

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWO

God kept His word! He promised Abraham that through his descendants the whole world would be blessed.(Gen.12:3) He promised David he would never lack someone to sit on his throne.(I Kgs.2:4) He promised those who returned from exile in Babylon that He would send someone who would rebuild them as a nation.(Jer.23:1-8) The birth of Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of all of these promises. To emphasise His faithfulness, the Holy Spirit led Matthew to arrange the genealogy of Jesus' adopted father, Joseph, in three sections each with 14 names. Just as God took six days to create the world and rested on the seventh so He took six times seven generations to create the family into which He would send His Son, the one promised from the beginning of creation.

God's choice of people to carry out His plan was fascinating. There were men of faith like Abraham, Isaac, David and Zerubbabel, but even many of them failed badly at times. The Old Testament records their ups and downs of faith but the New Testament records only their trust in God. Their sin was forgiven by God, never to be mentioned again. There were utterly godless men like Abijah, Ahaz and Manasseh who had no interest whatsoever in God but He used even them for His purpose. There were some remarkable women, Tamar, the widowed daughter-in-law who disguised herself as a harlot to keep Judah to his word; there was Rahab, another harlot, who became a heroine; there was Ruth, a Moabite, who trusted her husband's God; and there was Bathsheba who betrayed her husband but became the mother of the wisest man until Jesus. What an extraordinary selection of human beings who illustrate that God's plan is based on His grace not our record!

The list of ancestors from Abraham to David is complete but the list of kings has three omissions, Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah, who were presumably left out to fit into the pattern of 14's. The list from the exile to Joseph may also have omissions for the same reason, if one compares Luke's list from David to Mary, which has 10 more generations than Matthew's. Matthew did not make mistakes in his history. He and his Jewish readers were well able to check in Kings and Chronicles. His purpose was to underline a message of a creative God keeping His promises.

When God sent His Son to earth, He entrusted Him to two remarkable people. The availability of Mary to God's plan is highlighted in Luke's account, but equally Matthew shows the inspiring faith of Joseph. Engaged to a lovely young lady and anticipating their wedding but committed not to consummating the marriage until then, he discovered to his horror that she was already pregnant. The Old Testament allowed the death penalty for adultery.(Lev.20:10; Deut.22:22) What was he to do about the woman he loved? The only honourable course, he supposed was divorce, the one way to break an engagement in those days.(Deut.24:1) Then God stepped in with a message through an angel in a dream explaining the pregnancy as a creative act of God, the first and last time in history that a virgin conceived without a man, exactly as God had promised through Isaiah.(Isa.7:14) By faith Joseph accepted God's amazing explanation without question, and married Mary.

But God in His goodness does not just tell us what, He also tells us why. The child would be God with us on earth, and able to save His people because of who He was.

If He was to take our punishment, exchanging His record for ours on the cross, He had to be sinless, or the exchange would be valueless. Conceived from God, not man, He did not inherit the sin of our first father, Adam. He was to be given the name Jesus, the Aramaic version of the Hebrew name, Joshua, which literally means 'the Lord saves'. By faith Joseph accepted the name God gave for His Son. By faith he brought the child up as his adopted son, in due time passing his trade of carpenter on to Him. (Matt. 13:55; Mark. 6:3)

Chapter two describes some of the events surrounding the most famous birth in history.

2:1-4 Q.1 Tradition has added much to the story of Jesus' birth. What are the Bible facts about who came, why they came and where they came from? How did their expectations of the baby fit into Matthew's theme in his gospel? Why was Herod not excited about the birth? What information did he want from the Old Testament experts about the birth of the Christ? Did this mean he believed the Bible?

2:5,6 Q.2 Where did the experts say Christ would be born? What was the significance in the Old Testament of this particular city? (I Sam. 16:4,18) Look up the quotation from Micah 5:2 and read the few verses that follow. What else had God said about the birth of Christ? What was so unusual about the promise of this future king? What exactly was He going to do for us?

2:7-12 Q.3 What did Herod want the magi to do and why? What further information are we given about the star the magi followed? What possible explanations have you heard for what they saw in the sky? Does this story of where they found Jesus conflict with that in Luke's account? What was the response of the magi to what they found? What might be the significance of their gifts? What can we learn from this meeting about the real meaning of worship as far as we are concerned? How, for a second time, did God intervene to protect His Son?

2:13-15 Q.4 How for a third time did God protect Jesus and His parents? What very specific instructions were given to Joseph? What Old Testament stories might he have been reminded of by these instructions? How again did he show remarkable faith? Look up Hosea 11:1 and Num. 24:8 to see why God chose Egypt as the place from which He would bring Jesus back to Israel?

2:16-18 Q.5 By what terrible act of genocide did Herod seek to get rid of his possible rival as king? What clue does the age of the children he killed give us about the time scale of the whole story in Matthew 2? Again look up the quotation from Jer. 31:15. What light does it cast on the meaning behind this event? Why was Rachel the one who was weeping? (Gen. 35:16-19) How can a story like this help us to comfort those who suffer from man-made atrocities?

2:19-23 Q.6 Yet again an angel gave Joseph instructions. How, once more, did he show outstanding faith? What can we learn from the way Joseph was given, first general, then more detailed instructions? Was his fear of Archelaus a lack of faith? Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Nazareth in the northern area of Galilee? What Old Testament prophecy was being fulfilled by this choice of city in which Jesus was to grow up?