

The New Exodus Begins

Matthew 3–4 · A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Matthew

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that Jesus deliberately relives Israel's story and gets it right where Israel got it wrong: through the water, into the wilderness for forty days, tested at exactly the points where Israel fell, and answering every temptation from Deuteronomy, Israel's own wilderness book. At the Jordan the Trinity is manifest, and the Father names Jesus his beloved Son.

Catholic Touchstone. The baptism of the Lord and its meaning for our baptism. Christ does not need John's baptism; John's baptism needs Christ. By going down into the water the sinless One begins to fill baptism with the power it will carry in his Church.

What You Need to Know

John the Baptist appears in the wilderness dressed like Elijah (compare 2 Kings 1:8), preaching at the Jordan, the very river Israel crossed to enter the promised land. Matthew frames him with Isaiah 40:3, the great announcement of the return from exile. The geography preaches: if Israel's story stalled in exile at the end of the genealogy, the action resumes exactly where entries into the land begin, at the Jordan.

Jesus' baptism raises the question John himself asks: why does the sinless One come to a baptism of repentance? Jesus answers, "to fulfil all righteousness" (3:15). He is not confessing sin; he is standing with sinners, identifying with the people he came to save, and beginning to transform John's symbolic washing into something far greater. The Fathers loved to say that Christ did not need cleansing from the waters; the waters needed cleansing from Christ. Note what happens the moment he comes up: the heavens open, the Spirit descends, the Father speaks. This is the first explicit manifestation of the Trinity in the Gospel, and it is also the pattern of every Christian baptism: sonship declared, the Spirit given, heaven opened.

The Father's words braid together Psalm 2:7 (the royal Davidic son), Isaiah 42:1 (the suffering Servant), and an echo of Genesis 22:2 (Abraham's beloved son). In one sentence the voice from heaven joins King, Servant, and beloved-son-offered, a compressed preview of the whole Gospel.

Immediately the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for forty days, as Israel spent forty years. The three temptations map onto Israel's three great wilderness failures: bread (grumbling for food, Exodus 16), putting God to the test (Massah, Exodus 17), and false worship (the golden calf, Exodus 32). Jesus answers all three from Deuteronomy 6–8, the section of Moses' sermon that interprets those very failures. Where the first Adam fell in a garden of plenty and Israel fell in the desert, the New Israel stands. He is not merely resisting sin; he is rewriting the story from inside.

The tempter's opening move deserves attention: "If you are the Son of God" (4:3, 6) attacks the very words the Father just spoke at the Jordan. Temptation typically begins by questioning our identity as

beloved sons and daughters. Jesus never argues about his identity; he stands on the word of God and answers from it.

Jesus then withdraws to Galilee, fulfilling Isaiah 9:1–2, light dawning on “Galilee of the Gentiles.” The Abrahamic, all-nations side of Matthew 1:1 is already stirring. His first word of preaching repeats John's exactly, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and his first act is to call disciples, ordinary fishermen, with a promise to remake them: fishers of men.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Isaiah 40:3.** The voice in the wilderness announcing the end of exile. Matthew applies it to John: the long wait of the genealogy's third panel is over.
- **Psalms 2:7, Isaiah 42:1, Genesis 22:2.** The three strands braided into the Father's voice at the baptism: Davidic King, Servant of the Lord, beloved son.
- **Deuteronomy 8:3; 6:16; 6:13.** Jesus' three answers in the desert, all drawn from Moses' interpretation of Israel's wilderness failures.
- **Exodus 16; 17:1–7; 32.** The failures behind the temptations: bread, testing God at Massah, false worship.
- **Isaiah 9:1–2.** Light dawning in Galilee of the Gentiles; the nations are in view from the first day of the public ministry.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: St. Gregory Nazianzen (Oration 39, On the Holy Lights)

Gregory preaches that Christ is baptized so that we might go down into the water with him and come up with him, buried with him in the water so as to rise with him. The Light needed no cleansing, but he sanctified the Jordan for our sake and made water the beginning of new birth.

Voices of the Church: St. Gregory the Great (Homilies on the Gospels)

Gregory observes that the ancient enemy tempted the Lord by the same three approaches through which he conquered the first man: gluttony, vainglory, and avarice. Christ overcame him with the patience of the word of God rather than a display of power, teaching us how the battle is fought.

Voices of the Church: St. Hilary of Poitiers (Commentary on Matthew)

Hilary reads the events at the Jordan as a mystery of our own baptism: the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends, and the Father's voice declares sonship. What was manifested over Christ is bestowed on the baptized, who become sons in the Son.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 535–537.** The baptism of Jesus as his acceptance of his mission and the manifestation of the Trinity; in baptism the Christian is united to Christ's own descent and rising.
- **CCC 538–540.** The temptations recapitulate the trials of Adam and of Israel; Jesus is the New Adam and the true Israel who fulfills Israel's vocation in the desert.
- **CCC 1223–1225.** All Old Covenant prefigurations of baptism are fulfilled in Christ, who begins his public life by being baptized and in his Passover opens the fountain of baptism to all.

