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PREFACE

WELCOME TO THE NEW TESTAMENT, GOD'S LIVING WORD

Have you ever gone on vacation to a major theme park without the help of a detailed visitors' guide? No doubt you planned your trip full of anticipation and excitement about the thrills you would experience and the sights you would see. And yet you may have been frustrated when the vacation was over, because you didn't see as much of the park as you'd hoped to. If only you had known ahead of time which attractions are a "must," and what order seasoned park-goers recommend seeing them in!

Reading and applying God's word in the Bible can be a lot like visiting that much-anticipated theme park. You can open the Scriptures filled with excitement about learning what God has to say to you and what it means for your life. And yet you can sometimes wind up just as frustrated that you didn't fully understand his message. If only there were visitors' guides to help you get the most out of reading the Bible!

It was to provide you with a set of "visitors' guides to the Scriptures" that the books in this series were developed. Designed for both parish faith-sharing groups and individual use, each guide takes you, from beginning to end, through a particular book or set of books in the New Testament, pointing out the highlights along the way and encouraging you to make the most of your experience of Scripture. The Scripture texts are divided into short passages, and each citation is followed by a meditation and a set of three reflection questions.

Theme parks often have so much to offer that fully experiencing them in one visit isn't always feasible. And so attractions are often grouped into "packages" that are designed for different age groups or interests and that can be completed in a particular amount of time. Similarly, most of the books of the New Testament contain more riches than could adequately be explored in a single Bible study. For that reason, each book in the series offers four different "packages" that can be covered in eight-week periods. Each package or plan explores a particular theme by combining eight sets of meditations and reflection questions from among the dozens provided in the book. You can choose the package or packages that most appeal to you or your group, or feel free to use them as suggestions for creating your own unique Bible study. In case you would like to coordinate your choice of readings with the Mass, we also list the Sunday readings for each of the three cycles of the liturgical year (see Appendix 2, pp. 141–47).

To help you get the most out of the particular group of readings you choose to study, we provide "how-to's" for using the meditations and questions in a faith-sharing group as well as for personal reflection. For groups, we have designed each session to be completed in sixty to ninety

minutes, but you can easily adjust them to meet your particular needs. We also offer practical pointers for forming a faith-sharing group and dealing with group dynamics. A coordinators' guide is available for parishes and others who would like more detailed information about starting and facilitating their own programs.

Finally, because people come to the Bible with different backgrounds, we include general overviews of each book of the New Testament written by respected Scripture scholars, as well as articles that explore the culture and issues of the time. The insights in these materials will enrich your experience of the readings and provide interesting points of departure for reflection or discussion.

Whether studying the meditations in this book by yourself or with a group, prepare yourself for a life-changing adventure. Reflecting on Scripture transforms us—personally and communally—because it is the *living* word of God. We cannot be the same after we have spent time with God's word, because it comes to dwell in us. And we are meant to take that word out to others—through our words, actions, and attitudes—and make a difference with it.

Our sincere hope and prayer is that the guidelines presented here assist you in embracing God's word with your whole heart, mind, and soul—then, with passion and love, unleash it to the world.

So welcome to the New Testament! May you have a rewarding visit to the Gospel of Matthew and return to the Scriptures again and again.

The Word Among Us Press

CUSTOMIZING YOUR VISIT

Four Bible Study Plans

Do you have a faith-sharing group that would like to explore the ways Matthew reveals that Jesus is the Messiah? Or do you have a group that would prefer an overview or introduction to the Gospel of Matthew? Whatever the background or interests of your particular group of people, you can combine the many meditations in this guide to create a study of Matthew that they will all find rewarding.

We have suggested four Bible study “packages” below, designed to provide different approaches to the Gospel of Matthew. Each package explores a particular theme in Matthew or looks at Matthew from a particular perspective, and includes eight sessions designed to be studied one per week over an eight-week period. (Experienced Bible study leaders consider eight weeks to be the ideal duration for first-time faith-sharing groups as well as for longer-standing groups.) You should feel free to blend programs and shorten or lengthen them to meet your individual needs. You can also use the programs as examples to combine readings in other ways to create a program that matches the specific interests of your group. To make it easy to coordinate them with the Sunday Mass readings or seasons, we have provided a list of readings for the three cycles of the liturgical year (see Appendix 2, pp. 141–47).

You will also find the programs below well suited for personal study—whether you are currently in a Bible study group or not. Or you could choose to proceed through the meditations from beginning to end and cover the entire Gospel of Matthew at your own pace.

