

The Ministry Begins



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 3:1–12; 2 Pet. 1:19; Phil. 2:5–8; Matt. 4:1–12; Isa. 9:1, 2; Matt. 4:17–22.*

Memory Text: “‘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 humanity has been to know what the meaning and purpose of our lives are and how to live them. After all, we don't come with written instructions tucked under our arms on how to live, do we?

“I didn't understand what the meaning of life was,” said a 17-year-old boy from a well-to-do family who became a prescription drug addict. “I still don't, but I thought that everyone else did, that there was this big secret that everyone was in on that I wasn't. I thought everyone understood why we were here, and that they were all secretly happy somewhere without me.”

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

Hence, the Bible, the gospel, and the story of Jesus and what He has done for us. In Jesus—His preexistence, birth, life, death, ministry in heaven, and second coming—we can find the answers to life's most pressing questions. This week, we will look at the beginning of Christ's life and work here on earth, a life and work that alone can give full meaning to our own.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 9.

John the Baptist and “Present Truth”

Matthew 3 begins with John the Baptist, whose first recorded word in the text is an imperative—“Repent!” (*Matt. 3:2*). In one way, that’s a summary of what God has been saying to humanity since the Fall: *Repent, accept My forgiveness, put away your sins, and you will find Redemption and rest for your souls.*

And yet, no matter how universal that message, John also put a distinct “present truth” (*2 Pet. 1:12*) spin on it, a message for those people at that specific time.

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

John also does something here that is done all through the New Testament. He quotes the Old Testament. Old Testament prophecy comes alive in the New: time and again, whether Jesus or Paul or Peter or John, all quote the Old Testament in order to help validate, explain, or even prove the meaning of what was going on in the New. No wonder Peter, even in the context of the miracles he had personally witnessed, nevertheless stressed the “sure word of prophecy” (*2 Pet. 1:19*) when talking about the ministry of Jesus.

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

Notice how central Jesus is to everything that John was preaching. Everything even then was about Jesus and about who He was and what He would do. Though the gospel was presented, John also made clear that there will be a final reckoning, a final divide between the wheat and the chaff, and that it will be the prophesied One who will do that dividing. Hence 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 viewed as one event as we see John—in the immediate context of Christ’s first coming—talking about the second, as well.

The Contrast in the Wilderness

“Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1, NKJV).

Imagine this scene from the perspective of Satan himself. The divine, exalted Being whom he knew as the Son of God had now lowered Himself—had taken on human flesh—in order to save the human race. This was the same Jesus whom he warred against in heaven and who threw him and his angels out (*see Rev. 12:7–9*). But now this Jesus was—what? An emaciated human being alone in a harsh wilderness with no obvious support? Certainly Jesus would now be an easy target for Satan’s deceptions.

“When Satan and the Son of God first met in conflict, Christ was the commander of the heavenly hosts; and Satan, the leader of revolt in heaven, was cast out. Now their condition is apparently reversed, and Satan makes the most of his supposed advantage.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 119.

What a contrast: though Lucifer had once sought to “be like the Most High” (*Isa. 14:14, NKJV*), Jesus had emptied Himself of the glory of heaven. Here, in this one scene, we can see the vast difference between selfishness and selflessness; the vast difference between what holiness is and what sin does.

Compare Isaiah 14:12–14 with Philippians 2:5–8. What does this tell us about the difference between the character of Jesus and that of Satan?

Imagine how the angels who had known Jesus in His heavenly glory must have viewed what was taking place as these two foes now stood face to face in a mode of conflict that the two had never experienced between them before. Though we have the advantage of knowing how this turned out, the angels—indeed all of heaven—didn’t; and so, they must have watched this conflict with rapt and fascinating attention.

Satan exalted himself. Jesus humbled Himself, even to the point of death. What can we learn from this powerful contrast, and how can we apply this important truth to ourselves? How should it impact the way we make certain decisions, especially those in which our ego is at stake?

The Temptation

Read Matthew 4:1–12. What happened here with these temptations? Why did Jesus have to go through this? What does this story have to do with salvation? How did Jesus endure such powerful temptations under such hard conditions, and what should that tell us about enduring temptations?

Matthew 4:1 starts out with what seems like a strange thought: it was *the Spirit* that 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 us from the evil one” ’ ” (*Matt. 6:13, NKJV*). Why, then, would the Holy Spirit lead Jesus this way?