Thread Watch

- **Emmanuel thread (develop).** At the Jordan, God-with-us stands in the water with sinners, and the Father, Son, and Spirit are manifest together. Presence is becoming visible.
- **New Israel thread (develop).** Planted in Session 1 with Hosea 11:1, the pattern now unfolds exactly as promised: Egypt, water, wilderness. Next stop, a mountain. Say nothing yet; let the group see it coming.
- **Fulfillment thread (develop).** Two more fulfillment citations appear (3:3 and 4:14–16). Ask for the running count.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain why the sinless Christ received John's baptism and what his baptism means for ours.
2. Participants identify the Trinity manifest at the Jordan and the three Old Testament strands in the Father's voice.
3. Participants discover for themselves that all three of Jesus' answers come from Deuteronomy and map onto Israel's wilderness failures.
4. Participants hear the strongest Protestant case for purely symbolic baptism and can answer it from Matthew's own text.
5. Participants recognize the pattern of temptation that begins by attacking identity, and Christ's model of answering from the word of God.

Timing for 90 Minutes

Win 15 min · Build 55 min · Send and Live It 12 min · Prayer 8 min. If running long, the pre-chosen cuts are, in order: drop the Dig Deeper box on Elijah's clothing (saves about 4 minutes), then compress Build question 7 on the call of the disciples into a single read-and-comment (saves about 6 minutes). Do not cut the Deuteronomy discovery or the steelman chain.

EMMANUEL · SESSION 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

The New Exodus Begins

Matthew 3–4 · 90 Minutes

Opening Prayer

Father, at the Jordan you tore open the heavens and named your Son beloved. In our baptism you spoke the same word over each of us. Send your Spirit on this circle tonight; lead us into your word as you led your Son into the wilderness, and teach us to answer every lie with your truth. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. What do you know about the day of your own baptism? If you know nothing, who could you ask this week?
2. Think of a time you were tested right after a high point, a success, a retreat, a fresh start. Why do you think it so often works that way?

Build (55 minutes)

The Voice at the Jordan

1. Read Matthew 3:1–12. Where is John, what is he wearing, and what is he doing? **Live discovery:** have someone find the prophecy Matthew quotes in Isaiah 40:1–5 and read it with the verses around it. What was Isaiah announcing, and what is Matthew claiming by applying it to John?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

John preaches at the Jordan, the river Israel crossed to enter the land, dressed like Elijah the prophet (2 Kings 1:8). Isaiah 40 announces the end of the exile, comfort for Jerusalem, and a highway for the return of the Lord himself. Matthew's claim is enormous: the exile that ended the genealogy's second panel is finally, truly over, and the One returning on that highway is the Lord.

Dig Deeper: Why Dress Like Elijah?

Malachi 4:5 promised that Elijah would come before the great day of the Lord. John's camel hair and leather belt are a costume with a message, and Jesus will confirm the identification later in this Gospel (11:14). Watch for it.

2. Read Matthew 3:13–17. John tries to prevent the baptism, and his objection makes sense: what is it? Then name everything that happens the instant Jesus comes up from the water. Who is present in this scene?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

John knows Jesus does not need a baptism of repentance; if anything their roles should be reversed. Jesus answers that it is fitting “to fulfil all righteousness”: he stands with the sinners he came to save. Coming up from the water: the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends as a dove, and the Father’s voice speaks. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are manifest together, the first open showing of the Trinity in the Gospel, and the pattern of every Christian baptism since: heaven opened, the Spirit given, sonship declared.

3. Live discovery. The Father’s sentence in 3:17 is woven from three Old Testament threads. Split into three groups: Psalm 2:6–7, Isaiah 42:1, and Genesis 22:1–2. Each group reads its passage and reports: who is being described, and what phrase do you hear echoed at the Jordan?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Psalm 2: the anointed Davidic King, “you are my son.” Isaiah 42: the Servant of the Lord in whom God delights, on whom God puts his Spirit, the figure whose mission ends in suffering. Genesis 22: “your son, your only son, whom you love,” the beloved son carried up a hill to be offered. In one sentence the Father names Jesus King, Servant, and beloved son to be offered. The whole Gospel is previewed in a single voice from heaven.

Build Then Press: Is Baptism Only a Symbol?

The Strongest Protestant Reading, Given at Full Strength

Many Evangelical Christians read this chapter and conclude that baptism is an ordinance, a public symbol of a repentance and faith that have already happened in the heart. The case is serious. John’s baptism plainly symbolized repentance rather than causing it; crowds were baptized “confessing their sins”; and Jesus himself, who had nothing to wash away, was baptized, which seems to prove the act is testimony rather than transformation. Evangelicals also distinguish John’s preparatory baptism from Christian baptism after Pentecost, and they read the New Testament pattern as belief first, baptism after, as public testimony (Acts 2:41; 8:36–38); Paul can even say that Christ sent him not to baptize but to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:17). On this reading, requiring baptism for salvation adds a work to grace. Let the group feel the coherence of this before pressing on it.

