

## Introduction

# Meeting Jesus in the Middle of the Story

*Understanding Jesus' Ministry: The Keys to the Gospels*

## Dropped Into the Middle

Most people meet Jesus the same way: a manger, a star, some shepherds, a cross, an empty tomb. Good stories, usually told every year, and most people are entirely satisfied to know only that much of it.

But try picking up a long novel two-thirds of the way through, reading a hundred pages, and then closing the book. You could describe what you had read well enough — the characters, the scenes, how it ended. What you could not say is what the story was really about. You wouldn't know what set the plot in motion, what the people in it were trying to resolve, or why the ending is an ending at all rather than simply the last thing that happens.

That is exactly the position most readers are in when they open one of the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John don't begin the story of Jesus. Their books arrive in the middle of a story already four thousand years old by the time the events they describe take place — a story with its own plot, its own promises, its own unresolved tension, all of it laid down centuries earlier in the Old Testament. Understanding Jesus' Ministry: the Keys to the Gospels project looks closely at one thing Jesus said or did, and each paper dives into the meaning of each one by setting proper context, and none of that will mean what it's supposed to mean if the reader doesn't first know the story that's being continued.

## Four Openings, All Reaching Backward

This is not an external assumption imposed on the Gospels without merit. It is what the four writers do on their own opening pages. Not one of them begins at the beginning of what he has to say; every one of them begins by pointing backward, and each does it in his own way.

Matthew opens with a list of names:

*Matthew 1:1*

*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.*

Two Old Testament names mentioned, before a single event is narrated, and neither is chosen just for sentiment. Abraham and David are the two men in Israel's history to whom God swore promises about land, inheritance, seed, and a throne (Gen. 12:1-3; Gen. 15:7-8; Gen. 22:17-18; 2 Sam. 7:12-16), and Matthew is claiming at the outset that the promises attached to those two men now have an heir with a name and a location. A reader who does not know those earlier promises reads Matthew's first verse as a formality. It is not; it is actually his thesis.

Mark, who wastes no words anywhere with his being the shortest of the Gospel accounts, spends his second sentence on a quotation from the prophets:

*Mark 1:1-3*

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You." "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'"*

The first line of that quotation is Malachi 3:1; the second is Isaiah 40:3. (The NKJV reads, "in the Prophets" while other manuscripts read "in Isaiah the prophet." Either way, the material is a composite of two prophets, and Mark's point stands regardless.) Mark's Gospel, the one known as being "in a hurry," opens by reaching back four centuries and more. Mark evidently did not think he could start talking about Jesus without it.

Luke, after four verses addressed to Theophilus, begins in a building:

*Luke 1:5*

*There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.*

A priest, a priestly division, a wife descended from Aaron, and, three verses later, the temple itself. Luke opens his Gospel inside the covenant's own machinery — the sacrificial system God had given Israel centuries earlier and which was still running the morning his account begins.

John reaches back farthest of all. His Gospel shares little material with the other three; more than nine-tenths of what he records is his alone, and where the first three often run parallel, John runs his own course. Yet on this one point he agrees with them completely, and out-reaches them in his introduction:

*John 1:1*

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

John's first three words are the first three words of Genesis, borrowed on purpose (Gen. 1:1). John is telling his reader that to place this Man correctly, you have to go back past Herod, past David, past Abraham, past Noah's Flood, to the first line of the Old Testament.

Four writers, four temperaments, four purposes. All four begin by reaching backward.

## Four Hundred Years of Silence, Ended Mid-Sentence

The Old Testament does not simply stop and wrap up itself up with a tidy, little ending. It ends on a specific, pointed promise — and on a single, deliberate word:

*Malachi 4:5-6*

*"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."*

The last word of the Old Testament is "curse" and the last promise of the Old Testament — the last thing the nation heard from God Himself through a prophet — is about a messenger who comes ahead of the LORD Himself. Then **nothing** — four hundred years of silence follows: no prophet, no new word, no recorded revelation, following roughly sixteen centuries in which God had been speaking to His people continually, from Abraham forward. Scripture itself marks the change in how God spoke: God "spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets," and then, at a particular point, "has in these last days spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). Silence of that length, after a pattern that consistent, is not the absence of a story. It is a pause in one, mid-sentence.

Luke ends the silence, and he ends it by picking up precisely where Malachi left off. Gabriel's message concerning John the Baptist, the son to be born to an old priest and his barren wife, is a direct echo of the Old Testament's closing verses — the same messenger, the same errand, the same clause quoted back:

*Luke 1:17*

*"He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

Four hundred years of quiet, and the first message delivered through an angel closes on a quotation of the last words God had spoken before it. Nothing new is being announced... something interrupted is being resumed. (Whether John the Baptist is Elijah, and in what sense — a question Christ Himself answers in two different directions, Matt. 11:14 and John 1:21 — has its own paper later in this series.)

