

MATTHEW. . . WHO DID WHAT HE COULD

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom. and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him. (Matt. 9:9)

And after these things he went forth, and saw a publican, named Levi, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he said unto him, Follow me. And he left all, rose up, and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his own house. and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. (Luke 5:27-29)

Matthew, a tax gatherer in Capernaum, was a very wealthy but unpopular man. Most of the customs officials were unscrupulous men who deserved the condemnation of their countrymen, but there is no evidence to prove the son of Levi was an extortionist. Like another of his occupation, he might have been able to say, "The half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (see Luke 19:8).

Capernaum was one of the most important business centers in Palestine. Caravans from many countries passed through the area, and the Romans, recognizing its commercial importance, assigned one of their high-ranking officers to the district. There were all kinds of laws, and it may be assumed that Matthew was aware of them. Historians tell us there were three main taxes: (1) a tax on land—farmers were required to pay one-tenth of their grain and one fifth of their fruit; (2) a normal income tax, which amounted to one percent of income; and (3) a poll tax, which applied to all males between the ages of fourteen and sixty-five years. In addition, there was a special tax on exported and imported produce, and another that related to wheels and axles of wagons. There were no printed lists of required payments, and unscrupulous men could charge whatever they desired. It was customary for businessmen to pay bills and later recoup their losses by increasing the price of the merchandise.

The nation detested the villainy of the officials, and consequently, all tax gatherers were denied many of the normal rights of citizenship. They were unwelcome in synagogues where their presence was considered a contamination. Matthew, the son of Levi, had become one of these officials, and there could not have been a more unlikely man to become an apostle of Jesus Christ.

The Strange Response ... Suggesting

..... a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him" (Matt. 9:9). Mark says that Matthew was sitting by the seaside (see Mark 2:13-14). The booth, or office, was possibly a hut erected close to the roadside where produce was examined. The customs officers used long iron rods to push into bags of grain where taxable goods might be hidden. Evidently, Matthew was proceeding with his business when Jesus passed along the roadway. The Savior's sudden call was answered immediately, and the response of the tax gatherer was thought provoking.

It is extremely difficult to believe that any man, on the spur of the moment, would abandon his employment, jeopardize his future, and embrace a new occupation for which he had no special training. If any person did such a provocative thing, his or her sanity would be questioned. Since Matthew sat daily at his customs post, he would meet many people and be aware of events taking place within the area.

#### MATTHEW. . . WHO DID WHAT HE COULD

Perhaps he had frequently seen Jesus along the seashore, and the possibility exists that during his free time he attended some of the Savior's meetings. His surrender to Christ could have been the culmination of a process that had been taking place over a period of time. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

If the tax gatherer had a family, they would have sought an explanation for his strange behavior. His father, at least, would recognize the difficulty of securing another lucrative occupation. The account of Matthew's response to the call of Christ suggests he was ready. Without hesitation, he left everything—his family, his job, and assets—to embark upon a career in which, often, he would have no place to sleep. This is a story that acts as a mirror for all Christians. People look through windows at whatever may be seen outside but into mirrors to see themselves. No person can be useful to Christ unless he or she is willing to make a final commitment. Secret disciples can never

115

be aggressive workers for the Lord; their fear of discovery paralyzes every effort to glorify the Savior and negates every effort to extend His kingdom. When the tax gatherer responded to the challenge of Jesus, he left everything except his pen'

#### The Special Repast... Surprising

"And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them" (Luke 5:29). As will be seen later in this study, Matthew was not an orator; he was a man of books and handled figures. Nevertheless, he was consumed with an increasing desire to tell others about the Master. The greatest achievement of his career was the production of the Gospel which carries his name. That he owned his home was to be expected; he was rich. It was significant that Luke described the supper as "a great feast" attended by "a great company of publicans and of others." That sumptuous repast was a notable occasion for which expense was never considered. When Matthew entertained guests, he did so with the magnificence of a king!

It would seem the supper was hastily planned; discipleship meant service, but since the Jews would have refused to participate, the choice of guests was limited. As a tax gatherer, Matthew knew all the officials in Capernaum and was able, at short notice, to invite a great company of his friends. If the feast were held at a time when offices were closed, for example on the Sabbath or after business hours, Matthew could have entertained every official in the district. Why did he do this? He did not preach to his guests nor give his testimony. They were all aware of what had happened. It may be assumed that Matthew wished his associates to meet his new Friend, to see Him face-to-face. He did not expect them to leave their employment, but did all that was possible to introduce everybody to Jesus. If relatives questioned the wisdom of spending so much money, the host might have replied, "Money! who needs money when he has Christ?" The generosity of this unpopular man provided a strange contrast to the rich young ruler who loved his wealth too much to risk losing a penny. Matthew was a notable exception to the statement: "A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23).