A key is found in the previous chapter, when Jesus comes to John to be baptized. Seeing John’s resistance, Jesus says, “ ‘Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness’ ” (*Matt. 3:15, NKJV*). To fulfill all righteousness, that is, to do what was needed in order to be humanity’s perfect example and perfect representative, Jesus had to be baptized, even though He was sinless.

In the wilderness temptation, Jesus had to pass over the same ground that Adam did. He needed the victory against temptation that we all, from Adam onward, have failed to attain. And thus, by so doing, “Christ was to redeem Adam’s failure” (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 117), only He did so under conditions unlike anything that Adam had faced.

By this victory Jesus shows that we never have an excuse for sin, that there is no justification for it, and that, when tempted, we don’t have to fall but through faith and submission we can overcome. As we have been told: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (*James 4:7, 8, NKJV*).

How does this account, by showing us in such a powerful way that there is no excuse for our sin, make our need for Christ’s righteousness so essential? Imagine if we had to stand in our own righteousness without that covering and without justification for our sins! What hope would we have?

The Land of Zebulun and Naphtali

Matthew 4:12 tells about the imprisonment of John, thus ending his ministry. At this point, Jesus' ministry "officially" begins. The text doesn't say why, when Jesus heard about John, He went to Galilee, only that He did. (See also *Mark 1:14–16* and *Luke 4:14*.) Perhaps, while John was still preaching, Jesus wanted to keep a lower profile, lest a rivalry arise. The Greek verb in Matthew 4:12, often translated "departed," can give the idea of "withdrawing," in the sense of avoiding danger. Thus, prudent as always, perhaps Jesus was seeking to avoid trouble.

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

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of Jacob's sons (see *Gen. 35:23–26*), and their descendants became two of the tribes that ultimately settled in the beautiful northern region of Canaan.

Unfortunately, these two tribes were among the ten tribes who gave up their faith in God and turned to the things of the world. Many of the Old Testament prophets railed against the sinfulness, the worldliness, and the evil of these northern tribes, who were eventually overrun by the Assyrians, who then scattered them around the then known world. In turn, Gentiles 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 their level of commitment.

Whatever the problems in Galilee, there was this beautiful prophecy in Isaiah—that even in the dark land of Zebulun and Naphtali, "on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" (*Matt. 4:16, NIV*). In other words, here—where the need was so great, where people were deemed rude, backward, boorish—Jesus came and lived and ministered among them. However exalted He Himself might have been, we see the willingness of Jesus to humble Himself for the sake of others. We see here, too, another example of how central the Old Testament was to the ministry of Jesus.

How can we avoid the temptation to deem people as unworthy of our efforts to minister and witness to them? What's so wrong with that attitude?

The Call of the Fishermen

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (*Matt. 4:17, NKJV*). Just like John, Jesus began His ministry with a call to repentance. He knew, as did John, the fallen state of humanity and the need for all people to repent and come to a knowledge of God. Thus, it’s not surprising that His first public proclamation, at least as recorded here in Matthew, was with a call to repentance.

Read Matthew 4:17–22. What do these verses tell us about the totality of that call that Jesus has on our lives?

Here, in the forgotten land of Galilee, was a small fishing partnership run by four young men: two sets of brothers. These men apparently 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 in the direction of another young man from their own region.

These men had approached Jesus of Nazareth and asked to spend time with Him (*see John 1*). That’s how this culture worked: men would approach 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 grown up with the idea 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 had already spent a year with Jesus—apparently on a part-time basis.

“Jesus chose unlearned fishermen because they had not been schooled in the traditions and erroneous customs of their time. They were men of native ability, and they were humble and teachable,—men whom He could educate for His work. In the common walks of life there is many a man patiently treading the round of daily toil, unconscious that he possesses powers which, if called into action, would raise him to an equality with the world’s most honored men. The touch of a skillful hand is needed to arouse those dormant faculties. It was such men that Jesus called to be His colaborers; and He gave them the advantage of association with Himself.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 250.

