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1 Fulfillment

MATTHEW 1



DISCOVER

God's "To Do list" and how it was done.



LEARN

why Christ cannot be ranked alongside Moses or Mohammed.



WORSHIP

as you see how Jesus answers the questions raised by the Old Testament.

HOW do you organize your day? Do you work to a tight schedule, or do you just take things as they come? At the start of most days, I write a “To Do list.” It gives direction and helps with setting priorities. Not that everything on my To Do list gets done! The reality is that a fair amount gets rolled onto the next day. What’s really discouraging is when the list is longer at the end of the day than it was at the beginning.

Some things on the To Do list are pretty simple: Make a call, write a letter, or follow through on a decision. Other things are more extensive: Write an essay or prepare a presentation. When the list is complete, it’s time to stop planning and start working.

The real joy of a To Do list comes later in the day, when you draw a heavy line through each item and mark it “Done.” There’s nothing quite like the satisfaction of knowing that everything you planned to do is complete.

GOD’S “TO DO LIST”

In volumes 1 and 2 of *Unlocking the Bible Story*, we discovered God’s amazing promises. God told the prophets what He would do. You can think of the prophets as announcing God’s “To Do list.”

Of course, God’s To Do list does not arise from obligations that are laid on Him. Nobody can tell God what to do. God’s To Do list arises from commitments that He has made freely and voluntarily. God has promised to do certain things, and

because God is always faithful to His word, these things must be done. By the end of the Old Testament story, it's quite a list.

The New Testament opens by reminding us of the people to whom God made His greatest promises. Matthew arranged the genealogy of Jesus in three groups of fourteen generations, beginning with Abraham, David, and the exile, respectively. In this way, he focused readers on three points during the Old Testament genealogy where God's greatest promises were made. Matthew wanted us to know that the coming of Jesus was the fulfillment of all that God had promised to do.

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. (MATTHEW 1:1)

Jesus is introduced as “the son of Abraham.” Two thousand years before Jesus was born, God promised that His blessing would flow through Abraham to every nation. “I will bless you . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2–3).

Abraham wondered how this could be since he had no children. But God stepped in and caused Abraham and Sarah to have a child in their old age. The birth of Isaac was a miracle, but God's blessing did not come to the world through him. So the promise to Abraham remained on God's To Do list.

Jesus is also introduced as “the son of David.” God had spoken to David about a descendant who would build a house for God's name. God promised to establish that Son's throne and kingdom forever. Then God added, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Samuel 7:13–14).

David's son Solomon built a magnificent temple for the glory of God. But Solomon did not fulfill God's promise. His temple was eventually destroyed, and his kingdom certainly did not last forever. So this whole business of building a permanent house and establishing a throne was added to God's To Do list.

Matthew's third focal point in the genealogy is the Exile.

There were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. (v. 17)

Some of God's greatest promises in the Old Testament are associated with the Exile. When His people faced their darkest hour, God promised that He would make a new covenant and give His people a new heart (see Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel

36). He promised to create a community of people who would live according to His Law, not out of obligation but because of an inner desire. These promises were made about six hundred years before the time of Jesus, and during those centuries they remained on God's To Do list.

Despite all that God had done for His people through the Old Testament story, God's greatest promises were still unfulfilled. God's blessing was still to come to the nations, the kingdom that would never end was still to be established, and the hearts of the people were still to be renewed. By the end of the Old Testament story, there was a long list of things to be done.

GETTING GOD'S TO DO LIST DONE

Matthew then tells us how the birth of Jesus Christ came about (in verses 18 and following). Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph did not know what to make of this until one night God spoke to him through a dream. He saw an angel, who told him not to be afraid. He was to call Mary's child Jesus because this child would "save his people from their sins" (v. 21). Then Matthew tells us,

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. (v. 22, EMPHASIS ADDED)

In other words, when Jesus Christ came into the world, the things God had said He would do were done.

As you read through the Gospels, you find the same point repeated again and again. We are told about how Joseph took Mary and the child to Egypt when Herod was searching for the child with the intent of destroying Him. Matthew explains that this "fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son'" (Matthew 2:15). It was as if the event had been on God's To Do list, and now it was done.

Then the young family moved to a town called Nazareth. Matthew explains that this "fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene'" (v. 23). Done!

