included clear “present truth” (2 Peter 1:12) for the people at that time.

Read Matthew 3:2, 3. What was the present truth message that John was preaching? This message came with his call for repentance,³ baptism, and confession. Read also Matthew 3:6.



John the Baptist taught that there would be a final separation between the wheat (God’s followers) and the chaff (the lovers of this world).

John also does something here that is done all throughout the New Testament. He quotes the Old Testament. Old Testament prophecy (special messages from God) comes alive in the New Testament. Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John all quote the Old Testament in order to help explain or prove the meaning of what was going on in the New Testament. Despite the miracles that he had personally seen Jesus do, it is no wonder that Peter pointed to the “sure [trustworthy; true] word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:19) when he was talking about the ministry of Jesus.

Read Matthew 3:7–12. What message does John have for the leaders? Despite his “hard” words, what hope is being offered them here, too?

Notice how important Jesus is to everything that John is preaching. Everything is about Jesus and about who He is and what He will do. John preaches the gospel. But he also makes it clear that there will be a final judgment, a final separation between the wheat and the chaff (the husks of the grain). And it will be Jesus who will do that dividing. So, this teaching is more proof of how inseparable the gospel is from judgment. Here also is an example of how, in the Bible, the first and second comings of Jesus are seen as one event. When John talks about Christ’s first coming, he is talking about the second, too.

DEFINITIONS

2. Redemption—the act of saving people from sin or evil; Christ saved us by dying on the cross for our sins.

3. repentance—feeling sorrow over your sins and turning away from sinning with the help of the Holy Spirit.

THE BIG DIFFERENCE IN THE WILDERNESS (Matthew 4:1)

Imagine the scene in Matthew 4:1 from Satan’s viewpoint. Jesus as the Son of God had now lowered Himself. He even took on human flesh in order to save the human race. This was the same Jesus whom Satan went to war against in heaven. This is the same Jesus who threw out Satan and his angels (read Revelation 12:7–9). But now this Jesus was . . . what? A very thin, starving Man alone in a rough wilderness with no one, it seemed, to help Him. Certainly, Jesus would now be an easy target for Satan’s tricks.

“When Satan and the Son of God first met in battle, Christ was the commander of the heavenly hosts. And Satan, the leader of the rebellion [war] in heaven, was cast out. Now their condition is clearly reversed. And Satan does his best to use his supposed advantage over Christ.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 119.

What a big difference: Lucifer had once tried to “be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14, NKJV). But Jesus had emptied Himself of the glory (power and honor) of heaven. Here, in this one scene, we can see the big difference between selfishness and selflessness. There is a big difference between what holiness is and what sin does.

Compare⁴ Isaiah 14:12–14 with Philippians 2:5–8. What does this tell us about the difference between the character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of Jesus and Satan?

Imagine how the angels must have felt about what was taking place. They had known Jesus in His heavenly glory. And now the angels watched as the two enemies (Jesus and Satan) stood face to face in a type of conflict they had never experienced between them before. We have the clear advantage of knowing how this fight turns out. But the angels—in fact all of heaven—did not. So, they must have watched this clash with close attention.

Satan glorified (praised and honored) himself. But Jesus sacrificed (gave up) Himself, even to the point of death. What can we learn from this powerful difference? How can we make use of this important truth for ourselves? How should it influence the way we make certain decisions, especially when our ego (sense of self) is perhaps too big?



Starved and thin, Jesus was alone in the wilderness, an easy target, it seemed, for Satan’s attacks.

DEFINITIONS

4. compare—to show how two or more things (such as Bible verses) are the same or different.

THE TEMPTATION (Matthew 4:1–12)



To carry out God's plan, Jesus needed to be baptized, even though He was sinless.

DEFINITIONS

5. righteousness—God's cleansing and forgiveness of our sins; His mercy creates a change of heart in us that makes us new.

Read Matthew 4:1–12. What happened here with these temptations? Why did Jesus have to go through such experiences? What does this story have to do with salvation? How did Jesus stand strong against these powerful temptations under such hard conditions? And what should that tell us about facing temptations of our own?

Matthew 4:1 starts out with what seems like a strange thought: the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted. We are supposed to pray that we are not led into temptation. “ ‘And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver [save] us from the evil one’ ” (Matthew 6:13, NKJV). Why, then, would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus in this way?

A key is found in the previous chapter, when Jesus comes to John to be baptized. At first John refuses to baptize Him. But Jesus says, “ ‘Let it be this way for now. It is right for us to do this. It carries out God's holy plan’ ” (Matthew 3:15, NIV). To carry out God's holy plan means Jesus must do what was needed in order to become humanity's perfect example and perfect representative before our heavenly Father. So, for this reason Jesus needed to be baptized, even though He was sinless.

In the wilderness temptation, Jesus had to pass over the same ground that Adam did. Jesus needed the victory against temptation that we all, from Adam onward, have failed to win. So by gaining the victory over sin, “Christ was to redeem [make right; correct] Adam's failure” (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 117). Jesus did so under conditions unlike anything that Adam had faced.

By this victory Jesus shows that we never have an excuse for sin. There are no right reasons for it. And, when tempted, we do not have to fall. But through faith and surrender, we can overcome. As we have been told: “So obey God. Stand up to the devil. He will run away from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you” (James 4:7, 8, NIV).

This story shows in a powerful way that there is no excuse for our sin. But how does this story show how important our need for Christ's righteousness⁵ is? Suppose we had to stand in our own righteousness without Jesus' covering and without forgiveness for our sins! What hope would we have?

THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND NAPHTALI (Matthew 4:13–16)

Matthew 4:12 tells about John being imprisoned. So, this situation ended his ministry. At this point, Jesus' ministry "officially" begins. When Jesus heard about John, He went to Galilee. The Bible says that He did so but does not explain why. (Read also Mark 1:14–16 and Luke 4:14.) Perhaps, while John was still preaching, Jesus wanted to keep quiet to avoid a rivalry (competition) between His followers and John's. The Greek verb in Matthew 4:12, often translated "departed," gives the idea of "withdrawing" to avoid danger. So, wise as always, Jesus might have wanted to avoid trouble.

Read Matthew 4:13–16 (read also Isaiah 9:1, 2) about Jesus' settling in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. What are these verses saying about the ministry of Jesus?

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's sons (read Genesis 35:23–26). Their children became two of the tribes that settled in the beautiful northern area of the Promised Land.

Unfortunately, these two tribes were among the 10 tribes who gave up their faith in God and turned to the things of the world. Many of the Old Testament prophets (special messengers) spoke against the sinfulness, the worldliness, and the evil of these northern tribes. These tribes were overrun by the Assyrians, who then scattered them around the then-known world. In turn, Gentiles (non-Jews) settled in Israel, and Galilee became a mixed population, a confused and dark place. Galilee's most famous prophet was Jonah, which ought to tell us something about the Galileans' low level of faithfulness.

Whatever the problems in Galilee, there was this beautiful prophecy in Isaiah—that even in the dark land of Zebulun and Naphtali, "the people who are now living in darkness will see a great light" (Matthew 4:16, NIV). In other words, here—where people were considered rude, backward, and rough—Jesus came and lived and ministered (worked) among them. Here, we see the willingness of Jesus to humble Himself for the sake of others. We see here, too, another example of how important the Old Testament was to the ministry of Jesus.

How can we avoid the temptation to judge people as unworthy of our efforts to minister and witness to them? What is so wrong with that kind of attitude (thought and feeling)?

CALLING THE FISHERMEN (Matthew 4:17–22)

“ ‘Turn away from your sins!’ he said. ‘The kingdom of heaven is near’ ” (Matthew 4:17, NIV). Just like John, Jesus began His ministry by telling the people to repent. Jesus knew, as did John, the sinful condition of humanity and the need for all people to repent and come to a knowledge of God. So, it is not surprising that Jesus’ first public preaching included calling people to turn away from sin.

Read Matthew 4:17–22. What do these verses tell us about how important that call to repent is to our lives?



Jesus chose unlearned fishermen whom He could educate for His work.

Here, in the forgotten land of Galilee, was a small fishing partnership run by four young men: two sets of brothers. These men clearly had a heart for God, because for a while some of them followed John the Baptist. But to their surprise, John the Baptist had pointed them to another young man from their own area.

These men had reached out to Jesus of Nazareth and asked to spend time with Him (read John 1). That is how this culture worked: men would go to a rabbi and ask to follow him. But it was the rabbi who made the final decision about who his disciples would be. And when a rabbi asked you to be his disciple, it was a very exciting moment.

Many people have thought that when Jesus called the disciples at the sea, this was the first time they had met Him. But we know from John 1 through 5 that these men already had spent some time with Jesus for a year.

“Jesus chose unlearned [uneducated] fishermen because they had not learned all of the wrong ideas being taught in their day. The men Jesus chose were men who had natural gifts and skills. They were humble and teachable. They were men whom Jesus could educate for His work. In the common walks of life there are many men faithfully doing their daily work, not knowing that they have powers that would make them equal with the world’s most honored men. The touch of a skillful hand is needed to wake up their abilities. It was such men that Jesus called to be His coworkers. And Jesus gave them the advantage of fellowshiping with Himself.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 250.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: An evangelist⁶ came to town and advertised his meeting like this: “Come see a preacher tear a page out of the Bible!” No doubt those words drew a large crowd. The evangelist then stood before the crowd, opened his Bible, and—to their surprise—tore out a page just as he said he would. “This page,” he said, “never belonged there. It is the page separating the Old Testament from the New Testament.” Whatever one might think of his actions, the preacher made a good point. These two books are really one. All through the New Testament, the Old Testament is quoted. Time and again, events in the New Testament are explained and supported by either Jesus Himself or the New Testament writers. These men often pointed to the Old Testament. How often did Jesus say that “Scripture [the Bible] must be fulfilled”? Jesus Himself often pointed back to the Old Testament writings (read John 5:39; Luke 24:27; Matthew 22:29; John 13:18). Paul always was quoting the Old Testament (Romans 4:3; Romans 11:8; Galatians 4:27). The book of Revelation pointed back to about five hundred fifty Old Testament examples. The New Testament always links itself to the Old Testament. The Old and New Testaments are God’s written examples to people about the plan of salvation. Of course, some practices of the Old Testament, such as the sacrificial⁷ system, no longer apply to Christians. But we must never make the mistake of making the Old Testament less important than the New Testament. The Bible includes both Testaments. From them both we learn very important truths about God and the plan of salvation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① We can see the different ways that Satan tempted Jesus. In each case Jesus did not fall into Satan’s traps. Also notice just how important the Word of God (the Bible) is here. Jesus was the Lord Himself, now in “the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3). But He used the Scriptures as a defense against the devil’s temptations. If Jesus Himself had to do that, what should that tell us about how very important the Bible needs to be in our lives, as we struggle with temptation? We may know that we should use the Bible in our battle with temptation. But how do we do that in practice? What are some ways we can use the Bible to help us fight against Satan’s attacks?
- ② Why is being humble so important for Christians? How can we learn to be and stay humble? What part should the Cross play in helping us in this important area?

DEFINITIONS

6. evangelist—a preacher who travels from place to place, preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

7. sacrificial—having to do with making offerings of animals to God.