4. Now press from the text itself. Read Matthew 3:11 again carefully. What contrast does John himself draw between his baptism and the one the Messiah will give? Then look at what actually happens at Jesus’ baptism in 3:16–17. Is anything merely symbolized there, or does something happen?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

John himself makes the distinction the symbolic reading needs but cannot keep: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” John’s baptism was indeed a symbol; that is exactly why it is not the last word. The Messiah’s baptism gives the Holy Spirit. Matthew 3:11 by itself does not yet say that this Spirit-baptism comes through water; it names the difference in power between John’s rite and the Messiah’s gift. Matthew himself closes

the link at the end of the Gospel, when the risen Christ commands water baptism in the threefold name (28:19), and the apostolic Church confirms it (1 Peter 3:21). And at the Jordan things do not merely get symbolized, they happen: heaven opens, the Spirit descends, the Father declares sonship. Christ is filling the water with what it will carry in his Church.

Hold this thread loosely tonight and let Matthew finish it: the Gospel's final command is to make disciples "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). The Trinity manifest over the Jordan is the same name spoken over every baptized Christian. St. Peter will say it without blinking: baptism now saves you (1 Peter 3:21), not as magic, but as God's own act through the sacrament his Son entered the water to establish.

Forty Days in the Wilderness

5. Read Matthew 4:1–11. Before looking anything up: what number in this passage should ring a bell after last week, and where does the Spirit lead Jesus? What story is being replayed?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Forty days in the wilderness after coming through the water, as Israel spent forty years in the wilderness after coming through the sea. Last week we found Hosea 11:1, Jesus called out of Egypt as the New Israel.

The pattern is now unmistakable: Egypt, water, wilderness. Jesus is reliving his people's story, and this time the Son does not fall.

6. **Live discovery.** Jesus answers all three temptations with the phrase "it is written." Split into three groups and find where each answer is written: Deuteronomy 8:1–3, Deuteronomy 6:16, and Deuteronomy 6:13. Read each in its context. What do all three answers have in common, and what Israel story sits behind each one?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

All three come from Deuteronomy 6–8, Moses' sermon interpreting Israel's wilderness failures: grumbling for bread (Exodus 16), putting God to the test at Massah (Exodus 17), and false worship (the golden calf, Exodus 32). Jesus takes his stand precisely where Israel fell, and answers with Israel's own book. Notice also how the tempter opens: "If you are the Son of God," a direct assault on the words the Father spoke at the Jordan. Temptation still works this way, questioning our identity as beloved sons and daughters. Jesus does not debate his identity; he stands on the word of God.

Light in Galilee

7. Read Matthew 4:12–22. **Live discovery:** have someone find Isaiah 9:1–2 and read on through verse 7. Why is it significant that the light dawns in "Galilee of the Gentiles"? And what strikes you about how the first disciples are called?

ANSWER: share after the discussion

Isaiah 9 runs straight from light in Galilee to a child born for us who will reign on David's throne forever, the same royal promise the genealogy claimed. The ministry begins not in Jerusalem but in the borderlands where Jew and Gentile mix: the son-of-Abraham, all-nations side of Matthew 1:1 is already stirring. And the King's first act is to call ordinary working fishermen, immediately and by name, with a promise to remake them: fishers of men. He still builds his kingdom that way.

Send (12 minutes)

1. At your baptism the Father made you by adoption what he declared his Son to be by nature: a beloved son, a beloved daughter, in the Son. Where in your life right now does temptation begin with “if”, with questioning that identity?
2. Jesus answered every temptation with Scripture he clearly knew by heart. What is one verse you could carry into your most predictable temptation this week?

Live It This Week

- Find out the date of your baptism and write it somewhere you will see it. If you can, thank someone who was there.
- Memorize this week's verse and pray it once each day before your first meal.
- Read Matthew 5 before next session, and keep your running count of fulfillment citations.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, New Israel and beloved Son, you went down into our waters and came up tearing heaven open behind you. Renew in us the grace of our baptism. When the enemy whispers “if”, give us your answer: it is written. Lead us out of every wilderness in your company, and make us fishers of men. Amen.

Scripture Memory

Matthew 4:4 (RSV2CE): *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”*

EMMANUEL · SESSION 2 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every Passage in Order of Use

The New Exodus Begins · Matthew 3–4

Primary Text

• Matthew 3:1–12 · Matthew 3:11 · Matthew 3:13–17 · Matthew 4:1–11 · Matthew 4:12–22

Live Discovery Passages

• Isaiah 40:1–5 (end of exile) · Psalm 2:6–7, Isaiah 42:1, Genesis 22:1–2 (the Father's voice) · Deuteronomy 8:1–3; 6:16; 6:13 (the three answers) · Isaiah 9:1–7 (light in Galilee)

Background Passages

• 2 Kings 1:8 (Elijah's dress) · Malachi 4:5 (Elijah to come) · Exodus 16; 17:1–7; 32 (wilderness failures) · Matthew 28:19 and 1 Peter 3:21 (baptism, for the steelman) · Matthew 11:14 (John as Elijah, later)

Catechism

• CCC 535–537 · CCC 538–540 · CCC 1223–1225

Memory Verse

• Matthew 4:4