



Matthew or Levi

Matthew is represented by three money bags and sometimes a writer's quill. The money bags remind us of his position as a publican, a tax collector, before Jesus called him into service. Matthew was a learned man who was also given the responsibility by the Holy Spirit to pen one of the gospels.

THE JOB OF THE PUBLICAN

It's interesting to notice that as we follow the life and ministry of Jesus, we become familiar with him and his band of specially selected men because they become very important. His disciples were with him at the wedding of Cana, they saw him walking on the water, they witnessed the feeding of thousands of people—more than once, and they were shocked by the unbelievable spectacle of the raising of Lazarus. In addition to this, we know they were with Jesus in the upper room, and they fled from his captors in Gethsemane. However, through all of this it is surprising how little the Bible actually tells us about the Twelve. Matthew is a good example. Here is a man who seems to be quite familiar to us, yet other than the listings of the Twelve and his calling, Matthew is never again named in the gospels, and he never once speaks.

Who was Matthew, the disciple who once was a hated man? It is possible that among all of the disciples, none was more despised before his conversion than Matthew. Named Levi by his father Alphaeus (see Mark 2:14, Hebrew for "joined"), his name was changed later to the Greek name Matthew ("gift of Jehovah"), the name by which he always refers to himself in his own gospel. At an early age Matthew decided to leave the security of the Jewish community and purchase a tax-gathering franchise from the Romans. As a publican, or tax collector, he became a man who was despised and hated by his fellow Jews. He was counted among those who were vile, despicable, and unprincipled traitors, who padded their own pockets with money they

often forced from their fellow men. The Roman statesman Cicero once made a list of trades he considered vulgar and unbecoming. He mentioned tax gatherers among the most reprehensible.

The Romans seemed to have two levels of tax collectors: those who were in charge of the general income tax and property tax and those who were responsible for the import and export taxes, tolls, and even fish that were sold in the marketplace. Matthew seems to be of the latter. Twice in Matthew's own writing he admits that the tax gatherers were among the lowest sort of people: Matthew 9:11: "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?*" and Matthew 21:32: "*You did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did.*" These men were so despised that they were religious outcasts, forbidden to enter a local synagogue or the temple Court of Men, the place reserved for Jewish males. That is why in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the publican stood "at a distance" because he was not allowed into the central area of the temple.

The only other tax collector mentioned in the gospels is Zacchaeus, a chief among tax collectors and quite likely a very wealthy man. Matthew, the publican in Jesus' parable, and Zacchaeus all came to faith in the Savior. Jesus came to save the souls even of the tax collectors. Furthermore, Luke writes that "*the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear [Jesus]*" (Luke 15:1).

Matthew was in all probability the wealthiest of the twelve apostles and also older than most of them. His former occupation paid him well. It is also interesting to note that

whenever denominations of money are mentioned in the four gospels, Mark, Luke, and John always speak of the smaller denominations such as the penny, small copper coins, and silver. Only Matthew mentions the large denominations such as the talent and gold. Matthew was truly a man familiar with worldly treasure.

MATTHEW'S CALL

Matthew records his own conversion in stark, cold facts. It almost comes about as an interjection in the midst of Jesus' ministry. *"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth.*

'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him"



(Matthew 9:9).

Matthew had been poised at his regular desk on the outskirts of Capernaum on a well-worn pathway for travelers of this growing community. Here he sat day in and day out, counting his coins

and planning his profits. But this day was different. This day Jesus, the one who had recently preached the amazing Sermon on the Mount a few miles away, called him by name and told him to follow him. And as the gospel of Matthew says, he left his table behind, never to return to it again.

MATTHEW'S CELEBRATION

As was the case of Andrew and Philip, Matthew couldn't keep the wonderful news of the newfound Savior to himself, so he threw a celebration! While many sponsor parties for birthdays, weddings, and other festive occasions, Matthew's idea of a party was to celebrate his conversion, and Jesus was the guest of honor! This was not just a small gathering. Luke tells us that this was a lavish party: *"Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.*

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" (Luke 5:29,30). This was a gathering of the outcasts, the dregs of society, and in their midst was Jesus, the one in search of lost sheep. It was after the complaints of the Pharisees (and even some of John the Baptist's followers as mentioned in Matthew 9:14) that Jesus told them that it *"is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.*

. . . For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12,13).

Matthew took this opportunity to show his former world that his life's search had ended. He had found his hope and salvation, and he was not ashamed to tell his acquaintances. Perhaps some of those present shared Matthew's enthusiasm and turned their hearts to Jesus as well.

MATTHEW'S BOOK

Like many of the writers of the Bible, Matthew intentionally places himself in the background in his gospel for; after all, this book was not about him, but of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, he says little about his own experiences with the Savior.

Many suggest that of all the gospels, Matthew's is the one targeted especially for the Jewish people. One third of his book is made up of words spoken by Jesus. We also can tell that Matthew was well-versed in the Old Testament since he quotes it nearly one hundred times in his 28 chapters, and these quotes are from the law, the psalms, and the prophets. Matthew was indeed a unique man who served a very important place in the Lord's plan to begin his fledgling church and to serve his followers for many generations to come.

WHAT BECAME OF MATTHEW?

The ultimate demise of the writer of the first book of the New Testament is clouded in fable and conjecture. Some believe that Matthew remained several years in Judea following the Lord's ascension. Afterward, he preached in Arabia and Ethiopia, finally

suffering martyrdom by the sword in Ethiopia. Other accounts say that he was burned at the stake for his convictions as a believer in Jesus Christ. Regardless, we see here a man who was willing to give up his wealth and successful occupation to become a foundation stone in the building of the Church of Jesus Christ. Matthew was truly a remarkable man who can teach us all the meaning of following the one thing needful.

Discuss: Do you think Matthew's former occupation caused problems when he returned to Capernaum with Jesus? Why does the calling of Matthew give us hope and comfort?

***ST. MATTHEW'S DAY:
September 21***