



MATTHEW'S WORLDS AND OURS

Play Video

Background from the Author

The aim of this session is to help participants recognize and understand some of the major differences between the historical circumstances of Matthew's time and our own. Our world outlooks—like our social and cultural situations—are not the same, and so the leader will need to help guard participants from a common tendency to harmonize these differences and judge first-century characters and events by twenty-first-century standards.

One way to help participants recognize some of these startling differences might be to allow ample time for them to discuss particular ways in which their lives and relationships might be different if the foundational life principles and cultural aspects of Matthew's worlds were the standards in theirs today. What would change if “old” were valued more than “new,” if individuals largely believed they were not free to affect their destinies, if the needs of the groups to which one belonged always took precedence over one's personal desires, and if politics and religion were inseparable?

The fact that our world today has many versions of Christianity may help members of the class understand the rich diversity within Judaism in Matthew's day, but it will be important to keep in sight also the key factors that unified these disparate groups, even the polar opposites. The issues of diversity and the boundaries of toleration are central.

As for life under Roman rule, someone in the group may have experienced the hardship of living under an oppressive government, perhaps even a foreign one, or understand some of the challenges of being multi-cultural. Many, however, will not have had such experiences. Here again, opportunities for members to discuss aspects of the Roman rule of Palestine and ancient multiculturalism there will deepen their understanding of Matthew's worlds and the challenges that he and other early Christians faced. Consideration of some modern examples—the church itself, in some parts of the world—will help highlight the similarities and differences between living in Matthew's worlds and our own. Such sensitivity will enhance one's study of Matthew's Gospel.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Feel welcome, familiarized and prepared for this Kerygma study of Matthew.
2. Compare the different Jewish religious groups of Matthew's world.
3. Research some of the history and tensions that exist for the Jews living under Roman occupation.
4. Speculate on the hoped-for skills found in a saving Messiah.

Resources You May Need

Resource Books for each participant

Pictures of places to visit cut out of travel magazines, at least 3 times the number of pictures for the number of participants in the study

A copy of **Resource 1A – Matthew's Jewish World** for each participant

Pens/Pencils

Copies of selected texts from **First Maccabees** for each participant (See **Resource 1B**)

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

- 1. Setup and Informal Welcome.** Arrive early to make sure that your space is set up the way you wish it to be and allow yourself time to get settled before others begin to arrive. Round tables surrounded by 4 to 6 chairs each encourage small groups to be formed for discussion and give surfaces for bibles, papers, books and note-taking. Make sure everyone can see the leader and any flip charts, chalkboards or displays.

You are the leader of this study and your initial greeting with the participants will determine their comfort levels for the rest of the study sessions. Welcome all as they arrive, using their names, and offer activities for them to participate in. These activities can include making a nametag or picking up a prepared one to wear. You might ask them to greet one another or offer them tea/coffee or a snack. Introduce new arrivals to ones that are already present. Even if the group is well known to you, don't assume that everyone knows each other or that they are comfortable in this situation. If you would like them to jump right in, have them begin the "graffiti wall" activity as they arrive. Following the formal welcome and introductions, you can have the group reflect on the ideas people have written on the wall.

- 2. Welcome.** After the participants have arrived and it is the stated time for beginning, welcome them formally and briefly introduce them to the theme of the Bible Study. Take the time to explain where rest rooms, water fountains and other important facilities are as well as the length and meeting times of the study. If there are refreshments to be served, you may wish to circulate a sign-up list and let them know when the break will occur during each session. You may also wish to circulate a sheet to record a list of participants and their phone numbers/email addresses in case inclement weather postpones a session and to follow up on absences or with reminders.

This is the time to covenant with the participants to arrive and leave on time, to respect each other's opinions and to reassure them that there are no "stupid questions or answers." Encourage them to participate fully and to bring an open

mind to the subject matter. The Kerygma model is designed so that even though you are the leader, you are not the expert. All members of the group are called to offer their learning, wisdom and experience in the firm belief that the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

3. **Introductions.** Not all members of the group will necessarily know one another; please don't assume that they do. Take a few minutes to introduce yourself. Ask the participants to introduce themselves and share why they have decided to participate in this course.
4. **Opening Prayer.** Open with prayer. You may wish to use the following themed prayer:

Lord our God, as we come to your word this day, we come thanking you for your good news, your gospel of love. We thank you that you have given us hearts to know you, minds to consider your mighty deeds and lips to sing your praise.

