

A Study of Matthew, the Man

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Introduction

It is ironic that Matthew is one of the most familiar names of all the personalities of the New Testament, yet there is only a smattering of biographical information about him available to us.¹ The sparsity of material about the life of this well-known apostle illustrates the fact that the Scriptures never seek merely to satisfy human curiosity. Their aim is ever higher – to supply those facts, commands, and promises that pertain to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3; cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17). That which we do know about Matthew at the same time inspires deep admiration for him and indicates why the Lord called him first to be a disciple and then chose him as an apostle.

The Biography of Matthew

His Names

Matthew identified himself in his first appearance in the New Testament as a man “called Matthew” (Mat. 9:9).² Both Mark (2:14) and Luke (5:27) give his name as “Levi.” In spite of the fact that they are obviously the same individual, some commentators are reluctant to admit it because of the name difference. It is difficult to understand why anyone with the least skill in Bible knowledge would stumble in this matter. There is clear Scriptural precedent for such a name change. Abram, Sarai, and Jacob were all given new names in former ages (Gen. 17:5,15; 35:10). In the New Testament, the Lord renamed Simon, giving him the name “Cephas” (“Peter”) when he became a disciple (John 1:42). Barnabas’ original name was Joses or Joseph (Acts 4:36). When Saul of Tarsus began exercising his apostolic commission and authority, his name was changed to “Paul” (Acts 13:9). Why should anyone be surprised that “Matthew” and “Levi” are two names for the same man?

God renamed the aforementioned Old Testament individuals, Christ renamed Peter, and the apostles renamed Barnabas (no explanation is given for Paul’s new name). In the cases of Abraham, Israel, Peter, and Barnabas, we are explicitly told the new names were given, namely, to indicate a particular role or characteristic of life of the one named. *Levi* was a revered Hebrew surname, dating back to the third son of Israel, from whose stock God took all the priests of the Mosaic system (Gen. 29:34; Num. 3:9–10). Two others by this name were in the ancestry of the Lord (Luke 3:24, 29), indicating that it was not an uncommon Jewish surname. The name

Matthew means “gift of Jehovah.” While we are given no specific statement that the Lord renamed Levi-Matthew, in light of the above, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that this was indeed the case. Whether the Lord changed the name of Levi to Matthew or Levi made the change himself, it is conclusive that they are two names of the same man.

His Family

The inspired text gives us only one bare fact concerning the family of Matthew: “And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the place of toll, and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him” (Mark 2:14). Alphaeus was also the name of the father of one of the apostles named “James,” and he is so identified in each catalog of the apostles, doubtless to distinguish him from James, the son of Zebedee (Mat. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). However, Matthew is clearly distinguished in each listing from any kinship with James, the son of Alphaeus. Therefore, it is a matter of mere coincidence that the respective fathers of James and Matthew had the same name. There are no hints by which we may even speculate further concerning the family of Matthew (e.g., was he an only child, was he married, did he have children, was he the only one of his family to follow Jesus, et al.?).

His Place of Residence

While the Scriptures do not explicitly say so, Matthew was apparently a resident of the city of Capernaum, situated on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. I infer this upon the following bases:

1. Matthew was in Capernaum when Jesus invited him to follow Him. Jesus had returned to the city from His travels and was teaching and healing there **immediately** before he called Matthew (Mat. 9:1-9; Mark 2:1-14). Mark is especially clear on this point (vv. 1, 13-14), indicating that between healing the palsied man and arriving at the seaside (still at Capernaum), He passed by Matthew’s place of tax collection and issued His call to the publican. Jesus left Capernaum sometime later (Mat. 9:35).
2. Capernaum was the principal port city on the Sea of Galilee and of the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas. Matthew may have been collecting customs on the boat freight, which used the port of Capernaum in crossing the sea.³ However, the city was also on the great trade route from the Eastern cities of Babylon and Damascus to Judea and Egypt, which led Boles to suggest that it was the customs on this traffic that was collected by Matthew.⁴ He may have collected the taxes on both types of trade. In any case, Capernaum was of sufficient prominence and in the correct location to house a permanent tax collection office. This evidence suggests that Matthew, the tax collector, was a resident there, rather than merely a visitor there to collect taxes periodically.