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, which is in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. Matthew reminds us that this was "to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah" (Matthew 4:14). Done!

"This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled."



Luke tells us about the first public event in the ministry of Jesus. He came into the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and took His seat. Everyone in the synagogue stared intently; then Jesus announced, “Today this scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing” (Luke 4:18–19, 21, emphasis added).

“What God has promised is now being done—by Me!” He had declared. No wonder the people were astonished at His teaching!

The theme of God’s promises being fulfilled runs throughout the Gospels. The detail is staggering. Even the enemies of Jesus, who had every interest in showing that He did not fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament, found themselves playing their part in demonstrating that He did!

When Judas betrayed Jesus, the chief priests gave him thirty pieces of silver, which he used to buy a field. Matthew reminds us that this fulfilled what God had spoken by Jeremiah the prophet (Matthew 27:9).

When Jesus was on the cross, the soldiers took His clothes and divided them between them. But Christ had a seamless robe, and they decided to draw lots and give it to the winner. John wrote that “this happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing’” (John 19:24).

Later, the soldiers came to break the legs of the three who were being crucified. They did this to hasten the process. They broke the legs of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus, but when they came to Jesus, they found that He was already dead. So they did not break His legs but instead thrust a spear into His side. Again, John noted that, “These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken,’ and, as another scripture says, ‘They will look on the one they have pierced’” (19:36–37).

THE PORTRAIT ON A DIFFERENT WALL

This theme of fulfillment is important for those who question whether Jesus really is the Savior God had promised from the beginning of time. Jesus Himself was in no doubt about it. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).

If you want to know who Jesus is, you need to understand that He is altogether different from the Old Testament prophets, or indeed from any other religious leader who has ever lived.


A friend of mine recently attended a seminar on religious education in which he was told that Judaism stops with Moses, Christianity stops with Jesus, and Islam stops with Mohammed. The assumption was that Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed could be compared, as if their portraits belonged together on the same wall.

Many people see Jesus as another great figure in the line of religious history. They see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Jesus, Paul, and others continuing into contemporary times as belonging to a “class” of great religious teachers. As people view this “gallery,” they draw different personal conclusions about who is the greatest.

But Jesus cannot be placed alongside the prophets, or alongside any other religious teacher. The prophets announced God’s promises. Every time they spoke, God’s To Do list became longer! If Jesus were another prophet, He would be limited to announcing more things that God would one day do. His coming would contribute nothing to getting them done.

Of course, there have always been people who thought of Jesus as one of the prophets (see Matthew 16:14), but Jesus made it clear that we must not understand Him in this way. “I have come to fulfill the prophets,” He said. Jesus did not come to make God’s To Do list longer. He came so that God’s To Do list would be done!

God . . . has
fulfilled His
promises through
Jesus Christ.



Opponents of Christianity like to suggest that it is a new religion invented by a man called Jesus who lived a mere two thousand years ago. But the Bible story goes back to the beginning of time. It tells us what God has said He would do, and it tells us that He has fulfilled His promises through Jesus Christ.

This is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. The prophets announced God’s promises of blessing for all nations, a kingdom that will never end, and a new heart for God’s people, but only Jesus Christ was able to fulfill them. His portrait belongs alone on a different wall.

GETTING OUR TO DO LIST DONE

Once we understand the uniqueness of Jesus, we will be able to grasp what He has done more clearly. When Jesus announced what would be accomplished through His ministry, He made it clear that He came to fulfill not only the Prophets but also the Law.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

(MATTHEW 5:17–18)

If the prophets represent God’s To Do list, then the Law—all the commands given to Moses, including the Ten Commandments—represents our To Do list. In the Law, God tells us what He requires us to do. Jesus makes it clear that He did not come to abolish the Law. The Law of God will stand until heaven and earth disappear, and that hasn’t happened yet!

So it would be a grave mistake to think that God was concerned about the Law and righteousness in the Old Testament, but that somehow He changed His focus and switched to grace and forgiveness in the New Testament. The whole Bible is one story. God has always been gracious and forgiving, and His Law stands forever.

The Law of God is still our To Do list. But Jesus says that He has come to “fulfill the Law.” In other words, He came to move the Law from the To Do list to the Done list. He does this in three ways: in His life, by His death, and through His people.