Bless us now as together we seek to know you better through the work of your Son, our Saviour; Jesus Christ.

Amen.

5. **Resource Books.** Distribute the *Resource Books* if they haven't already been picked up. Invite participants to turn to the Table of Contents and skim over the 14 session themes. Let them know that it is expected that before each session they will have read the appropriate session in the *Resource Book* and the Basic Bible References. Encourage them to note any questions that arise from this reading and to bring them to the group sessions for discussion. (The session plans do not include suggestions for dealing with questions participants bring to the group from their preparation. Some leaders designate time to consider these issues during each session. Others deal with questions as they arise or as they relate to other topics discussed.) Invite the participants to turn to the **Foreword**. Suggest that they read this material before they begin reading Session One.

6. What Would You Pack? Prior to this session invite people to bring with them a picture of an “exotic” place they would like to visit one day. If this is not possible set out a table with a great variety of pictures of places people might like to visit. Invite the participants to visit the table and each select one picture of a place they would like to visit. Ask them to form groups of 3-4, or work with those at their table if they are in table groups, and share their pictures and their responses to the following questions:

- Where would you like to visit?
- Why would you like to visit this place?
- What differences might you expect to find when you visit this place?
- What might you do to prepare yourself to be a more aware visitor to this place?

and/or

Have you ever visited a new and unknown place, made assumptions that this place was just like the place you came from, and discovered through error that you were very wrong? If you have the time you may wish to invite 2 or 3 people to share light-hearted stories of some of these embarrassing moments. We often go to scripture with the same assumptions; that the people thought just like us, or the geography was just like ours, or the areas of concern were similar to ours. Or, we often retain visual images from movies, plays and music that give inaccurate images of biblical realities. We begin this session by gathering information to use as a resource for our study of Matthew to help us understand better Matthew’s world and prevent false assumptions as we study together. We will research together both the Jewish religious groups of the First Century and the Gentile world in which they lived.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Jewish Religious Groups. Dr. Bryant has given us a fair amount of background on the primary Jewish Religious groups in the *Resource Book*. Distribute **Resource Sheet 1A: Matthew’s Jewish World** to each participant. Using the material presented in Session One entitled “*Matthew’s Jewish World*,” have participants work in groups of three or four researching the various groups

representing Judaism in the first century. The research grid and questions can be found as **Resource 1A** following this session plan. They will not be able to fill in all the spaces for all of the groups, but encourage them to finish the assignment to the best of their ability. Invite them to answer the questions following the research grid. When all participants have finished, review their answers to the questions, giving answers with the accompanying scripture references.

- Which group would you most likely find in the temple in Jerusalem? (Sadducees)
- Which group would you expect to be willing to discuss repentance with you? (Pharisees and/or priests)
- Which group would you expect to find in the desert? (Essenes)
- Which group would you expect to find showing off in the synagogue? (Pharisees – **Matthew 23:1-3**)
- Which group would you expect to challenge Jesus when he talks about resurrection? (Sadducees – **Matthew 22:23-33**)
- Which group would be the least likely to be mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew? (Essenes)
- Which group would teach your son or settle a dispute with your neighbor? (Scribes)
- Which group would take a literal and conservative view of Hebrew scripture? (Sadducees)
- Which group would wish to discuss the issue of divorce with Jesus? (Pharisees – **Matthew 19:3-9**)
- Which group would care about the paying of taxes? (Herodians – **Matthew 22:1-5**)
- Which group would likely be able to talk to the Romans about Jewish concerns? (Sadducees)

When the research has been done discuss the following questions:

- How might these groups get along with one another?
- What provokes disparate groups to unite?

