Invitation

JESUS CALLS PEOPLE TO FOLLOW HIM.

Growing up as the son of a Southern Baptist pastor, I didn't know you could have a worship service without an invitation. My first real experience with a worship service without an overt invitation was singing in a youth choir with 50-60 singers from my Baptist church, the Methodist church, the Presbyterian church, and the Nazarene church in Bennettsville, SC, the small county-seat where I went to high school.

Instead of an invitation, the choir met together after the concerts and shared how singing those late 1960s Christian youth musicals brought us closer to God. So there was not an invitation, but there was a time of response.

My next experience of a worship service without an invitation was in my United States Air Force's Basic Military Training at Lackland AFB, Texas. During the next four years of serving our nation, I learned that some chaplains offered an invitation while other chaplains did not.

When I was ordained as a Southern Baptist minister in 1982, I became the pastor of Roseland Baptist Church in Roseland, Louisiana. I also joined the United States Air Force as a chaplain in the USAF Reserves. Later as a chaplain in the Mississippi Air National Guard, I completed more than twenty-four years of serving our country and our God as a chaplain, retiring in August of 2002. During my service as a chaplain, I sometimes offered an invitation. At other times, I reminded those military members who attended worship services that I would be available to talk with anyone after the worship service was over.

As we study this passage in Matthew 4, we see that Jesus called people to follow Him. He continues to do that today. Our focal verses remind us that Jesus joined John the Baptist in preaching a message of repentance, fulfilling His role of Messiah as prophesied by the eighth-century BC prophet Isaiah. Even as Jesus urged the crowds to repent, He invited them to follow Him as His disciples ("one who learns"). To twelve of these disciples, Jesus extended the invitation to special service as an apostle ("one who is sent").





Matthew 4:12-25

When Jesus was about thirty years old (Luke 3:23), the Holy Spirit led Him to participate in His first public ministry event: to be baptized (immersed) by John the Baptist in the Jordan River (Matt. 3:13-17). Prior to Jesus's baptism, Matthew stressed John the Baptist's fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (vv. 1-12; see Isa. 40:3). Matthew's Gospel account follows Jesus's baptism by detailing the Holy Spirit's leading Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (4:1-11). Immediately following Jesus's defeat of Satan, the angels (spiritual beings created to serve God) ministered to (served) Jesus. Jesus then began His public ministry.



Starting Out (Matt. 4:12-17)

Jesus began His ministry by leaving Nazareth and settling in Capernaum. This region of Galilee once belonged to the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, and Jesus's ministry there fulfilled ancient prophecy about those tribes. His message was simple and clear. People needed to repent from their sins and recognize the arrival of God's kingdom through Him.

VERSE 12

When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.

Jesus began His public ministry by (1) leaving Nazareth, (2) encouraging John the Baptist to baptize Him, (3) being led into the wilderness to be tempted, (4) visiting Nazareth, and finally (5) settling in Capernaum.

When Jesus heard that **John** the Baptist had been arrested by Herod Antipas (the fuller story of John the Baptist's arrest and beheading is given in Matt. 14:1-12), He left the wilderness area of the Jordan River and traveled to Galilee further away from this Herod's influence. Galilee was in the northern part of the Roman province of Judea.

The area of Galilee was approximately 2,000 square miles with an estimated population of 2,000,000 to 3,000,000 in at least 200 cities, towns,

and villages. More than half the residents of Galilee were Gentiles (which is probably why this area was sometimes called "Galilee of the Gentiles," 4:15). Galilee was bordered to the north by Lebanon, Samaria to the south, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and the Jordan River to the east. Galilee was divided into two parts: Upper Galilee which had mountains over 4,000 feet and Lower Galilee which had hills of about 1,000 feet. Agriculture, trade, and fishing were the principal areas of employment.

VERSE 13

He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Jesus visited His hometown of **Nazareth** (pop. about 400), which was located in the hill country of Lower Galilee about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. It was near the Via Maris, an international trade route running from Egypt to Mesopotamia. The main economy of the village was agriculture. Centuries earlier, Joshua allocated this region to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali around 1400 BC.

After His visit, Jesus relocated to **Capernaum** (pop. about 1500), a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum was the center of a thriving fishing industry and became Jesus's headquarters for His Galilean ministry. This move from Nazareth to Capernaum represented the beginning of Jesus's preaching and teaching ministry.

