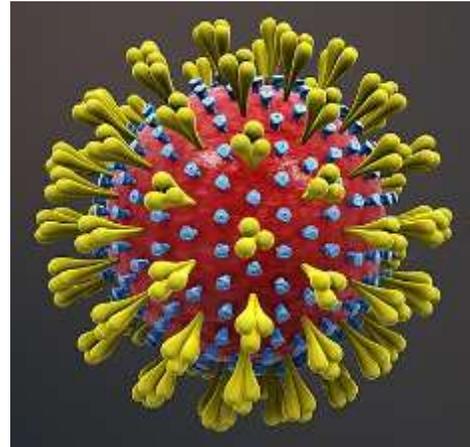


**From the Wilderness to the World**  
**From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”**  
**Presented on Sunday, March 15, 2020**  
**By Phil Brainerd**

**Introduction**

Over the last few weeks, we’ve all seen very unusual headlines. Here’s why I say that. We all know that a virus has appeared, and that people are concerned. At first, we heard that it was in mainland China. Then we heard about it spreading. Then we heard that different places were affected. Places like Japan and South Korea. It wasn’t too long after that that we started to hear the word, “world”. There was concern that this virus would affect large segments of the world, if not the whole world. We started hearing words associated with the whole world. We started hearing “Pandemic”. We started hearing that the World Health Organization was involved.” Then we started hearing concerns that the global economy would be hurt.



*Corona Virus*

“World”. You can’t get much more concerned than the world. Problems can’t get much bigger, you would think, than being “world-wide”. People are concerned. People are afraid.

***We’re going to learn today that the Great King, Jesus, is very concerned about the world.***

We’re in our series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe.” Today, our message is entitled, “From the Wilderness to the World”.

Let’s review a few things. Over the last few sessions, we’ve repeatedly seen Jesus in areas described as “Wilderness”. In Matthew 3, we learned that John the Baptist had set up his ministry area near the Jordan River described as “Wilderness”. It was a difficult area; a place far away from the comforts that you might find in developed areas. Among the things that we learned as we studied this section of Matthew’s book was the importance of wilderness for disciples of Jesus Christ - We need to find a place to be alone with God. Jesus came to that wilderness area to be baptized by John.

In our last session we saw Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit into another area referred to as “wilderness”. This area was even rougher than the area where John had located himself. We learned that Jesus was led “up” into this wilderness. If you travel “up” from the Jordan, you’re in the mountains of ancient Israel. In this area, not too far from the dead sea, the mountains are very dry and inhospitable. And they are very lonely.



*Judean Mountains near the Dead Sea*

We learned that Jesus was led there in order to be tempted by the Devil. He prepared for that test by fasting for 40 days and 40 nights. Then he faced temptations of a very powerful nature; face to face with the enemy of God and mankind; the Devil. He passed those tests. He did battle with our great enemy and won decisively.

Jesus spent lots of time in the wilderness. This is after spending 30 years growing up in a little-known corner of the world called “Nazareth” in Galilee.

Why did Jesus do all this? Why all this time preparing? What was he preparing for? Today, Matthew tells us. Let’s read:

12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.

13 Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— 14 to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

15 “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles—

16 the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.”

17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:12-17)

So, Jesus has gone from obscurity in a little-known town to the wilderness. In verse fifteen of this passage, we’re told that Jesus went from the wilderness to an area called “Galilee”. But not just “Galilee”, but “Galilee of the Gentiles”. Note: the word “Gentiles” means “nations”, or people of the world.

So, Jesus went from obscurity and wilderness to the world. Let’s take this apart.

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.  
(Matthew 4:12)

John the Baptist, the herald of the Great King, had been put in prison. We'll learn the full story of his imprisonment in Matthew 14, so let's just be reminded of a few things for now. Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..." (Matthew 11:11) John had a powerful ministry. There was no one greater.

We learned that he had been filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. (Luke 1:15) This caused him to speak with great boldness. When he saw the political King of Israel, King Herod committing sin, John called him out. The king had taken the wife of his brother, stolen her away, and married her. This was clearly something not permissible under the law. The King of Israel should have been someone willing to be an example for his people. Instead, Herod lived in gross disobedience, flaunting his power. Because John was a man filled with the Spirit, he couldn't remain silent when he saw such a man insulting the God of Israel. So, he repeatedly and very publicly criticized King Herod.