2. Wars and Struggles. The Romans were the latest in a long line of empires controlling the interests and existence of the Jews. In **First Maccabees** we read of the struggle of the Jews to retain or recapture power from a variety of rulers. Wars and treaties determined the safety and the security of the temple in Jerusalem, the state of Israel and the Jews. These struggles occurred during the second century B.C., prior to Roman rule. Understanding those struggles lays a foundation for understanding the tension the Jews lived in: maintaining peace while hoping for restoration by a Jewish leader who would overthrow Rome and restore their freedom. If the number of participants in your study group is small, work through some of the following passages together to hear a flavor of the struggle of the Jews. If your group is over 14 participants, divide the total group into smaller groups, assigning one passage to each working group to read, answer the questions and report back the finding to the whole group. You will likely have to provide copies of these apocryphal passages for members of your group (**Resource 1B**).

1 Maccabees 1:10-15 (Israel consorts with the Gentiles)

- What motivated the renegades to abandon their Jewish identity?
- What covenant(s) did they break with God?
- What might be the outcome of their actions?

1 Maccabees 1:20-28 (Antiochus overthrows Jerusalem)

- What might have motivated Antiochus to plunder the items from the temple in Jerusalem?
- What do these items symbolize to the Jews?
- What would the loss of these items do to the community of faithful believers?

1 Maccabees 1:41-50 (King demands unity and compliance)

- What is the benefit of unity in the eyes of the king?
- What choices do the Jews have in responding to the king's demands?
- What would this action do to the spirit of Israel?

1 Maccabees 2:29-38 (Jewish martyrs)

- Refusing to reject their Jewish faith, what did this group of Israelites choose as response to the king's demands?
- Why was this the option that they chose?
- What message would this send to other Jews who heard of the slaughter?

1 Maccabees 2:39-48 (Jewish warriors)

- This third group of Jews fought their own people who had chosen to assimilate with the Gentiles rather than face death. Why would they have fought those within their faith, rather than fight the king who forced them to assimilate?
- What message does Mattathias send to the other Jews?
- How do you predict the king will respond when he hears of Mattathias' army and what it has done?

1 Maccabees 4:36-58 (Restoring the temple)

- What is the first response of the army to the destruction and desecration of the temple?
- What steps are necessary to restore the temple?
- What does this restoration mean for the people of Israel?

1 Maccabees 14:29-37 (Summary of Simon's legacy for Israel)

- What does Simon do for Israel and the Jews?
- What kind of leadership does Simon offer?
- What kind of leader does Israel need to help them survive their future life under Roman rule?

or

Prior to this session, invite a participant to research this Maccabean period of unrest using the previous texts and questions as a guideline, and ask him or her to give a short presentation on this topic, highlighting the choices that the Jews could make in response to persecution, the kind of leadership that helped them to maintain their faithful worship of God and the constant tension experienced while hoping to live in peace and prosperity.

and

Given these circumstances, ask the following questions of the group:

- Following this period the Jews come under Roman rule. As an occupied people, what choices do they have in their response to occupation?
 - What would be Israel's primary concerns as a religious group?
 - How should they behave under a new ruler?
 - What could change their situation for the better?
 - What would the people look for in a leader of Israel?
- 3. Messiah.** Israel had been promised a Messiah who would save them from this life of persecution and constant struggle. Invite each person to silently read **Isaiah 11:1-9**.

Ask them to read it once again and choose a line or verse that stands out in their minds as a verse the people of Israel would rejoice in hearing given their situation of Roman occupation. Ask them to turn to a neighbor and share the chosen verse and why it is such a powerful message.

Invite the pairs to reread the passage again and together choose a verse that excites them when they think of the Messiah coming into their own lives. These verses will be used in the closing prayer.

CLOSING

- 1. Prayer.** Thank all for their attendance and remind the group to prepare for each session by reading the appropriate material in the *Resource Book*, as this will enhance their experience in this study.

Close with prayer, inviting a representative of each pair to offer his or her chosen verse from **Isaiah 11:1-11** as a part of the prayer. As you introduce this prayer, let the participants know in what order they will offer their verse. Also, explain that there will almost certainly be verses repeated and that this is fine. As the

leader, you will start, you will introduce the opportunity for them to contribute their verses and finally you will close the prayer.