#### The Studious Recorder ... Submitting

Unlike Simon Peter, the first evangelist, and Stephen, the first Christian martyr, Matthew was not a great preacher. Nothing was

116

written to describe his public confessions, but he never complained

#### MATTHEW. . . WHO DID WHAT HE COULD

when appointed to be one of the seventy disciples commissioned to spread the gospel through Palestine. Maybe he felt like a square peg in a round hole, but was willing to do his best at something for which he was not particularly gifted.

It would be interesting to know the identity of Matthew's associate on that first attempt to evangelize Palestine. He must have been a man of rare understanding who never complained when his partner appeared to be more concerned in writing notes. If the first Gospel had not been written, its author would have disappeared into obscurity. The former tax gatherer was more interested in the preservation of the sayings of Jesus than in miracles and the expulsion of demons. It was evident he could have preached like Peter. The Lord gave to Matthew a special gift, and the disciple never deviated from the path of duty. Perhaps he was ill at ease when addressing an audience, but he never became weary writing memoirs of the Savior. He did not see the spectacular signs that followed his comrades' service, but deep within his soul, he was content to produce something that would outlast the exploits of his brethren.

Matthew was the only author to preserve for posterity the Sermon on the Mount, and the parables of the kingdom. When he should have been in bed, he probably sat in the glow of a lamp, committing to writing the events of that day. Perhaps he heard from Mary the account of the visits of the Magi to Bethlehem, and believing this would be convincing evidence for his Jewish readers, included it in his writings. Matthew was not a great preacher, but his labor supplied innumerable pastors with stories that have never lost their charm. He loved to write of the King of heaven, who, although He was rich, became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich (see 2 Cor. 8:9).

#### The Silent Resolve ... Supporting

"But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them [the multitude], Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words" (Acts 2:14, emphasis mine). The Holy Spirit ignited the fiery preaching of the apostles, and the church was born. The Jewish leaders became angry because uneducated men were undermining the authority of the Sanhedrin. They were insisting that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead, and much of the population believed the story. The troublemakers had to be silenced. Within days, Stephen was stoned and Saul of Tarsus began to attack the disciples.

117

Matthew, in all probability, had written his notes regarding the death of his Master, but even if he had not, something of greater importance claimed his attention. Peter was determined to preach in the streets, but at that moment the reactions of the crowd were unpredictable. Peter was a strong individual, but what could one man do against thousands of listeners if they did not like the message and turned against the messenger? Antagonism could destroy the church. Matthew considered the grim possibilities, and putting aside his pen, decided first things should be first. However great his desire to continue writing, he resisted the urge and went to stand with his brethren before the crowd. The world has become aware of the miracle that God performed that day, but it must be remembered that when the eleven—including Matthew—stood with Simon Peter, they were prepared to preach no matter what the consequences. Momentarily, the urge to write was suppressed, and although there is no record that Matthew ever uttered a word, maybe it was upon his shoulder Peter leaned as he addressed the audience. When the events of that wonderful day became memories, Matthew returned to his appointed task and his message was enhanced by the fact that he had been courageous when fear could have dominated his soul.

#### The Splendid Record... Surviving

#### MATTHEW. . . WHO DID WHAT HE COULD

The time and place of the writing of the first Gospel have been discussed by Christians in every age. There is no conclusive evidence, but it may be said that Antioch in Syria, about the year A.D. 60, might have been the city and date where it first appeared. Most theologians agree the place of composition was in a city of the Middle East where Judaism and Christianity existed together. It should be remembered that during the first three centuries of church history, Roman emperors destroyed everything associated with the teaching of Jesus. All copies of the sacred writings were written by hand, and each scroll necessitated much labor. When the Scriptures were burnt, the loss was incalculable. Yet in some miraculous fashion the Gospels were preserved, and at least one copy survived every period of destruction. Today, after two millenniums of recurring opposition, millions of Bibles endorse the fact that the Word of God is indestructible. Most of the sermons preached by the early Christians have been forgotten; their influence on the modern world has become void. Yet Matthew's gospel, with its companion volumes, survived the test of time.

Stored in the libraries of many nations are billions of books that have outlived their usefulness. They are consulted only by historians or

118

comedians who laugh at the predictions made in an earlier age. Many people who admired certain authors regarded their works as infallible and priceless, but unfortunately the onward march of time revealed mistakes in those volumes. Some of the greatest expectations were ruined by progress. Yet there is one book that has endured through the centuries, whose doctrines never became obsolete, whose revelations overcame criticism, whose teachings became the foundation of whatever virtue remains in this world. Its pages may become tattered and torn through constant use, but its message abides eternally in the hearts of readers. If the present order continues for thousands or even millions of years, future generations in every country will discover, as did their forefathers, the Word of God is the greatest treasure ever bequeathed to humankind. Matthew used his gift to glorify Christ—  
what are we doing with our talents?

119□

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.  
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.