Herod responded by arresting John and locking him away. Here's something very important: There were lots of religious leaders in Israel at the time. We've learned that there were Sadducees and Pharisees. There were priests and a high priest. None of them went to jail for criticizing King Herod. That's because none of them were criticizing King Herod. Only John had the courage to speak out.

This created a problem situation. There's a threat here. Herod showed that he was willing to arrest anyone who displeased him. Might he try to do that with Jesus or anyone else associated with Jesus?

This brings up a challenge for the disciples of Christ. It's a challenge that has presented itself from the earliest days of mankind. The challenge is this: ***Should we act in ways that rely on supernatural intervention from God, or should we act in ways that involve the normal, practical resources we see in the world around us?***

Let me explain. Jesus certainly wasn't afraid of Herod. God has often given protection to his prophets. Going back in history, the God of Israel had protected Moses from Pharaoh, one of the most powerful kings in the world back in that day. Moses announced the plagues that God sent on the people of Egypt. Rather than Moses being afraid of Pharaoh, Pharaoh should have been afraid of Moses!

Jesus could easily have asked his father to intervene. But remember – Jesus at this point wanted to be associated with us. He wanted to be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. He wanted to follow the commands of God using the resources that are available to us. So, in this case he chose the practical route. He simply moved to a different location where it would be harder to Herod to pursue him. We're told, he withdrew. He withdrew to the northern territories of Israel up in Galilee.

Often, we as Christians wrestle with the question, "Should we act in ways that require a miracle, or should we rely on more practical means?" God can provide miracles, so we should

always pray. Many times, though, we rely on practical ways to solve problems. It's really a matter of discerning God's will in any given situation.

Right now, our world is threatened by a contagious virus. We should certainly pray for God's protection. But we're also told we should practice decent personal hygiene like washing hands. So, we do that. We're also told that we might be able to ride out the contagion by avoiding large public meetings for a short while. So, we're doing the practical thing: We're not going to hold services at our church for just a short while. We'll make sure that we keep in touch with our loved ones, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, using electronic media like our phones and the Internet.

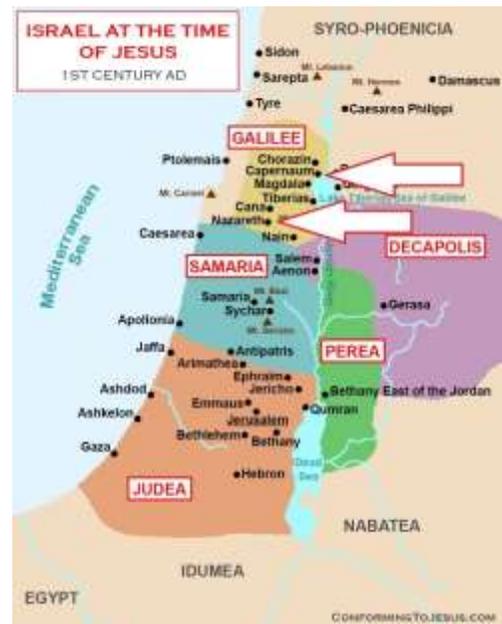
Let's read on:

13 Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— 14 to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

15 "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles—  
16 the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned." (Matthew 4:13-16)

Jesus originally returned to his childhood home in Nazareth. It was a great place for Jesus to grow up and prepare for a life of ministry. However, it's too isolated to reach many people. So, Jesus moved on to the city of Capernaum.

Capernaum sat on the northwestern shore of the sea of Galilee. You can see it on the map to the right: Capernaum is indicated by the upper arrow; Nazareth by the lower one. In taking this action, in relocating to Galilee, Jesus did something very important. **He fulfilled a prophecy.** Recall, Mathew is showing his Jewish friends that Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah, the Great King of Israel. One way this will happen is when Jesus fulfills ancient prophecies. He did that here. This quote comes from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 9:1-2). Isaiah predicted centuries before the birth of Jesus that the Messiah would spend time in the region of Galilee.