Plan 1: An Overview of Matthew’s Gospel—Eight Key Passages

You may want to begin with an eight-week overview of Matthew’s gospel. The list below divides the gospel into eight major sections. To ensure that you study the full range of passages, we recommend choosing one or two passages from each section:

Week 1: The Birth of Jesus and the Beginning of his Ministry (1:1–4:11), pp. 25–31

Week 2: The Sermon on the Mount and the Miracles in Galilee (4:12–9:38), pp. 32–60

Week 3: Jesus’ Messages to Missionaries (10:1–12:50), pp. 61–77

Week 4: The Parables and Acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah (13:1–17:27), pp. 78–99

Week 5: Jesus’ Teachings on Community and Forgiveness (18:1–20:34), pp. 100–110

Week 6: Jesus’ Teachings on the End Times and Persecution (21:1–25:46), pp. 111–30

Week 7: Jesus’ Passion and Death (26:1–27:66), pp. 131–35 (The passion narrative is covered in one session but is accompanied by eight questions instead of three. Your group might want to schedule additional time or add an extra session in order to cover all the points.)

Week 8: Jesus’ Resurrection (28:1–20), pp. 136–37

An overview based on the above plan might look like this:

- Week 1: The Birth of the Messiah: Obedient and Dedicated Faith (1:18-25), p. 26
- Week 2: Sermon on the Mount: Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets (5:17-19), p. 35
- Week 3: Message to Missionaries: Commissioning the Apostles to Preach (10:1-7), p. 61
- Week 4: A Parable: Rooted in Good Soil (13:1-9), p. 78
- Week 5: Jesus' Teaching: The Privilege of Serving Christ (20:1-16), p. 108
- Week 6: On the End Times: God's Blessing on the Sheepfold (25:31-46), p. 130
- Week 7: Jesus' Passion: The Passion of Christ (26:1–27:66), pp. 131–35
- Week 8: Jesus' Resurrection: Kingdom Courage Overcomes Fear and Death (28:1-15), p. 136

Plan 2: Jesus' Ethical Teachings—The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)

The second Bible study plan covers Jesus' rich and rewarding ethical teachings, which he delivered in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7):

- Week 1: Abundant Blessings (5:1-12), p. 33
- Week 2: Salt of the Earth, Light of the World (5:13-16), p. 34
- Week 3: Forgiveness Rather Than Retaliation (5:38-42), p. 39
- Week 4: Love for Enemies (5:43-48), p. 40
- Week 5: The Motives of Charity (6:1-6, 16-18), p. 41
- Week 6: Serve God and Worry Not (6:24-34), p. 44
- Week 7: Prayer According to God's Will (7:7-12), p. 46
- Week 8: Acting Upon the Father's Will (7:21-29), p. 48

Plan 3: Jesus the Messiah Inaugurates the Kingdom of Heaven

The third Bible study plan looks at Matthew's slow and steady unveiling of Jesus' true identity as the Messiah who comes to inaugurate the kingdom of heaven:

- Week 1: Gifts for the King (2:1-12), p. 27
- Week 2: The Servant's Baptism (3:13-17), p. 30
- Week 3: The Christian Mission (4:12-25), p. 32
- Week 4: Recognizing the Messiah (12:14-21), p. 73
- Week 5: The Christ, the Son of the Living God (16:13-20), p. 94
- Week 6: Transformed into the Image of Christ (17:1-9), p. 96
- Week 7: Jesus' Humble Entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11), p. 111
- Week 8: The Coming Day of the Lord (24:1-35), p. 125

Plan 4: Responding to Jesus' Call to Discipleship

The fourth Bible study plan includes passages that call you to strengthen and deepen your faith in Jesus:

Week 1: Repentance and the Spirit's Guidance (3:1-12), p. 29

Week 2: Reconciling with One Another (5:20-26), p. 36

Week 3: The Primacy of Mercy (12:1-8), p. 71

Week 4: Yielding Plentiful Fruit (13:18-23), p. 80

Week 5: Trusting in the Lord (14:22-36), p. 89

Week 6: Forgiveness from the Heart, Without Limit (18:21-35), p. 103

Week 7: The Readiness of the Wise (25:1-13), p. 128

Week 8: The Great Commission (28:16-20), p. 137

Matthew 1:1-17: God's Extraordinary Plan

While the inclusion of Jesus' genealogy may seem tedious to us today, it establishes Jesus' place within the Jewish tradition and his continuity with great Old Testament figures. It also highlights the Father's deliberate preparation for the sending of the Son. God carefully unfolded his plan by using his people across the generations—some admirable and some not.