3. According to Luke 5:29, Levi (Matthew) provided the supper with the publicans and sinners described in Matthew 9:10–13 in his own house. Since Matthew apparently owned a house in Capernaum and his work was in Capernaum, this was likely his home. This fact has implications relating to Matthew's familiarity with the Lord before Jesus actually called him to be a disciple, as we shall soon note.

His Occupation

Matthew called himself a "publican" (10:3), as did Luke (5:27). This term referred to Jews who assessed and collected taxes from their own people for the Roman government. Since Capernaum was in the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas, Matthew most likely collected the taxes for him, who, in turn, paid tribute to Rome. There were numerous opportunities for graft and extortion in this profession. Consequently, the potential of gaining considerable wealth was great. Fellow Jews viewed publicans as traitors who had sold out to their oppressors. Generally, these men were judged as those who had no respect for the Law of Moses (perhaps with good reason). Their fellow citizens thought of them in the same way as they did "Gentiles," "sinners," and "harlots" (Mat. 5:46–47; 9:11; 21:31).

It was almost a trademark with Jesus to elevate those most despised by the leaders of Judaism. This He did in the parable of the Samaritan (a member of a halfbreed race especially despised by the Jews) who assisted the victim of robbers on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:25–37). He did the same thing in His parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14). Those wicked Jews at the foot of the cross could also have seen this compassion from the Lord's promise to the penitent thief on the cross, had they not been so blind (Luke 23:39–43). Not only did Jesus' call of Matthew, a publican, send a message to the self-righteous Jews, but His acceptance of Matthew's invitation to eat with him and several of his publican friends did the same (Mat. 9:10).

His Economic Level

While nothing specific is stated about Matthew's wealth, we are justified in inferring that it was likely considerable on the following premises:

1. As already noted, the office of publican lent itself to amassing riches even if one discharged his duties honestly.
2. Also, as previously seen, he owned his house in Capernaum (Luke 5:29).
3. Significantly, Matthew's house was sufficiently large to entertain a "great company" at a "sit down" banquet (Luke 5:29).

4. Furthermore, Matthew was able to provide a “great feast” for the “great company” (Luke 5:29). All these factors indicate affluence.

His Call by the Lord to Be a Disciple

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recorded the call Jesus issued to Matthew (Mat. 9:9; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27). Matthew and Mark both simply recorded that Jesus asked the publican to follow Him, and in response, “...he arose, and followed him.” However, Luke wrote more particularly, “And he forsook all, and rose up, and followed him” (Luke 5:28). The indication of a decisive and complete break with his former work and life is seen in Luke’s words.

Are we to understand that this was Matthew’s first exposure to Jesus and that this was a spontaneous, impulsive decision to accept the Lord’s invitation? Such an explanation seems most unlikely. For one thing, Jesus warned men not to follow Him without due consideration of the cost (Luke 14:27–33). Had Matthew impetuously decided to follow Jesus, he might well have been as the shallow soil of the parable of the sower (Mat. 13:5–6).

Bear in mind that Jesus had made Capernaum His home after His rejection in the synagogue at Nazareth (Mat. 9:1). Furthermore, He had done so many “mighty works” there that the city’s impenitence would render her without excuse in The Judgment (Mat. 11:23–24). Since Matthew was a man of public life, it is hardly possible that he was not well acquainted with the miracles and teachings of the Christ. Indeed, it seems likely that he had already indicated a deep confidence in the Lord, and that, when he was personally challenged by His invitation, it was all that was needed for Matthew to solidify his resolve.