Further Thought: An evangelist came to town and advertised his meeting by this invitation: “Come see a preacher tear a page out of the Bible!” That, no doubt, brought a crowd. He then stood before them, opened his Bible, and—to their astonishment—tore out a page. “This page,” he said, “never belonged there. It’s the page separating the Old Testament from the New.” Whatever one might think of his theatrics, 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 justified by either Jesus Himself or the New Testament authors, by references to the Old Testament. How often did Jesus make the statement, in one form or another, that “Scripture must be fulfilled”? Whether from Jesus Himself, who repeatedly pointed back to the Old Testament writings (see *John 5:39, Luke 24:27, Matt. 22:29, John 13:18*), to Paul, who was always quoting the Old Testament (*Rom. 4:3, 11:8, Gal. 4:27*), to the book of Revelation, with an estimated 550 Old Testament allusions, the New Testament constantly links itself to the Old. The Old and New Testaments are God’s written revelations to humanity of the plan of salvation. Though, no question, some parts of the Old Testament, such as the sacrificial system, are no longer binding upon believers, we must never make the mistake of somehow relegating the Old Testament to an inferior status to the New. The Bible is composed of both Testaments, and from them both we learn crucial truths about God and the plan of salvation.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 We can see the various ways that Satan tempted Jesus and how in each case Jesus didn’t fall prey to any of the temptations and deceptions behind those temptations. Notice, too, just how central the Word of God was here. Though Jesus was the Lord Himself, now in “the likeness of sinful flesh” (*Rom. 8:3*), He used the Scriptures as a means of defense against the devil’s temptations. If Jesus Himself had to do that, what should that tell us about how central and crucial the Bible needs to be in our lives, especially as we struggle with temptation? Though we might know in principle that we are to use the Bible in our battle with temptation, how in practice do we do that? What are some ways we can use the Bible to help us withstand the assaults that we all face?
- 2 Why is humility so crucial a trait for Christians? How can we learn to be and stay humble? What role should the Cross play in helping us in this crucial area?

The Tooth: Part 2

The story this far: Newlyweds Colin and Melva Winch were on their first mission assignment in the Solomon Islands as nurses. During one of Colin's first outpatient clinics, a patient came in needing a tooth extraction. While Lukana, the clinic assistant, firmly held the patient's head in place, Colin gave the patient an injection.

Selecting the lower-jaw forceps, Colin approached the apprehensive patient. While Lukana held Jacob by the hair, Colin planted his feet firmly on the floor, gripped the molar, squeezed and pulled and pushed. The tooth didn't move! Failure as a "dentist" had become a real possibility.

The day was hot and steamy. Any ventilation that might have reached Colin was blocked by the curious spectators. Those with a clear view of the procedure continued the commentary to those who couldn't see. There were beads of perspiration on Colin's brow—also on Jacob's, although for different reasons.

Colin selected alternative forceps and gripped the offending tooth once more. Jacob sank deeper into the chair restrained by Lukana. Pull! Push! Pull!

It seemed like an hour to Colin as he worked without success. Some of the observers were beginning to have doubts. Others were leaving, deciding the new "dentist" was no good.

Then Jacob said, "Doctor, you have forgotten something!"

"No, I don't think so, Jacob," he replied. Colin checked the sterile tray. All was in order.

"You have forgotten to pray, Doctor!"

Incredulous at his own forgetfulness, Colin and Lukana helped Jacob out of the dental chair and the three knelt in prayer. The spectators whispered the news: "They're praying!"

Expectations rose again. Some who were about to leave waited to observe the answer to prayer.

Back in the chair, Jacob received another pain-deadening injection. Taking the same pair of forceps, Colin offered another silent prayer, and placing his feet firmly on the floor once more, gripped the molar and pulled.

Those four huge curled molar roots came out as easily as pulling a nail out of soft timber. "It's out!" went up the cry as Colin held up the offending tooth. In his excitement, Lukana had failed to loosen his grip on Jacob's hair. But, with an enormous grin, Jacob praised God for the miracle.

So did Colin. His reputation was intact, and his dental practice began to flourish.

This story has been reprinted from Winchee: Mission Stories of Colin and Melva Winch by S. Ross Goldstone, with permission from Signs Publishing in Warburton, Victoria, Australia. To enjoy more adventure stories from their mission service, the book may be purchased at www.AdventistBookCenter.com.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Matthew 3:2, 4:17*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the primary mission of John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ.

Feel: Sense the power and thrust of the message of the Baptist and the Messiah.