Here's an interesting point: This was completely missed by the religious leaders of the time. We learned from Matthew that the teachers of the day expected the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:5-6). That's correct, so good for them. Sadly, although they got the birthplace of the Messiah right, they seemed to have missed the possibility that the Messiah would have feet, and that he would travel to different places.

Over in John's Gospel, John shares a time when the great teacher, Nicodemus, suggested that perhaps the leaders should give Jesus a hearing. The leaders had a harsh reply: "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." (John 8:52)

"Are you from Galilee, too?" That has a condescending tone to it. Here's why: The people in Jerusalem considered themselves to be elite. They lived in the city of David. They had the temple. They had the best teachers.

The people up in Galilee had, well, lots of gentiles. This was true for a long time. There was also a lot of activities considered impure by the religious leaders: A lot of inter-marriage between Jews and gentiles. We don't have time to go into all the reasons, but the Jewish people who lived in Jerusalem looked down on the Jewish people in Galilee. The people of Galilee were thought to be an inferior group. So, the teachers of Jerusalem thought that the idea of the Messiah coming from that area was nonsensical.

Today, we call this being prejudiced. ***If you've ever felt like a victim of prejudice, believe me, Jesus understands. Jesus associated himself with these people.***

This was no minor problem. The prejudice of those teachers gave them tunnel-vision. They ignored clear statements of Scripture when those statement didn't fit their preconceived notions of how the world should work. As we said, the passage Matthew quotes is from Isaiah (9:1-2). If you read a few verses down to verse 6, you see the following famous quote:

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

That is a passage we always pull out at Christmas time because it very much refers to the Messiah. So, the Great King, the Messiah, was certainly born in Bethlehem near Jerusalem. However, he travelled to the north and set a major part of his ministry up there. The teachers in Jerusalem missed this. As we said, they missed this because of prejudice.

They also missed it because they weren't the best teachers. They were weak and corrupt. As I said earlier, they accepted the actions of the evil king Herod without complaint or challenge. That's because they profited from a system of corruption and oppression.

On top of all this, the religious leaders were pompous. And, they were lazy. They allowed themselves to receive the teachings of previous generations without fully understanding or researching for themselves. That led to an incomplete understanding of a major biblical concept. That tells us something important: ***We need to always try to understand the Scripture for ourselves.*** We must always be ready to make sure that our teachings are based on the Bible, and not on the traditions of men.

I can't tell you the times this has caused major problems for the Church of Jesus Christ. Since we're on the topic of one group of people feeling superior and looking down on others, let's use that as an example.

In the 17 and 1800's people in England and America were introduced to the concept of slavery. Slavery involved kidnapping people in Africa and selling them in the Americas, both north and south. Slavery took place because it gave the illusion of being very profitable. The Bible has a very clear teaching on this: "Anyone who kidnaps someone is to be put to death, whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper's possession." (Exodus 21:16)

Kidnapping a person and selling them into slavery was a death penalty offense. This is alarmingly clear. It should have been obvious to any honest person who sought God's will on the topic from the Bible. Sadly, people allowed their prejudice and greed to overshadow the clear teaching of the Scriptures. Even some people who claimed to be Christians allowed themselves to be seduced into tolerating slavery, if not supporting it. They ignored many passages of Scripture and misread others.

Fortunately, there were many Christians who read the Scriptures more carefully. Those people became abolitionists. Thanks to their work, slavery was eventually abolished.

So, corruption, pomposity, and laziness led the religious leaders in the days of Jesus to miss the coming of their great king, the Messiah. Corruption, pomposity, and laziness have raised their ugly heads through the history of the church, leading to atrocities like slavery.

I can't make this point too strongly: ***We need to study the Scriptures for ourselves and understand them.*** This is followed by a second point: ***Prejudice, looking down on other, has no place in the Christian church.***

These principles become even more important as we look deeper into this passage. This misunderstanding on the part of the religious leaders wasn't limited to just the Messiah. ***They missed his mission as well.*** Isaiah didn't just say that the Messiah would spend time in Galilee. He would spend time in Galilee "of the gentiles". This is curious, because the region of Galilee contains land that was originally given to the Jewish tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali.