His Supper for Jesus

The accounts of Matthew and Mark simply mention that Jesus and the disciples were found eating with publicans and sinners, although Mark mentioned that it was in “his [Levi’s] house” (Mat. 9:10; Mark 2:15). However, Luke more specifically described the feast: “And Levi made him [Jesus] a great feast in his house: and there was a great multitude of publicans and of others that were sitting at meat with them” (Luke 5:29). We are not told for what specific purpose Matthew prepared this supper for the Lord. Several possibilities exist:

- (1) He may have done this to bid farewell to his former associates in the publican profession.
- (2) He may have used this means to introduce his publican associates to his new Master, hoping He would also influence them.
- (3) He may have simply chosen this way to honor Christ. (Of course, he may have held this supper for a combination of these or even other reasons.)

For whatever reason or reasons Matthew planned this supper, it was an appropriate and noble gesture. That it met with the approval of the Lord is implied by His willingness to attend it and His defense of His presence there (Mat. 9:11).

When it came time for the Son of God to select the men into whose care He would ultimately entrust the saving Gospel, Levi-Matthew was among the number. There were doubtless many people following Jesus by this time at some level of discipleship, but from among them He selected His twelve apostles: "And when it was day, he called his disciples: and he chose from them twelve, whom also he named apostles" (Luke 6:13).

The significance of "naming" them "apostles" resides in the word *apostle*. *Apostle* is from *apostolos*, meaning one sent forth. Upon selecting these twelve men, Jesus soon sent them forth into the towns and cities of the Jews with the message that the kingdom was at hand (Mat. 10:5-7). Before being dispatched, they were given miraculous powers to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons (Mat. 10:8). Later, the Lord of Heaven and earth would send these same men (minus Judas, the traitor, and plus Matthias in his place) into all the world with His blood-empowered, soul-saving Gospel (Mat. 28: 18-20; Mark 16:15-16). In all four of the lists of the apostles in Scripture, Matthew is listed. He was a member of the most elite group of humans who ever walked the earth!

His Authorship of the First New Testament Book

The only trace we have of the work and activity of Matthew after he provided the feast for Jesus is the authorship of the New Testament book that bears his name. This is that for which Matthew is most famous. It is quite possible that due to its being the initial book of the New Testament, it (or portions of it) has been read more than any other piece of literature in the world.

As with everything relating to the Sacred Text, skeptics have done their best to destroy faith in Matthew's authorship. However, the overwhelming weight of the evidence favoring it is well summarized by McClintock and Strong: "There is no ancient book with regard to the authorship of which we have earlier, fuller, and more unanimous testimony."⁵ Modernists like to accuse Matthew of copying most of his material from Mark. Halley penned a good response to such foolish speculation:

The widely held, but unsubstantiated, present-day hypothesis that Matthew copied from Mark's Gospel is, on the face of it, absurd. It is not at all certain that Mark even knew Jesus. Why should Matthew have to copy from one who had Not [*sic*] been an Eye-witness [*sic*] of

things that he himself had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears over and over and over?⁶

Doubtless, Matthew accomplished many other worthwhile things in his service to Christ. However, if he did nothing more than give us his “Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven,” he would have rendered millions of souls through thousands of years a great service.

Lessons from the Life of Matthew

His Humility

There is no hint of vainglory or pride in Matthew. While Luke wrote of him that “he forsook all” and followed Jesus (5:28), Matthew simply said of himself, “And he arose and followed him” (9:9). He did not **boast** that he forsook all; he simply forsook all! Barnes observed on this point: “Had Matthew said this [i.e., that he ‘forsook all’], it would have been a commendation of himself utterly unlike the evangelists. No men were ever farther from **praising themselves** than they were.”⁷ One would not know from the words of Matthew that he prepared the dinner in his own house for the Lord. It is true that Matthew briefly described what happened at the dinner (Mat. 9:10), but he left it for others to give him credit for it, which Luke did (5:29).