Bible scholars have long commented on the “irregularities” found in Matthew's genealogy, especially its inclusion of women, an unusual occurrence in Jewish genealogies of that time. St. Jerome said that Matthew chose sinful women for his list, such as Rahab, but this doesn't accurately explain Ruth's inclusion. Others have said that Matthew chose foreign women, which is true of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Still others have commented that their “irregularity” is the

very thing the women in Matthew have in common. Yet each also played an extraordinary part in the history of Israel. They thus prepared the way for the unique and extraordinary role of Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus.

God worked in all of these unique individuals to prepare for the coming of his Son. We can find encouragement in this fact. Whether we are high and mighty or lowly and limited, God invites us and uses us to bring Jesus to others, just as Mary brought him to us. However “irregular” we may consider ourselves, the Father lets nothing stand in the way of his love, not even ourselves. What joyful hope this instills in us, that God uses us in an extraordinary way to bring his Son to others! In this sense, we participate in the ongoing genealogy of Christ.

1. Which names do you recognize from Matthew's list? Whose story are you most familiar with, and how does that story add to your understanding of Jesus?

2. If you could create your own Christian genealogy, who would you include in your list? What individuals or groups have most significantly influenced your own walk with Christ?

3. Do you know anyone who feels alienated from the church because of events in his or her past? What could you do to show them that God loves them and welcomes them back?

Matthew 1:18-25: Obedient and Dedicated Faith

Joseph demonstrated what can happen when we cooperate with God. Even before an angel had spoken to him, he had determined to protect Mary at great risk to his own standing in the community. Based on her testimony that she was “with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18), he trusted God and chose what he considered to be the safest course of action for her. An angel then further enlightened him by confirming Mary’s words and rewarding Joseph’s trust, saying, “[Jesus] will save his people from their sins” (1:21).

Joseph believed in God’s plan and worked to see it fulfilled; thus, the Messiah was born. The wonder and glory of all God’s promises came to fruition in part through the cooperation of this humble and upright man. In a unique way,

he anticipated St. Paul’s words that through Christ “we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5). Joseph clearly demonstrated that “obedience of faith”; he simply trusted in God and opened himself to the grace that God gave him.

Through baptism, we have received grace and apostleship. We have been called to the obedience of faith—not to a slavish obedience based on fear and anxiety, but to a joyful obedience based on simple trust and love. Through joyful obedience, we cooperate with God in his desire to bring all people into his kingdom. He teaches us to dedicate our whole being—body, mind, and soul—to an active Christian faith. As we respond to that call, we will see marvelous things take place—as did Joseph.

1. What thoughts might have gone through Joseph’s mind when Mary told him about her condition? What demands were placed on Joseph by his trusting and cooperating with God’s plan for him? What graces do you think he received by trusting in God?

2. Recall a time when you were confused or anxious about an issue. How did you resolve it? Were you quick to ask for God’s guidance, or did you hesitate, or did you not ask at all?

3. What habits and attitudes can you develop in your day-to-day life that will help make you more able to cooperate with God in the future? How might trusting God without reservation open you to receive more of his grace?

Matthew 2:1-12: Gifts for the King

After humanity's devastating fall from grace into sin, after centuries of preparation, war, exile, prophecy, and longing, the eternal Son of God manifested himself to the nations through a lowly birth to a humble Jewish couple. As the light of salvation dawned on the earth, wise men from other nations came to pay homage to the one in whom all wisdom and dominion and power is found.

This revelation of Christ in the world must have been powerful indeed. Sages from the East, men of learning, were drawn to him! What could have induced them to leave their homes and positions of prominence to go on such a long journey? Only a work of God in their hearts could have moved them to recognize the one they came to worship.

The Fathers of the church held that the sages' gifts revealed their full recognition of Jesus. They brought gold as tribute for a king, incense to burn in praise of God, and myrrh to soothe the sufferings of humanity. These three gifts signal Jesus' authority, deity, and future suffering and death, which would bring about the salvation of all God's people.

What fruit was borne from the journey of these wise men! In their wake, generations of wise people continue to bow down before the humble child of Nazareth. Like the wealth of the nations in the prophet's words (see Isaiah 60:5), men and women from every age have laid their treasures before Christ, renouncing the apparent wealth of this world to embrace the real wealth that is found in repentance, humility, and faith.

1. How did the various groups of people in this passage react to the news of the newborn king of the Jews? Which group or groups do you most closely identify with? Why?

2. What worldly treasure do you feel compelled to give away to Christ? What spiritual treasure do you wish to offer Christ?