One more detail, small but not incidental nor accidental. The man chosen that day to burn incense was chosen by lot (Luke 1:9) — no committee, no arrangement, no one's plan but God's as to who would be standing in the temple when the silence broke. His name was Zacharias, which means "God remembers." His wife's name, Elizabeth, means "God of the Oath." Put the two names side by side and they say the whole thing at once: God remembers His oath and the silence ends.

## A Kingdom Nobody Had to Explain

Read what happens next, and notice what does not happen –

*Matthew 3:1-2*

*In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying,  
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven [literally "the kingdom of the heavens"] is at hand!"*

That is the entire message from the messenger. He doesn't define the kingdom. He doesn't explain which kingdom, or whose, or where, or why anyone should want it. Jesus Himself then preaches the identical sentence, word for word (Matt. 4:17), and later sends the Twelve out with the same announcement with nothing added to it (Matt. 10:7).

And no one asks them what they are talking about. Crowds come out to the Jordan from Jerusalem and all Judea (Matt. 3:5), the religious leadership comes out too, and not one person in the record asks, "What kingdom?"

That silence is evidence. A term needs no explanation when the hearers already know it, and Israel did. It had been promised to them by name, through their own prophets, for a thousand years: a kingdom the God of heaven would set up and never let fall (Dan. 2:44), a dominion given to One like the Son of Man that would not pass away (Dan. 7:13-14), a king out of David's line shepherding a restored people in their own land (Ezek. 37:24-25). Notice also the announcement itself: not that a kingdom was being invented, but that a known one was "at hand." Near. Arriving. The word assumes the topic would be known by its audience.

Also notably, the disciples were still asking about **that same kingdom** at the very end of Jesus' ministry. After His resurrection, after forty days in which Christ spoke to them about "the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3), their last recorded question to Him is this:

*Acts 1:6*

*Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

Jesus' answer corrects their timing — "It is not for you to know times or seasons" (Acts 1:7) — but He leaves their premise entirely alone. If the kingdom Israel had been promised were no longer the primary subject at hand, that was the hour for the Christ to say so. He didn't.

## Christ's Own Testimony

None of this is only a working assumption about how to read the Gospels. It is what Jesus says about Himself, in His own words, after the resurrection. Walking unrecognized with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, His first response to their confusion over recent events isn't sympathy. It's a rebuke:

*Luke 24:25-27*

*Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*

Beginning at Moses — the first five books of the Bible — and continuing through all the Prophets, Jesus shows two men that everything they already had in hand had been about Him the whole time. Note what He calls their problem. Not ignorance of some new revelation He was about to give them, but slowness "to believe in all that the prophets have spoken." The information had been available. He repeats the point later that same day to the wider group, and this time names all three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures at once:

*Luke 24:44-45*

*Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.*

That conversation on the road deserves its own full treatment later in this series, and it will get one. For now the point is narrower: Christ treats the Old Testament as the first two-thirds of His own story, not as background reading. If He read it that way, *then that is the correct way to read it*.

John says the same thing in his own way when he states why he wrote at all — that his readers "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). "Christ" is not a surname; it's the Greek word for Messiah, meaning, "the Anointed One," a title that carries no meaning whatever apart from the Old Testament that promised Him. The Gospels cannot even name their subject without borrowing vocabulary from the story already in progress.

## **One Promise Still Standing Open**

The clearest case of a thread left hanging is the one made to David. Centuries before the birth of Christ, God spoke to David through the prophet Nathan concerning a son not yet born:

*2 Samuel 7:12-14a, 16*

*"When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever."*

Solomon built the house, but Solomon did not exhaust the promise. His kingdom split within a generation of his death (1 Kings 12:16-20), the throne of David eventually stopped altogether when

Jerusalem fell (2 Kings 25:7), and the prophets went on speaking of that throne as a future thing long after David and Solomon were both in their graves — a Child born, with the government on His shoulder, seated "upon the throne of David and over His kingdom" without end (Isa. 9:6-7); a Branch raised to David who would "reign and prosper" (Jer. 23:5). Clearly, Israel's own prophets did not consider this promise already spent.

So the promise is still sitting open when the Gospels begin. And when Gabriel comes to Mary, he doesn't announce a new arrangement, he cites the old one:

*Luke 1:32-33*

*"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."*

Then, at the Jordan, the Father's own voice supplies the other half of what Nathan had said — "I will be his Father, and he shall be My son" — out loud, over a grown Man standing in a river:

*Matthew 3:17*

*And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

The promise to David confirmed, a thousand years from its proclamation. A long gap of time in man's eyes, yet nothing in the eyes of Scripture.