The very fact that he did not refer to himself by his other name, “Levi,” may itself be a signal of his humility. As a Jew he could have reveled in being named after the ancient patriarch, one of the sons of Jacob. Instead, he used a name in reference to himself that did not reflect such earthly pride. No hint of boasting or self-aggrandizement can be seen in Matthew. Where these elements are absent, humility must be present.

How often does the Bible warn us of pride and enjoin humility! The first abomination in the eyes of Jehovah is “haughty eyes” (Pro. 6:16–17). Many a human has learned the hard way that “pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Pro. 16:18). Pride was apparently the stumbling block of Satan himself (1 Tim. 3:6). One of the snares the devil has set for humankind from the beginning is the “vainglory of life” (Gen. 3:6; 1 John 2:15–16).

Contrariwise, “Better it is to be of a lowly spirit with the poor, than to divide the spoil with the proud” (Pro. 16:19). The Lord promised that “whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 18:4) and “whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted” (23:12b). James added: “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (Jam. 4:6). Consequently, we should hear Peter’s

exhortation: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" (1 Pet. 5:6).

Preachers must be ever vigilant against the pitfall of pride. They dare not begin believing all the good things brethren may say about them. Elders also may have a special temptation concerning pride (1 Tim. 3:6). I well remember one case in which a man had served humbly as a deacon, but when he was ordained as an elder, he became pride-filled and power-mad, causing great damage to the church. Matthew apparently learned this lesson well, and he serves as a good example for us.

His New Name

As previously mentioned, Matthew is referred to by a second name, "Levi." Actually, "Levi" was likely his original name since it is the name that both Mark and Luke first assign to this publican, with *Matthew* being given later. Afterward, when they listed the apostles Jesus chose, they both called him "Matthew." The name *Levi* means "to adhere," "to cleave." *Matthew* means "gift of God." Williams postulated that the new name may have been given at the time he began following the Lord and that the significance of the name change may have been as follows: "'Levi,' he who cleaves to the old ways, dies; 'Matthew,' the gift of Jehovah, henceforth lives instead."⁸ It could well be that even as he left his past life of sin behind, Matthew also left his old name behind. How often the Bible reminds us that there is something in a name!

This is not to say that the mere assumption of a new name itself is equivalent to a change in character. However, it appears that the two accompanied each other in Matthew, even as they must in us. We are given a glorious new name, "Christian," when we obey Christ in the Gospel plan of salvation. This new name means "one who follows Christ," "one who belongs to Christ," "one who is connected to Christ," and we must live in harmony with that name. When we are "born anew...of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3, 5), we are raised to "walk in newness of life" in Christ (Rom. 6:4). As new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we are to suffer willingly and glorify God in this new name (1 Pet. 4:16). Let us leave behind all names that symbolize a former life of sin and aim at living up to the honor and majesty of the name *Christian*!

His Self-sacrificing Spirit

As indicated above, Luke's record tells us that Levi-Matthew "forsook all" (5:28). This indicates that Matthew understood exactly what Jesus had been preaching, whether or not he had been hearing any of His sermons! On one occasion Luke wrote of the Master: "And he said unto all, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and

follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (9:23–24). Could it be that Matthew heard the Lord say on another occasion, "And whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.... So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27, 33)?

As Matthew wrote the record of Jesus' challenge to the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give it to the poor and then follow Him (Mat. 19:21), he must have thought of the time when he was faced with a similar decision as a younger man. As previously indicated, it is quite possible that Matthew possessed considerable wealth. Thankfully, he was equal to the challenge of leaving everything that would interfere with following Christ.

Let us all learn that Christ justly demands of us all that we are and have and can be! The "first and great commandment" has not been repealed and never will be! We must love God with **all** (not a little, not some, not much, not even most) of the heart, soul, strength, and mind (Luke 10:27). The curse of the church in every age has been the lukewarm, professing, pretending, half-hearted, and half-committed Christian (including some preachers, elders, and deacons) who has never learned to operate on any level that might interfere the least with his or her convenience, comfort, and pleasure.