Do: Accept the call to discipleship extended by Christ.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Primary Mission of John and Jesus

- A** What was the mission of John?
- B** How did the mission of Jesus differ from that of John?
- C** What does Jesus' victory over Satan mean in relationship to His mission?

II. Feel: The Power and Thrust of the Message of John and Jesus

- A** Both John and Jesus called for repentance (*Matt. 3:2, 4:17*). Are there differences between the two calls?
- B** How are repentance and discipleship related to the kingdom of God?

III. Do: Accept the Call to Discipleship.

- A** Discipleship involves leaving and cleaving. What does one leave? To what does one cleave, and what are the experiential steps that testify to this process?
- B** What does it mean to be fishers of men in terms of inner experience and outward responsibilities?

▶ **Summary:** Matthew 3 and 4 present repentance, victorious life, and discipleship as essential features of the kingdom of God. How do you see the linkage between these concepts?

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 3:2, 4:17*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The phrase “kingdom of heaven” or its variant “the kingdom of God” occurs 106 times in the Gospels: 49 times in Matthew, 16 in Mark, 38 in Luke, and 3 in John. Undoubtedly, it is the central theme of the teachings of Jesus. Wherever “kingdom” is mentioned with reference to the ministry of Jesus, there is a sense of newness. Newness because the incarnation of Jesus and His death on the cross have assured, on the one hand, the Redemption of humanity from sin (*John 3:16*) and, on the other, the total destruction of the devil and his angels (*Matt. 25:41*). Salvation from sin and the elimination of evil are secured in the message of the King and His kingdom. Hence, the kingdom that Jesus spoke about is often described in two powerful phrases: the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of glory. “The kingdom of God’s grace is now being established, as day by day hearts that have been full of sin and rebellion yield to the sovereignty of His love. But the full establishment of the kingdom of His glory will not take place until the second coming of Christ to this world.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 108.

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson presents five spiritually dynamic essentials in the Christian life: repentance; kingdom of heaven; baptism by water, the Spirit, and fire; victory over Satan; and becoming “fishers of men.” Ensure that your class understands the meaning of each of these concepts and how they are indispensable to the Christian faith and life.

Opening Discussion: Repentance is a milestone that divides the attitudes, priorities, and direction of one’s life with the incisiveness of B.C. and A.C.: before coming to Christ (B.C.) and after coming to Christ (A.C.). Christ is thus the great divider, the new definer, the new Lord of life. Lead the class in a discussion as to what this implies in practical terms.

Discussion Question: Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries with a call for repentance. Compare and contrast the views of John and Jesus.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Isaiah was the first to prophesy that a forerunner would prepare “the way of the Lord” (*Isa. 40:3*) for the arrival of the

Messiah. Malachi (4:5) picked up the theme and predicted that a forerunner in the spirit of Elijah would precede the day of the Lord. After 400 years, the prophetic silence was broken, and John the Baptist emerged in the “wilderness of Judea” (Matt. 3:1, NKJV). Matthew identifies this forerunner as John, with whom this week’s lesson begins. How did John prepare the way for the Messiah? How was the Messiah introduced to the world? How did the Messiah begin His ministry?

Bible Commentary

I. Preparation for the Messiah *(Review Matthew 3:1–12 with the class.)*

John is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD’ ” (*Matt. 3:3, NKJV*). The King is about to come. His highway of human hearts needs to be readied. How did John expect to achieve this?

He called for repentance. The Greek word for “repent” means “a change of mind,” a change of direction, a change of life. John demanded that his hearers radically change the spiritual and moral compass of life and return to God. He denounced sin everywhere and in any form—be it in Herod, whose life was marked by murder, adultery, and plunder; or in the Pharisees, who equated righteousness with religious routines; or in ordinary people, who prided themselves on being Abraham’s children. The Baptist labels those who expected God’s approval because of position, wealth, power, or lineage as nothing but a “brood of vipers” (*Matt. 3:7, NKJV*).

He called for a life that will meet the test of judgment. John spoke of judgment (*Matt. 3:10–12*) in picturesque terms of certainty—the ax to cut down “every tree which does not bear good fruit”; the “winnowing fan” to blow away the trash; the cleansing ensured by the threshing; the gathering of the “wheat into the barn”; and the burning up of the chaff (*Matt. 3:10–12, NKJV*).