Leader: Lord our God, you chose your people in the time of Abraham and established a covenant with them. You chose Isaiah to speak to a people in exile and you chose us to serve you. Your word is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Hear us as we claim the promises of your word.

Lord, our God, your word, your promise to us is this:

Group 1: (Read selected verse)

Leader: Thank you Lord that your Promises come true. (Pause)
Lord, our God, your word, your promise to us is this:

Group 2: (Read selected verse)

Leader: Thank you Lord that your Promises come true. (Pause)
Lord, our God, your word, your promise to us is this:

(Prayer continues as all groups have an opportunity to read their selected verses)

Leader: (Conclusion) We thank you and we praise you that your promises still come true. May we hold your promises ever before us until you come again. Amen.

Looking Ahead

If you wish to use the Reader's Theatre Play as a part of Session Two, ask if a member of the group is willing to take the part of Matthew in your performance. When doing Reader's Theatre, it is not necessary to memorize your lines, just to be familiar enough with them that the words flow comfortably, with inflection and emphasis practiced enough that the play is engaging and informative. Performers hold their scripts while sitting on stools facing their audience. Give "Matthew" a copy of the script today in order that he may prepare for your next gathering.

You may also wish to seek out a first-century costume for “Matthew” to wear to add to the drama.

Resource 1A						
Matthew's Jewish World						
First-Century Jewish Religious Group	Size of Religious Group	Status/Role in Jewish Community	Status/Role in Hellenistic Community	Core Religious Beliefs (Sin, Resurrection, Law, Scripture)		
Pharisees						
Sadducees						
Essenes						
Priests						
Scribes						
Herodians						

Resource 1B

1 Maccabees

Chapter 1

- 10:** From them came forth a sinful root, Antiochus Epiphanes, son of Antiochus the king; he had been a hostage in Rome. He began to reign in the one hundred and thirty-seventh year of the kingdom of the Greeks.
- 11:** In those days lawless men came forth from Israel, and misled many, saying, “Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles round about us, for since we separated from them many evils have come upon us.”
- 12:** This proposal pleased them,
- 13:** and some of the people eagerly went to the king. He authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles.
- 14:** So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom,
- 15:** and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil.
- 20:** After subduing Egypt, Antiochus returned in the one hundred and forty-third year. He went up against Israel and came to Jerusalem with a strong force.
- 21:** He arrogantly entered the sanctuary and took the golden altar, the lamp stand for the light, and all its utensils.
- 22:** He took also the table for the bread of the Presence, the cups for drink offerings, the bowls, the golden censers, the curtain, the crowns, and the gold decoration on the front of the temple; he stripped it all off.
- 23:** He took the silver and the gold, and the costly vessels; he took also the hidden treasures which he found.

- 24:** Taking them all, he departed to his own land. He committed deeds of murder, and spoke with great arrogance.
- 25:** Israel mourned deeply in every community,
- 26:** rulers and elders groaned, maidens and young men became faint, the beauty of women faded.
- 27:** Every bridegroom took up the lament; she who sat in the bridal chamber was mourning.
- 28:** Even the land trembled for its inhabitants, and all the house of Jacob was clothed with shame.
- 41:** Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people,
- 42:** and that each should give up his customs.
- 43:** All the Gentiles accepted the command of the king. Many even from Israel gladly adopted his religion; they sacrificed to idols and profaned the sabbath.
- 44:** And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land,
- 45:** to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and feasts,
- 46:** to defile the sanctuary and the priests,
- 47:** to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals,
- 48:** and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane,
- 49:** so that they should forget the law and change all the ordinances.

50: “And whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.”

Chapter 2

29: Then many who were seeking righteousness and justice went down to the wilderness to dwell there,

30: they, their sons, their wives, and their cattle, because evils pressed heavily upon them.

31: And it was reported to the king’s officers, and to the troops in Jerusalem the city of David, that men who had rejected the king’s command had gone down to the hiding places in the wilderness.

32: Many pursued them, and overtook them; they encamped opposite them and prepared for battle against them on the sabbath day.

33: And they said to them, “Enough of this! Come out and do what the king commands, and you will live.”

34: But they said, “We will not come out, nor will we do what the king commands and so profane the sabbath day.”