## **What Was Resuming — and What Was Not**

What is resuming at the start of the New Testament is not a rescue mission aimed at people who had no relationship with God up to that point. The nation of Israel was already God's own people, and Scripture says so in the strongest terms available — "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Ex. 4:22), spoken before the nation ever reached Sinai. They were a redeemed people, brought out under blood God Himself had appointed (Ex. 12:13) and kept under a sacrificial system He Himself had given them (Lev. 17:11). Paul lists what was already theirs before their Christ arrived: "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the **promises**" (Rom. 9:4). That is the nation, taken as a whole, yet true of the individual as well: the Israelite who trusted what God had given him already had a standing before God, and the Gospels never suggest otherwise.

What resumes in the New Testament is the offer of establishing the kingdom itself — the government, the throne, the reign the whole preceding story had been pointing toward. **But this time**, unlike in the Old Testament, the kingdom was being offered in its **fullest form**: the kingdom of the heavens, the realm tied to and presiding over the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man, had come to establish it with His people.

The Heir had arrived. David's Son was standing in the middle of the nation, and the announcement was that the kingdom was at hand, but acceptance and repentance were the required response before it could be fulfilled. Jesus put it to the very generation in front of Him: if He cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28) and why every statement concerning the kingdom was preceded by the word "repent." What Israel refused was not a way of being *saved*, in the sense of spiritual birth – they already had that. It was a refusal of repentance, a refusal of acceptance – a refusal of their promised King and the kingdom He would usher in.

Make that distinction and a great deal of the Gospel record stops fighting itself. Hearing Jesus tell a rich man to sell what he had, or warning about being cast into outer darkness, or promising thrones to twelve men, reads very differently once you know that the people in front of Him were not being told how to escape "hell"; they were being told to repent and accept their King and His offered kingdom of heaven. The Gospels are the record of that offer being made to a people already God's own, at the one moment in their long history when the promise made to David – and to Abraham – was standing in front of them in the flesh.

## What Happened to the Offer

The offer of the kingdom of heaven to the nation of Israel was refused. Specifically, Israel's leadership concluded that the power behind Jesus' works was demonic (Matt. 12:24), and from that point His public teaching turns to parables the crowds could audibly hear, but could not understand (Matt. 13:10-13). Before the week of the cross was out, Jesus stated the outcome for the nation Himself — her house left desolate, and no sight of Him again "till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'" (Matt. 23:38-39).

However, the cross didn't close the matter. Jesus asked the Father to forgive them, "for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34), and Peter afterward stood in Jerusalem and said the same to the same nation — "I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:17) — and on that ground held the kingdom out to Israel again, though this time at the hands of the newly forming "church" (Acts 3:19-21, Rom. 10:14-11:14). What became of that re-offer belongs to the book of Acts and falls outside this series (it was rejected again, Acts 28:20-31). What matters here is that Israel's refusal of the kingdom recorded in the Gospels, culminated in the crucifixion of their Messiah, was not God withdrawing the promises He had previously made.

It was a deferral, not a cancellation. "Has God cast away His people? Certainly not" (Rom. 11:1), and "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Israel's throne, her land, her city, and her restoration remain hers, unspent and still ahead of her — an earthly people, an earthly city, an earthly throne the Old Testament unconditionally has promised them. **Notably however**, is that what is now held out to another people — the church — is the heavenly portion of the same kingdom, under the same King, because that was the realm taken from Israel. (Those two portions,

earthly and heavenly, are worked out in full in later papers, as well as the “Taught vs. Written” series by the same author.)

A Christian reading these papers – and every book of the New Testament – now stands on *that* side of the offer, not on Israel’s.

That sets the rule this series reads by. The Gospels were spoken to Israel, about Israel, by Israel’s Messiah, and every passage gets read that way first, and no Christian gets to help himself indiscriminately to a promise God swore to a nation. HOWEVER...

That is not saying nothing in the Gospels reaches the Christian. Jesus spoke of a church He had not yet built (Matt. 16:18), and told the men refusing Him that the kingdom **of the heavens** would be taken from them and given to a nation bearing its fruits (Matt. 21:43). (Both verses get their own paper in this series.) The point is that no reader gets to decide for himself which parts of the Gospels apply to him and which do not. Jesus decided that when He spoke, and the men who wrote it down decided what to keep and where to set it. Between them the text was settled long before any reader arrived. So application in these papers is drawn along the line He drew: the offer itself and what a man does when it is set in front of him, what prepares him to receive it, what hardens him against it, what forfeits it. Never along Israel’s promises, and never before the passage in hand has been allowed to say what it said to the people who first heard it.

## Reading What Follows

Every paper after this one looks closely at one moment, one saying, one sign. Some will dig into typology most readers have never been shown — patterns laid down in the Old Testament that the Gospel writers plainly expect their readers to recognize. Others will do something simpler and, in its own way, just as useful: take a famous verse that has been living on its own for years and set it back inside the sentence someone forgot to keep reading.

Both kinds of paper rest on the same ground laid here. Whatever else the Gospels are, they are not the beginning of the story. They are the arrival of the Son the whole story had been reaching toward — with a name, an address, and a throne still ahead of Him.

*Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.*