



MATTHEW

BOOKS OF FAITH SERIES
Learner Session Guide

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SESSION ONE

Matthew
1:18—2:12

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Focus Statement

The birth of Jesus is associated with various names, ideas, and events—each with profound meaning. In contrast to the other gospels, Matthew emphasizes that this messiah is foretold by the prophets, a king worthy of homage, and one who will save his people.

Key Verse

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” [Matthew 1:23](#)

The Birth of the Messiah

Focus Image



Nativity Christmas scene © iStock/Thinkstock

Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

O God, who came among us by way of a peasant child, Emmanuel: we ask you to help us see the significance of your coming among us, to help us discern how best we may embrace you in our lives, and finally to help us respond in ways that honor you as royalty in our hearts. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Focus Activity

Sketch images or write down words and ideas that come to mind when you think about the birth of Jesus.

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Open Scripture

Read Matthew 1:18—2:12.

- What features of these stories stand out to you?
- What questions do these stories raise for you?
- What are your first impressions of Matthew's gospel?

Join the Conversation

Historical Context

1. The fact that Joseph and Mary are not yet married makes for a socially difficult situation. Although engagement itself was a formal and binding contract in this time and culture, Mary's pregnancy out of wedlock inevitably would have been viewed as a sign of infidelity—a mark of great social shame and even grounds for execution.

- What does it mean to you that Jesus was born into a situation of social shame for his family?

2. As we read Matthew's gospel, we quickly realize we are entering into a new world—a time long ago in the Middle East, in a realm heavily influenced by Jewish religious tradition. One example is the term "Messiah" or "Christ" in Matthew 1:1, 16-18. The word signifies an anointed leader whom Jews at this time expected to come from God to inaugurate a realm of peace. Precise definitions of the messiah are difficult to pin down, but certainly many Jews associated the messiah with a political and military leader who would free the Jewish people from foreign rule (such as the Roman Empire).

- Read Matthew 1:18-25 and list words and phrases that describe the purpose of Jesus the Messiah. (See especially verses 21-23.)

- In what ways does the story of Jesus' birth in Matthew fit or contrast with the ideas people at this time had about the messiah?

3. Unlike the shepherds in Luke 2:8-20, the “wise men” (Greek *magi*) in Matthew are non-Jews who learn about Jesus' arrival when a star appears. In response, they travel some distance to seek out the child. Despite the fact that Jesus is “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2), these non-Jewish wise men kneel before him in worship, in a way worthy of a king.

- Matthew makes strong connections between Israel's history and the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), but the first people to take notice of the Messiah in this gospel are not Jews but “outsiders.” How does Jesus' welcome by non-Jews affect the meaning of the story?
- Several passages in the Hebrew Bible foresee the travels of non-Jews to Israel in order to worship Israel's God. Look up Isaiah 60:1-7 as an example. How does this passage compare with the visit of the wise men in Matthew 2:1-12?

Literary Context

1. More than any other gospel, Matthew takes shape squarely in view of Israel's history as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. This is especially true of the opening chapters. Matthew 1, for example, uses Jesus' genealogy to connect his ancestry with Israel's history.

- Look at the following passages together: Matthew 1:20-23 and Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 1:20-24 and Genesis 37:1-11; and Matthew 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14. What connections do you see between Matthew's narrative and stories from Israel's history? How do these connections shape how you read Matthew?

2. At first glance, the session text may look like a pairing of two very different stories (Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12). But the two stories have much in common, making it interesting to read them alongside each other.

- Identify the similarities and differences between the stories in Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-12. (Pay attention to the main characters, how they react, and how events finally take place.) How do these two stories read when you look at them together?

Lutheran Context

1. When they are made aware of Jesus' arrival, Joseph and King Herod both face a fork in the road. Each must choose between a path of judgment and a path of grace—following what society would expect or opting for a more merciful response. Although “righteous” (Matthew 1:19) or law-abiding, Joseph chooses the path of grace toward Mary and this extraordinary situation. Meanwhile, King Herod claims he



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wants to worship the child but ultimately chooses merciless judgment (see 2:16-18).

