

## SESSION ONE

Matthew 4:12-23

### Learner Session Guide



#### Focus Statement

Now is the time for us to follow in Jesus' footsteps and bring heaven to earth.



#### Key Verse

Immediately they . . . followed (Jesus). [Matthew 4:20](#)

## Who wants heaven on earth?

### Focus Image



Where might that be? © Image Source / SuperStock

### Gather

#### Check-in

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

#### Pray

*God, Creator of heaven and earth, we want to know you more. Unveil our eyes. Open our hearts. Create in us a deeper understanding of what it means to experience heaven on earth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

#### Focus Activity

Get to know the other people in your group by talking about your life circumstances—what is going on with you “right now.” In today’s session, we learn that now is the time for the kingdom of heaven—that it is not far from us, but nearer than we think. How does today’s Focus Image speak to this?

## SESSION ONE



### Open Scripture

Read Matthew 4:12-23.

- How does the mention of John the Baptizer’s arrest at the beginning of this text make you feel?
- In Matthew 4:15-16, we hear about how Jesus is fulfilling prophecy. Why is this important?
- Jesus’ first ministry words are, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). Why do you think he chose these words to start his ministry? What are some other phrases you think Jesus could have used?

### Join the Conversation

#### Historical Context

In Jesus’ day, one-third of the children died before the age of six. “By the mid-teens, 60 percent would have died. By the mid-twenties, 75 percent were dead and by the mid-forties, the figure reached 90 percent. Perhaps 3 percent of the population made it to their sixties. Few ordinary people lived out their thirties . . . moreover, it is obvious that much of Jesus’ audience would have been younger than he . . .” (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (SSCG)* by Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, [Fortress Press, 2003], p. 327).

1. Matthew 4:12 in the New Revised Standard Version begins with a word that suggests “there’s no time like the present.”
  - What is that word?
  - Note that Jesus “started” his ministry when he was 30. What does it mean to you that Jesus starts his ministry in his “senior years”?
2. Given the severe conditions of life in Jesus’ day, what would you have considered to be “good news/bad news”? Matthew purposefully uses the specific term “good news” because it was a political term of

the day. Chapter 4 verse 23 is the first time in Matthew we hear the words “good news.” Look at the previous chapters with:

- Mary’s unexpected pregnancy and Joseph’s near dismissal (1:18-25).
- The Magi’s dream warning them about Herod (2:1-12).
- Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fleeing for their lives to Egypt (2:13-15).
- The massacre of infants and their making a home in Nazareth (2:16-23).
- The devil tempting Jesus (4:1-11).

In light of all this “bad news”, how do you see the “now” of Matthew 4:12 as being the right time to hear “good news”?

3. Let’s talk about . . . fishermen. What kind of people were they? What was their status? What were their responsibilities? Did the kingdom of heaven coming near to fishermen simply mean more fish? That might seem heavenly to some anglers, but what about Simon Peter? Compare Peter’s first fishing encounter with Jesus (Luke 5:1-11) to one he had after the resurrection (John 21).

### Literary Context

Look at the action words in today’s text, as they paint a vivid picture for us. We see the words “immediately” and “followed” used twice. Repetition was one of the ways writers emphasized things before the days of punctuation! In addition, we hear about Jesus curing and healing “every” body. All of this speaks to the hyperbolic force of Matthew’s message.

1. Do you think the fishermen left “immediately,” no questions asked? Would you need to ask questions before you “left everything behind”? What would they be?
2. Do you think “every” single person was healed, or that the mention of “everybody” was a figure of speech for Jesus’ attraction and power? Could it be a common exaggeration similar to what we still use today, like “everyone is doing it”? Why might Matthew use exaggerated generalizations to talk about the “kingdom of heaven”?
3. When Jesus says in verse 19, “I will make you fish for people,” it is commonly thought that Jesus means they will fish for people. How does it change your idea of what it means to be a disciple if you are “fishing” or if you are “the fish”? Respond to the phrase: “Christianity is caught, not taught.”



Notes



Notes

### Lutheran Context

Lutherans do not focus on salvation as a one-time commitment to God that saves us from hell. Throughout Matthew, starting in today's text, verse 23, Jesus heals and cures people, thus "saving them," which is not limited to saving them from hell and providing them with eternal life.

1. How does this Lutheran understanding of wholeness inform our understanding of what "heaven on earth" looks like?
  
2. According to Luther, baptism is not merely a ritual that happens in our past or something that gives hope for our future; it's God's constant promise that "daily a new person can come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (*ELW*, p. 1165). How would it affect the decisions you make on a daily basis to be soaked in your baptismal promises rather than worried about making "right or wrong decisions" leading to heaven or hell?
  - How is this similar to/different from the other Gospels? See Luke 4:40-44; Mark 10:13-16, 23-27; John 3:1-6.
  - How is this similar to/different from what we find in the epistles? See Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; Galatians 5:19-25.

From what you've gathered from these passages, imagine together what the kingdom of heaven on earth should be like. How does it compare to kingdoms of the earth?

### Devotional Context

"Prophets read hearts, not cards or crystal balls or configurations in the heavens. What is in the human heart they compare to what is in the mind of God. The contrast becomes prophecy" (Joan Chittister from *Liguorian* magazine, [www.liguorian.org](http://www.liguorian.org)).

1. What do you think of Joan Chittister's definition of a prophet/prophecy? How does it compare to your picture of a prophet (what do they look like, what do they say)?
  
2. Although we talk about Jesus as the "fulfillment of prophecy" we do not always refer to him as "Jesus the prophet." What characteristics of the prophet Jesus are similar to Deborah (Judges 4-5), Elijah (1 Kings 17), Moses (Exodus 32), or Anna (Luke 2:36-38)?

3. It is tricky finding a balance in our lives and figuring out when and how to follow Jesus. When and why would we “drop everything”? Consider by way of a modern example the story of Greg Mortenson. In his best-selling book *Three Cups of Tea* (Penguin Books, 2006), Mortenson describes his willingness to live out of his car, keep his belongings in a storage unit, shower at the gym, and work the holiday/weekend/night shifts as a nurse in order to have the flexibility to go mountain-climbing. When his attempt to reach the summit of K2 (one of the highest peaks in the world) fails, he literally stumbles into a Pakistani camp where the direction of his life changes. From then on, Mortenson finds a calling in his life beyond climbing physical mountains to climbing the steep mountain of fighting terrorism by providing schools in rural poor communities in Pakistan.

- How did the “flexibility” of Mortenson’s life prepare him for this calling?
- What role does divine “serendipity” play in bringing the kingdom of heaven near to earth?
- Can you see your church welcoming the help of other religious groups who are also working towards heaven on earth?
- If someone came to our place of work and asked us to quit our jobs right then and there to do mission work, if the seed had been planted in our hearts, might it be possible that we also “immediately” follow?
- Is there a way to use our current life circumstances to stay where we are at and still follow faithfully?

### Wrap-up

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

### Pray

*Holy Spirit, come. Come into our lives this week ahead, and point out to us places of heaven on earth. Holy Spirit, guide our words, our thoughts, and our actions as we seek to follow you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*



Notes