35: Then the enemy hastened to attack them.

36: But they did not answer them or hurl a stone at them or block up their hiding places,

37: for they said, “Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly.”

38: So they attacked them on the sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and cattle, to the number of a thousand persons.

39: When Mattathias and his friends learned of it, they mourned for them deeply.

- 40:** And each said to his neighbor: “If we all do as our brethren have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth.”
- 41:** So they made this decision that day: “Let us fight against every man who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our brethren died in their hiding places.”
- 42:** Then there united with them a company of Hasideans, mighty warriors of Israel, every one who offered himself willingly for the law.
- 43:** And all who became fugitives to escape their troubles joined them and reinforced them.
- 44:** They organized an army, and struck down sinners in their anger and lawless men in their wrath; the survivors fled to the Gentiles for safety.
- 45:** And Mattathias and his friends went about and tore down the altars;
- 46:** They forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel.
- 47:** They hunted down the arrogant men, and the work prospered in their hands.
- 48:** They rescued the law out of the hands of the Gentiles and kings, and they never let the sinner gain the upper hand.

Chapter 4

- 36:** Then said Judas and his brothers, “Behold, our enemies are crushed; let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate it.”
- 37:** So all the army assembled and they went up to Mount Zion.
- 38:** And they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins.

- 39:** Then they rent their clothes, and mourned with great lamentation, and sprinkled themselves with ashes.
- 40:** They fell face down on the ground, and sounded the signal on the trumpets, and cried out to Heaven.
- 41:** Then Judas detailed men to fight against those in the citadel until he had cleansed the sanctuary.
- 42:** He chose blameless priests devoted to the law,
- 43:** and they cleansed the sanctuary and removed the defiled stones to an unclean place.
- 44:** They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned.
- 45:** And they thought it best to tear it down, lest it bring reproach upon them, for the Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar,
- 46:** and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them.
- 47:** Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one.
- 48:** They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple, and consecrated the courts.
- 49:** They made new holy vessels, and brought the lamp stand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple.
- 50:** Then they burned incense on the altar and lighted the lamps on the lamp stand, and these gave light in the temple.
- 51:** They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken.

- 52:** Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year,
- 53:** they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering which they had built.
- 54:** At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals.
- 55:** All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them.
- 56:** So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and offered burnt offerings with gladness; they offered a sacrifice of deliverance and praise.
- 57:** They decorated the front of the temple with golden crowns and small shields; they restored the gates and the chambers for the priests, and furnished them with doors.
- 58:** There was very great gladness among the people, and the reproach of the Gentiles was removed.

Chapter 14

- 29:** Since wars often occurred in the country, Simon the son of Mattathias, a priest of the sons of Joarib, and his brothers, exposed themselves to danger and resisted the enemies of their nation, in order that their sanctuary and the law might be preserved; and they brought great glory to their nation.
- 30:** Jonathan rallied the nation, and became their high priest, and was gathered to his people.
- 31:** And when their enemies decided to invade their country and lay hands on their sanctuary,

- 32:** then Simon rose up and fought for his nation. He spent great sums of his own money; he armed the men of his nation's forces and paid them wages.
- 33:** He fortified the cities of Judea, and Beth-zur on the borders of Judea, where formerly the arms of the enemy had been stored, and he placed there a garrison of Jews.
- 34:** He also fortified Joppa, which is by the sea, and Gazara, which is on the borders of Azotus, where the enemy formerly dwelt. He settled Jews there, and provided in those cities whatever was necessary for their restoration.
- 35:** The people saw Simon's faithfulness and the glory which he had resolved to win for his nation, and they made him their leader and high priest, because he had done all these things and because of the justice and loyalty which he had maintained toward his nation. He sought in every way to exalt his people.
- 36:** And in his days things prospered in his hands, so that the Gentiles were put out of the country, as were also the men in the city of David in Jerusalem, who had built themselves a citadel from which they used to sally forth and defile the environs of the sanctuary and do great damage to its purity.
- 37:** He settled Jews in it, and fortified it for the safety of the country and of the city, and built the walls of Jerusalem higher.