3. Why do you think Jesus came to earth in such humble circumstances? How can his birth influence your perception of circumstances in your own life?

Matthew 2:13-23: Joseph, the Father Figure

The fact that an angel spoke to Joseph (see Matthew 1:20; 2:13) and warned him of impending danger emphasized the importance of the message and the need for it to be heeded. Joseph heard God’s word because he was not only a “righteous man” (1:19) but also a loving, faithful man of God. His heart was open to hearing God’s message!

As foster father and protector of the long-awaited Messiah, Joseph can be viewed as a model parent and as one who can teach us much about faith-filled family life. Today, no less than in biblical times, parents and those in parental roles need to hear from God. This involves a special commitment to prayer and Scripture reading. God wants us to know that the Holy Spirit, who dwells in each of us, can teach us how to

nurture our families and loved ones. The gifts of the Spirit, including wisdom, understanding, counsel, and knowledge (see Isaiah 11:2; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11), can help us shepherd our families along the way of the Lord.

Empowered by the wisdom of God, Joseph could see the forces of evil in the world (personified by Herod) and took steps to protect his son from them. We, too, need to protect our children from the real threats of the world. We know that protecting our children doesn’t mean hiding them from reality; it means teaching and training them in the ways of God. If we protect and teach our children—especially in the formative years—they will gain the ability to make decisions based on gospel truths.

1. In what ways did Joseph secure his wife’s and son’s safety? How might those actions have been difficult for him?

2. Have you ever felt called by God to do things for your family that you considered difficult? How did you respond?

3. What parenting or caregiving lessons does Joseph teach you? What can you do to help create environments and opportunities for teaching gospel truths to children?

Matthew 3:1-12: Repentance and the Spirit's Guidance

Preaching in the desert of Judea, John the Baptist spoke a simple but difficult message to all who came to be baptized: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. . . . ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Matthew 3:2, 3). John understood that repentance and spiritual conversion would be essential for receiving salvation through the coming Messiah.

Today we still hear John’s message calling us to change our behavior and set our hearts on God. How willing are we to let God change not only aspects of our behavior but also our whole lives? Will we allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the sinful habits and thought patterns that act as barriers to God’s work in our lives?

John’s message calls us to examine the root causes of our pride and selfishness. He calls us to strike at the root of our resentments and grudges that cause division in our families, communities, and parish relationships. Most of us know that this task is too difficult to handle on our own.

Through baptism we receive help from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of power and new life. The Spirit actively helps us draw closer to God and share more fully in his divine life. Therefore, the Spirit does not only reveal our sins but also guides us into the life God intended for us as his sole creation made in his own image and likeness. God wants us to lead our lives as privileged sharers in his divine life.

1. What does John’s lifestyle say about his understanding of God? Why do you think so many people responded to his message?

2. When you read John’s words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2), what attitudes and actions of yours come most quickly to mind? Do you feel a sense of urgency in repenting? Why or why not?

3. What one or more things can you request from the Holy Spirit to help you prepare for Christ to come more fully into your life?

Matthew 3:13-17: The Servant's Baptism

After years of waiting and preparing, Jesus recognized that the time had come for him to begin his mission. No longer would he remain hidden away in Nazareth, quietly plying his trade as a carpenter. The day had arrived for him to play his part in the Father's plan.

Jesus began his public ministry not in glory but in humility, as he submitted himself to a baptism of repentance. He, the sinless one, heeded the Baptizer's call to sinners; this was in order to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). And when Jesus came up out of the water, the Spirit descended on him and the Father testified to him, declaring him to be "my Son, the Beloved" and that he was "well pleased" with him (3:17).

By recounting Jesus' baptism in this way,

Matthew emphasized Jesus' role as the servant of the Lord. Yes, Jesus had come to bring justice, to open blind eyes, and to release prisoners (see Isaiah 42:3, 7), but even more important, Jesus had come to give himself as a sin offering, to bear others' sins and intercede for their forgiveness (see 53:10, 12).

St. Paul said that through baptism we are baptized into Christ (see Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). We, therefore, affirm that as the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, the Spirit also descended upon us at our baptisms. As the Father declared Jesus to be his beloved Son, God also declares us to be his beloved sons and daughters in Christ. And like Jesus, we, too, are called to give our lives as servants of the kingdom.

1. How would you rephrase, in your own words, Jesus' understanding of his need for baptism (see Matthew 3:15)?

2. Do you have any fears or reservations about sharing in the baptism of Christ? If so, consider listing them and asking God to remove these barriers from your life.

3. In baptism we were made sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. How can an awareness of this reality make a difference in your day-to-day life?