VERSES 14-16

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, along the road by the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who live in darkness have seen a great light, and for those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

These verses quote from **the prophet Isaiah** (Isa. 9:1-2). Matthew's quote preserves Isaiah's use of parallelism (saying the same thing with different words); this is a common element of Hebrew poetry. (More than half of the Old Testament was written in poetic format.) The **great light** Isaiah referred to was the Messiah. "Messiah" is a transliteration of the Hebrew term *Mashiach*, while "Christ" is English for the Greek term *Christos*. Both have the meaning of "anointed one." New Testament writers identified this great light with Jesus (John 8:12).

The phrase **along the road by the sea** likely refers to the road from Damascus south and west to the Sea of Galilee and possibly to the

Mediterranean seaport of Caesarea. Why did Isaiah refer to this area as **Galilee of the Gentiles**? When Israel's United Kingdom under David and Solomon was split into two nations (around 930 BC), Israel (10 tribes) in the north and Judah (plus Benjamin's tribe) in the south, Israel's kings led them away from worshiping the one true God. God punished Israel by allowing the nation of Assyria to destroy them in 722 BC. Assyria exiled many of the Israelites and imported foreigners to Israel. The subsequent intermarriage between the Jews and Gentiles destroyed any racial ties to the former Israelite tribes. Thus, the term *Galilee of the Gentiles* is an appropriate designation for many people living in Galilee in Jesus's time.

VERSE 17

From then on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near."

John the Baptist preached: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (3:2). After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus began to preach repentance as well: "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near." Whereas John proclaimed the coming of the kingdom, in Jesus the kingdom had arrived. Jesus's message was simple and clear. People needed to repent from their sins and recognize the arrival of God's kingdom through Him. With His arrival, Jesus had partially established the reign of God's kingdom; it will fully arrive with Jesus's second coming. This "already" but "not yet" aspect of Jesus's fulfillment of the kingdom of God is taught in the New Testament and is still preached today.



Explore Further

Read the article "Galilee" on pages 608–610 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What role did Galilee play in the Old and New Testaments?

Calling Out (Matt. 4:18-22)

Walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus encountered two sets of brothers: Peter (Simon) and Andrew, James and John. He invited these fishermen to join Him in His work, challenging them to fish for men. All four immediately left their nets and their families behind to follow Jesus.

As he was walking along the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter), and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea — for they were fishermen.

The **Sea of Galilee** is a heart-shaped freshwater lake approximately thirteen miles long (north-south) and eight miles wide (east-west); its deepest part is about 141 feet. The headwaters of the Jordan River flow into its northern end, and the Jordan River flows out on its southern end. This sea (lake) is located in the upper portion of the Jordan Rift Valley.

Surrounded by hills and mountains at an elevation of almost 700 feet below sea level, the lake is prone to sudden, violent storms. The Sea of Galilee is also called Lake Gennesaret (Luke 5:1), Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1), and Sea of Chinnereth (Josh. 11:2; 13:27).

The Sea of Galilee contained three major types of fish: small sardines, members of the carp family, and large musht (tilapia). Nets were used for most fishing from small boats.

During a drought in 1986, the low water level allowed two Israeli fishermen living on the northwest shore to see part of a well-preserved wooden boat emerging from the mud. The ancient craft measured about 27 feet long \times 7.5 feet wide \times 4.3 feet tall and was propelled by a sail and oars. The boat is dated to about 40 BC.

The calling of Jesus's first disciples is reported in our focal verses, as well as in Mark 1:16-20 and Luke 5:1-11. Jesus called two sets of brothers: Simon (Peter) and Andrew, and James and John (Matt. 4:18,21). Previously, Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:40). Peter also met Jesus during that time (v. 42). A frequent practice at this time was for the older brother to be listed first. Probably Peter was older than Andrew and James was older than John.

With the common practice in Jesus's day of wandering rabbis calling younger men to follow them, Jesus (about thirty years old) commanded Simon and Andrew to follow Him. Matthew preferred the name Peter (twenty-two times) to Simon (five times) in his Gospel.

VERSES 19-20

"Follow me," he told them, "and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

In Matthew's Gospel, **follow me** is frequently used in the sense of discipleship. The word *disciple* means "one who learns," frequently in terms

of a master/student relationship. Disciples in Jesus's day were usually about thirteen to fifteen years old.