Men cannot play a "percentage game" with Christ. He can never be pleased with the person who in effect says, "Lord, you can have ninety-nine per cent of my life and my heart, but I reserve this one per cent for myself." Men must divest themselves of any and every loyalty that was once above Christ. Truly, the Lord must be **above all** or He will not be **at all** in our lives! Paul honored this essential principle, as seen in his statement to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ: and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (2:20).

Clearly, Matthew understood it, and so must we! Let us leave everything behind us that would keep us from single-minded discipleship of Christ.

His Reverence for Scripture

One does not read the words written by Matthew very long without being profoundly impressed with his reverence for Sacred Scripture. It is obvious that he fully trusted the Old Testament genealogical records from the very opening words of his book, as he carefully traced the ancestry of the Lord back to Abraham. From time to time throughout his book he called

attention to prophecies, which were fulfilled by particular events (e. g., Mat. 1:22-23; 4:12-16; 13:35; 21:4-5; et al.). There is never the slightest hint that he considered the Bible that he had (the Old Testament) to be anything but the inspired Word of Jehovah God. The fact that he was himself a man inspired of God through the Holy Spirit (John 16:13) assures us that he was correct in his assessment of Scripture.

What Matthew accepted concerning the origin and trustworthiness of the Scripture then extant (the Old Testament), we have every right (yea, the obligation) to accept concerning the Scriptures now extant (the Old and New Testaments). Those twelve apostles (and later Paul) were indeed guided into all the Truth (John 16:13). When they had finished their work, God's plan to redeem man from sin through the blood of His Son was recorded and revealed for all who would ever live thereafter: "For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Tit. 2:11). That inspired message was and is all that man would and will ever need for God to make him whole (Rom. 1:16). In the mold of Matthew, we can have utter confidence in the Scripture because "All scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Because of these inspired men, we can say with Paul concerning the Scripture (in a secondary sense, of course) that it did not come to us by men, nor through the teaching of men, "but through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12). Let us, like Matthew, accept with full assurance that "...no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). No person has ever lived or will ever live who could or can please God or serve Christ while rejecting the Word of Deity! Let us all give not only lip service to reverence for God's Word but let us give the only reverence that counts — that of being doers of the Word and not hearers only (Jam. 1:22).

Conclusion

Our natural curiosity leads us to desire to know more about Levi-Matthew than has been preserved for us. This will have to wait until the grand reunion of the saints of God in Heaven at last. However, what we know of him, both through the sparse references to him and from his immortal book, causes us to esteem him highly. Here was a man who gave up everything that he might gain everything. He was the living enactment of the Lord's parables of the treasure hid in the field and the pearl of great price (Mat. 13:44-46). R.C. Foster made the following appropriate comments concerning Matthew:

Matthew left all and followed Jesus.... What Matthew gave up was not to be compared with what he gained. Back of the great love which brought forth a great sacrifice was the great Saviour who was able to save him from his past and to call him into a great future. Matthew's break with his past was definite and final: he did not drift back into it. He became one of the apostles of Jesus. He became the author of the first Gospel – one of the most important documents of all history. The contrast between Matthew, the publican, and Matthew, the faithful apostle and biographer, reveals the great love and saving power of the Son of God.⁹

Endnotes

1. With minor alterations this chapter was originally written for the Memphis School of Preaching lectureship book, *Great Characters of the New Testament*, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Memphis, TN: Memphis School of Preaching, 1991), under the title, "Matthew, Who Left All and Gained All." It is used here by permission.
2. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
3. John McClintock and James Strong, ed., *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969 rep.), 5:886.
4. H. Leo Boles, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1936), p. ix.
5. McClintock and Strong, 5:887.
6. Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1965 rep.), p. 414.
7. Albert Barnes *Notes on the New Testament* (London, England: Blackie and Son, 1884–85; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983 rep.), 9:99.
8. A. Lukyn Williams, *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls Co, n.d.; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950 rep.), 15:xxi.
9. R.C. Foster, *Studies in the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971 rep.), p. 436.

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