- What can we learn from these stories about the way judgment and grace work in relationships? Or about the presence of Christ in unexpected circumstances?
- Later on in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7; quoting Hosea 6:6), to show that his ministry is more about extending God's mercy to those in need than about adhering scrupulously to religious regulations. Where is God's mercy, rather than judgment, needed in today's world?

2. Although many regard Jesus' ethical teaching as central to his ministry, Martin Luther emphasized that receiving Christ as God's gift to us is more important than any of his teachings. Luther wrote: "The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own" ("Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels" [1521], *Luther's Works* 35:119).

- Consider the response of the wise men when they finally encounter Jesus (Matthew 2:9-11). How might we emulate their example in our own faith and lives today?
- Look at this session's Focus Image. A group of dignified travelers from a distant land, bearing some of the costliest gifts available, kneel before the tiny child of a humble peasant couple. Such a picture makes little sense to the average bystander. What meaning or significance does this picture have for you and your understanding of how God works?

Devotional Context

1. Try to block out what you know about the rest of the story and focus on the events surrounding Jesus' birth. If you were presented with the same situations as Joseph, Mary, Herod, the priests and scribes, and the wise men, how do you think you would respond?

2. Various characters in Matthew 1:18—2:12 are called on to act in faith without receiving much information. Joseph and Mary know very little about what lies ahead for them and the child. And the wise men simply see "his star at its rising" (Matthew 2:2) before they set out. How does this relate to your own experiences with faith today?

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

O God in Christ: we thank you for all that we learn from the simple but profound event of your arrival among us. Help us to respond to Christ's presence among us today with mercy not judgment, with openness to the unexpected, with earnest seeking for signs of your leading, with generosity with the things we hold dear, and with reverence and worship for the Christ who draws near. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Extending the Conversation**Homework**

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Matthew 3:13—4:11.
2. Several characters in Matthew 1:18—2:12 may be associated with particular paths or emphases of spirituality. Which of these four paths best characterizes your own spirituality?
 - Joseph (mysticism): engaged in direct experiences of the divine, discernment
 - Magi (activism): going and doing, gift giving, service
 - Mary (heart): engaged holistically with feelings and relationships
 - Priests, scribes, and Herod (mind): engaged in study, inquiry with experts, and logical reasoning
3. To explore further how Jesus' story in Matthew resonates with Israel's story in the Hebrew Bible, take a look at one or more of the following groups of passages in comparison with each other.
 - Matthew 1:18 (also 1:1) and Genesis 2:4; 6:9; 10:1; 11:27; 25:19; 37:2
 - Matthew 1:1-17 and Genesis 5:1-32; 10:1-32; 11:10-32; 25:12-18; 36:1-43
 - Matthew 1:22-23 and Isaiah 7:10-17
 - Matthew 2:1-12 and Isaiah 60:1-7 (also Isaiah 60:8-22 and 2:2-4 or Micah 4:1-3)
 - Matthew 2:3-6 and Micah 5:2 (also 1 Samuel 16:1-13; 2 Samuel 5:2)

Enrichment

1. Read the whole of Matthew 1 and 2 as well as chapters 3 and 4 in preparation for session 2.
2. Look for ways that Jesus' birth and the wise men are portrayed in artwork, music, movies, social media, or other forms of media. How do these different kinds of media capture what Matthew 1:18—2:12 is truly about? In what ways do they seem to miss the boat?



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3. Consider how traditional nativity scenes frequently place three wise men alongside shepherds and animals, with perhaps an angel and even a little drummer boy. After reading Matthew 1:18—2:12, what do you think of this common practice?

For Further Reading

“A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels” (1521) by Martin Luther. In *Luther’s Works* 35:115–124, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960.

The Gospel of Matthew by Daniel Harrington. Sacra Pagina series. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002.

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Matthew, by Donald Senior. Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.