Jesus captured the interest of Peter and Andrew by asking them to do something they were familiar with: fishing. But instead of fishing for fish, Jesus elevated His call to them to fish for something much more important—to **fish for people**. They would be doing what Jesus was doing, calling people to follow Jesus. What a contrast: fishing for fish kills but fishing for people brings life, abundant in the "here and now" and eternal in the future. The word **immediately** describes Peter's and Andrew's response to Jesus. Peter and Andrew did not say their goodbyes to their family. They responded to Jesus's call to discipleship immediately.

VERSE 21

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father, preparing their nets, and he called them.

Matthew presented Peter, **James**, and **John** as the most prominent of the disciples. James and John's father was **Zebedee**. Likely they were mending their nets when Jesus called them. For James and John to leave their father points to the radical nature of discipleship—a person's relationship with Jesus is even more important than their relationship with their earthly family (Luke 14:25-27). All the Gospel accounts communicate this view of the costly nature of what it means to follow Jesus as His disciple.

VERSE 22

Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

James and John's response to Jesus's call was the same as the first set of brothers. **Immediately** they left their occupation and their family, making Jesus their number one priority. Jesus's call for these four to become His disciples occurred about AD 26–27. This James (not Jesus's half-brother who wrote the book of James) played a prominent role as an apostle in the early church after Jesus's ascension into heaven until his martyrdom in about AD 44. James was the first of Jesus's twelve disciples who was killed for his faith (Acts 12:2). Peter, James, and John formed the inner circle of Jesus's disciples (Matt. 17:1; 26:36-37; Mark 5:37).



Explore Further

Read the article "Fish, Fishing" on pages 575–576 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways are "fish" and "fishing" used symbolically in the Bible?

Reaching Out (Matt. 4:23-25)

As Jesus shared the message of God's kingdom around Galilee, He proved He was the Messiah through His preaching and His miracles. News of Him spread, and His popularity grew. Before long, people from surrounding regions were coming to hear Him speak. They also brought sick and demon-possessed people to Him for healing. Jesus's popularity was not limited to Jews and Jewish areas. Syria and the Decapolis (along with "beyond the Jordan") represented primarily Gentile populations. Yet, He highlighted God's work among these people by ministering to them as well.

VERSE 23

Now Jesus began to go all over Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

During the first and probably second year of Jesus's ministry (AD 27–28), Matthew reported that Jesus **began to go all over Galilee**. The words *all over Galilee* imply an extended amount of time. While we don't know the exact amount of time Jesus spent in Galilee, likely it was several months or more.

According to this verse, Jesus's **teaching** was in the **synagogues** (a word which means "coming together" and refers to a place where worship services were held and teaching was done). The synagogue developed while the Jews were in Babylon (sixth century BC).

Synagogue worship services were similar to our worship services today complete with prayers, singing, reading Scripture—primarily from the Law [the first five books of our Old Testament] and Prophets as well as Psalms. Women, if they were allowed into the synagogue, had to sit or stand in the back, frequently behind a screen. A synagogue usually was established when there were ten Jewish men who could come together for

worship in that area. Outside of the temple in Jerusalem, most of Jewish religious life was focused in the synagogues. Visiting guests frequently were asked to read Scripture and make brief comments on that Scripture.

The second activity that Matthew reported Jesus doing was **preaching the good news of the kingdom**. Although similar to teaching in Jewish synagogues, there are some differences between these two activities. *Teaching* involved making comments about Old Testament Scripture and pictures a teacher and learners. *Preaching* involved speaking or announcing something new as town heralds did.

Matthew gave us the content of the teaching: the good news of the kingdom. The Greek word translated good news or "gospel" refers to the content of Jesus's preaching. We get our English word "evangelist" and similar words from this Greek word. In this context, the word kingdom refers to God's rule in a person's heart and not to a geographical area or a political designation. It also involved repentance from previous acts of sin and belief that the kingdom of God had come in Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). Jesus was both the source and the embodiment of what God's kingdom meant.

The third activity that Matthew reported was Jesus **healing every disease and sickness among the people**. This statement revealed Jesus's power and authority over all different types of *disease* and *sickness*. Jesus's healing ministry was a sign that God's kingdom was not only coming but, to a certain extent, had already arrived. His healing drew the crowds that enabled Jesus to present Himself as *the good news*. By healing people, Jesus demonstrated God's love and mercy.