He spoke of the coming kingdom. The nearness of the kingdom demanded an immediate response from his hearers. With repentance from sin, there’s no time to waste. The forging of the kingdom does not permit delay but expects only that we be ready, be baptized, and be counted worthy of the kingdom.

Consider This: Some Jewish scholars see nine norms of a repentant life in Isaiah 1:16, 17: “*Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow*” (*NKJV*). Share why you agree or disagree.

II. Introduction of the Messiah *(Review Matthew 3:13–17, 4:1–11 with the class.)*

Two great events—baptismal anointing and victory over Satan—introduce the Messiah.

“Jesus came from Galilee . . . to be baptized.” Jesus’ baptism is not to be seen as the process of “repent and be baptized,” but He was baptized to show that the Son of God has fully identified Himself with human beings whom He came to save. Jesus is sinless in every sense of the term, but that did not mean He did not or could not identify Himself with sinners. Hence Ellen G. White wrote: “Jesus did not receive baptism as a confession of guilt on His own account. He identified Himself with sinners, taking the steps that we are to take, and doing the work that we must do.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 111.

Jesus’ baptism also must be seen for what it was: heaven’s appointment with earth during which the Father placed His personal insignia on the Son, and the Spirit came down to equip the Son for the arduous task ahead. The baptism opened the way for the Messiah to set His eyes on the distant cross and tread the path of suffering and redemption alone, with the assurance that He was indeed the Messianic King and the Suffering Servant. The baptism of Jesus is also an affirmation that the Trinity together is involved in the plan of Redemption.

Consider This: John’s baptism was one of water (*Luke 3:14–18*). But the Baptist predicted that the One who shall come after Him “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (*Luke 3:16, NKJV*). What do you understand by baptism of fire (*compare with Mal. 3:1–3*)?

III. The Messiah Begins His Ministry *(Review Matthew 4:12–22 with the class.)*

The departure of Jesus into the wilderness had a precise focus: to be alone, to communicate with His Father through fasting and prayer, to meditate on the why and the how of His mission ahead, and to plan the mission team He was about to organize. Such a moment of seeking for clarity is precisely the moment when the devil chose to entice, “tempt,” and lead Jesus, if possible, away from God’s preordained redemptive plan—the Cross. Satan’s strategy was to thwart Christ’s mission by trying to make Him doubt His Sonship, by testing His confidence in His Father’s love, and by the offer to regain the lost planet without the Cross. Jesus overcame each of the temptations by trusting in the power of the Word—a lesson we can ignore only at our peril.

The secret of Jesus’ victorious life also can be our weapon against the enemy (*Eph. 6:17*). He, the giver of the Word, lived by the Word. So can we. Absolute dependence and undiluted trust in God make up a life that cannot be shaken by the lack of bread, the lure of power, or nefarious disbelief, built on the scorn that the kingdom of God is but a fantasy.

Discussion Question: Temptation in and of itself is not sin. In the biblical sense, temptation has the potential to affirm the possibility of holiness. To be tempted is one thing; to fall into sin is another. Where does our security lie? Elaborate further.

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Review Matthew 3:13–17 and 4:1–11. The first passage is a strong, positive affirmation of the Person and mission of Jesus, showing that the entire Godhead is involved in Jesus’ redemptive mission. The second is an assault, a creeping of doubt, an attempt to divert Jesus from His mission. Now discuss the following questions.

Thought Questions:

❶ What lessons can you draw from these two sets of passages that may be applicable to your personal spiritual struggles?

❷ Recall an experience in which one moment you live in the absolute certainty of God’s guidance and in the next you fear the onslaught of Satan. How do you deal with such situations?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: To be tempted is not sin, but yielding to temptation is. Life is full of temptations: to cheat on your spouse; to take a shortcut in reaching a particular objective, knowing that such a route affects another person unfairly; to ignore or compromise the expectations of our workplace; or to neglect deliberately our relationship with God or His church. Discuss such possible situations.

Activity: Ask your class members to write down, anonymously, the kind of temptations that they face most and how they handle such situations. Encourage each person to find a scripture that may answer such difficulties. Gather the notes and mix them up. Give each member one note to read aloud and to share what he or she can learn from the struggles that others face. Alternately, to do this activity without supplies, invite class members to share which temptations they feel beset Christians the most. Then invite them to share scriptural solutions that offer hope in confronting these difficulties.