When the territories were created, there was no thought given to the idea that this would one day be a land associated with Gentiles. But Isaiah foresaw it. By the time that Jesus walked there, this land was brimming with Gentiles.

Galilee had qualities that attracted people from all over. It had very fertile soil. The farmers there produced crops for the surrounding regions. The sea of Galilee was full of fish. Galilee also contained a major pathway that allowed surrounding regions to access the Mediterranean Sea. It was called the “via Maria”, or “way of the sea”. This brought merchants from all the surrounding nations. The Romans saw this and established major settlements there.

Some historians put the population of this region at 2 million people; many of them gentiles, the peoples of the world. A writer of the day said, “The roads of Judea (the land of southern Israel containing Jerusalem), led to nowhere, but Galilee led to everywhere”.

Here is where we see the heart of God revealed to us. This says a lot about God and his Son, the Messiah. ***It says they care not just about Israel, but about the world.*** The mission of the Messiah would indeed start in the land of Israel, but it was always intended to go from there to the whole world.

The world needed the Messiah as much as Israel. Why? Let’s read verse 16 again:

16 the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.” (Matthew 4:16)

Matthew quotes Isaiah as saying that these people live in great darkness. Darkness and light are powerful symbols in the Scriptures. Darkness refers to evil and sin. Sin and evil cause people to live in the “shadow of death”. This means that all the peoples of the world are in danger.

How can people be saved from such darkness? By light! Light is a symbol of righteousness and revelation. People need to know about God in order to escape their evil and their sin. God gives us revelation; his words contained in the Scripture.

However, the people of this region didn’t only receive the words of God. They received something much more. They received God himself. They received the one that the apostle John called “The Word of God”. Jesus said of himself: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

But it’s not enough just to know about the words of God. It’s not enough to be in the presence of the light. All people must make a decision. That’s why Jesus picks up on the ministry of John the Baptist. He proclaims these words: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17)

## Conclusion

We live in a world of people of people who are afraid. If you were to ask those people about the biggest problem in the world, you would get different answers. They think their biggest problem is a virus. And of course, disease is a terrible problem. It's just not the world's biggest problem.

The world thinks their biggest problem is economics. They tremble when the stock market waivers. And of course, having a source of income is important. The loss of income though, isn't the world's biggest problem.

We've learned today, as we've seen many times before: The biggest problem in the world is that the world lives in darkness. The world's biggest problem is evil and sin. It's because of those things that the people of the world live in the "Shadow of Death".

There is only one way to combat evil and sin: It's the light of Jesus Christ. Almost 2000 years ago, Jesus Christ was born into a little-known corner of the world. He grew up in obscurity. He spent time in the wilderness facing the greatest enemy of mankind. He did this all to prepare him for a mission. That mission would start with the children of Israel. But from there it would shoot out into the whole world. That's why the book of Matthew will later close with these words: "... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

If you're concerned about disease, that's understandable. If you're concerned about the economy, that's understandable, too. But if you're afraid of those things; if you find you're obsessed with those things; it might be because you know in your heart that you live in darkness - You live in the shadow of death.

Would you like to live a life free from fear? You must repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near. This is the time to invite Jesus into your life. He is the light. He is the Word of God. If you've never done that, contact us. You can learn how by visiting our web site: [www.TrinityTeaneck.org](http://www.TrinityTeaneck.org).

You can also visit Billy Graham's wonderful web site: [PeaceWithGod.net](http://PeaceWithGod.net)

If you've already invited Jesus into your life. You need to do two things. First remember that God protects us and provides for us. You need not fear disease or death. Pray and learn to grow in your faith. Read God's Word – understand it for yourself. There you will find many reminders of God's love for you, along with his willingness to protect you and provide for you. Then, commit to sending the light of Jesus, the Gospel, out into the whole world. Pray about your place in that.

If you do, you can live the words that we've read today: "...the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."  
(Matthew 4:16)

Thanks for reading. May the Lord richly bless you.