VERSE 24

Then the news about him spread throughout Syria. So they brought to him all those who were afflicted, those suffering from various diseases and intense pains, the demon-possessed, the epileptics, and the paralytics. And he healed them.

Matthew revealed the scope of Jesus's popularity in stating **the news** about him spread throughout Syria. This mention of Syria probably refers to the area north of Galilee and demonstrated the growing popularity of Jesus's ministry even outside Galilee.

Verse 24 then gives an impressive list of the categories of afflictions Jesus healed, moving from comprehensive to general and finally to specific. The word **afflicted** is a broad term referring to those with medical problems. The root of this word is the general Greek term meaning "bad."

The phrase **those suffering from various diseases and intense pains** is less comprehensive than *afflicted* but the phrase is still general in its scope. Matthew then moved from the general to the specific problems using the phrases **the demon-possessed**, **the epileptics**, **and the paralytics**. These three terms specify particular medical and mental problems.

The Gospel's focus on Jesus's healing of various types of maladies emphasized Jesus's power and authority over all types of sickness and diseases, regardless of their origin, medical or mental. Demon exorcism revealed Jesus's power over the devil and his demons (Matt. 12:28; Mark 1:23-28; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:14-29). Some demons acknowledged Jesus to be "the Holy One of God" before He exorcised them from people (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). Verse 24, taken as a whole, emphasizes the extensive range and scale of Jesus's healing ministry. As previously noted, it pictures Jesus's unlimited power and authority demonstrating the dramatic coming of God's kingdom in Jesus.

Matthew concluded with a summary statement without elaboration: **And he healed them.** Regardless of the type of problems people had, Jesus met their needs through God's coming into their particular situations through His gifts of grace to them.

VERSE 25

Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

Matthew reported one major result of Jesus's healing ministry: **Large crowds followed him.** These *large crowds* enabled Jesus to preach, teach, and evangelize, pointing to Himself as the one who would meet all their deepest needs. In Jesus—and only in Jesus—the kingdom of God had arrived.

We don't know the exact size of these crowds, but on several occasions, Jesus had fed large crowds. On one such occasion Jesus fed 5,000 men plus women and children (14:13-21), bringing the total number of people to possibly 15,000 to 20,000. Another time Jesus fed 4,000 men plus women and children (15:32-39) for a total number of possibly 8,000 to 12,000 people.

The remainder of verse 25 lists the areas the people in these crowds who followed Jesus had come from: **Galilee**, **the Decapolis**, **Jerusalem**, **Judea**, **and beyond the Jordan**. These five geographical areas comprise the major land area of modern-day Israel and Jordan. People from *Galilee* represented many in the crowds since Jesus's healing and

evangelistic ministry had been centered in Galilee at that time. People from *the Decapolis* were from the region east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee. The word *Decapolis* means "ten cities." The population of these Greek cities is uncertain, but we do know that some Jews lived there and people traveled from the region to see Jesus. The Decapolis is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Matt. 4:25; Mark 5:20; 7:31). Although some disagreement exists about the cities in the Decapolis, frequently these are listed: Damascus, Philadelphia, Raphana, Scythopolis, Gadara, Hippos, Dion, Pella, Gerasa, and Canatha.

People from *Jerusalem* were part of the large crowds who followed Jesus as well. Although much of Jesus's ministry was located in Galilee, Jesus also spent time in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. In Jesus's time, the population of Jerusalem was estimated to be approximately 25,000 to 50,000. Those numbers more than doubled (some estimate an increase to 2.5 million people) during the Passover and major Jewish feasts.

People from Judea also made up some of the large crowds who followed Jesus. Judea is the name of the Roman province made up of both the Old Testament Southern Kingdom (Judah and Benjamin) and the Northern Kingdom (Samaria; the other ten tribes of Israel).

People from beyond the Jordan represented those in the crowd from the area east of the Jordan River. Matthew, Mark, and John use this Greek phrase translated "beyond the Jordan" (Matt. 4:15,25; Mark 3:8) or "across the Jordan" (Matt. 19:1; Mark 10:1). This included the area the New Testament calls Perea and possibly included the Decapolis, and Nabataea.



Explore Further

Read the article "Kingdom of God" on pages 964–966 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the article define "the kingdom of God"? How can believers follow Jesus's example of sharing the message of God's kingdom? We should apply these verses to our lives by remembering that Jesus's call means following His example and ministering to others. Are you following Jesus's example? How so?