BRINGING THE LAW TO LIFE

The Law is not an arbitrary set of moral rules but a written description of God’s character and glory. As we saw in volume 1 of *Unlocking the Bible Story*, the reason we should not lie is that God is truth. The reason we should not commit adultery is that God is faithful. The reason we should not murder is that life is the gift of God.

The Law tells us what God is like and describes His calling for our lives. Jesus came to live the life that God has put on your To Do list. He lifted the words of God’s Law off the page and expressed them fully in His perfect life. That is why Jesus could say, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,” the Scripture says. This is why Paul wrote that we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (Hebrews 1:3; 2 Corinthians 4:6).

In the Law, God told us how we are to live in this world. He said, in essence, “This is your To Do list.” Consider the long list of names at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel. Not one of them fulfilled the Law of God. But when Jesus came, it was done.

PAYING OFF SOME OLD DEBTS

The Law does more than tell us the kind of life God requires. It also announces the consequences of sin. This is why the Bible talks about the curse of the Law. The soul that sins will die.

Throughout the Old Testament story, God repeatedly postponed this condemnation. When Adam disobeyed in the garden, God was gracious to him, and although he was excluded from Paradise, his life continued. Abraham told lies about his wife, but he remained a friend of God. David committed adultery, and yet he remained on Israel's throne. Isaiah confessed to being a man of unclean lips, but he was still used as a prophet. None of them came under the condemnation of God announced in the Law.

Why? The reason cannot be that their sin didn't matter, because the whole point of the Law is that it does. "The soul who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:4 NASB). And Christ says that God's Law will stand even when heaven and earth pass away (Matthew 24:35).

The answer is that throughout the Old Testament God held back the condemnation of the Law. He put off the Day of Judgment. He didn't cancel it, but He did postpone it. God said, in effect, "We will deal with that later." He put the whole matter of dealing with the consequences of human sin on His To Do list.

The windows in our shopping malls are regularly filled with advertisements enticing us to buy. Often you will see a poster saying, "Nothing to pay until January of next year." It sounds wonderful—Why, it's virtually free!—and it is, until the letter arrives in January of next year announcing that the time for payment has come. The payment was not canceled; it was only postponed. At some point the bill has to be paid.

Throughout the Old Testament, the sacrifices reminded God's people that there would come a time when something had to be done. But the consequences of sin remained like an accumulating debt that one day would have to be paid.

Then Jesus came. "I have come to fulfill the Law," He said. That meant not only that He would fulfill everything the Law required in His life, but also that He would bear the condemnation of the Law in His death.

This is why He had to go to the cross. God's time for dealing with the consequences of sin had come. On the cross, Jesus bore the consequences of human sin in His own body (see 1 Peter 2:24).

All that
remained "to do"
. . . has been
accomplished
fully . . . by
Jesus Christ.



The judgment and condemnation described in God's Law were poured out on Him, and when He had absorbed it fully, He cried out in a loud voice, "It is finished!" At that moment, dealing with sin was struck off God's To Do list because, for all His people, it was done.

Done!

This is why we do not offer sacrifices. The communion service is not a new sacrifice, as if our sin still needed to be dealt with, but a reminder that through the death of Jesus, it is done. This is why we do not need a temple but have direct access to God by the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ. It's done!

All that remained "to do" throughout the entire period of the Old Testament has been accomplished fully and finally by Jesus Christ. In the words of Jonathan Edwards:

Though millions of sacrifices had been offered, yet nothing was done to purchase redemption before Christ's incarnation. . . . But as soon as Christ was incarnate, the purchase began. And the whole time of Christ's humiliation, till the morning that he rose from the dead, was taken up in this purchase. Then the purchase was entirely and completely finished. As nothing was done before Christ's incarnation, so nothing was done after his resurrection to purchase redemption for men. Nor will there ever be any thing more done to all eternity.¹

A NEW DESIRE AND A NEW DIRECTION

As we follow the Bible story, we will discover still another way in which Jesus fulfills the Law. The apostle Paul wrote:

What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (ROMANS 8:3-4)

Jesus came to bring you into a new life in which you will begin to fulfill the Law of God. He died to bring you out of condemnation, and He lives to lead you into a righteous life.

Over the years, I have noticed a pattern in the things that get pushed to the bottom of my To Do lists. They are the things I don't like and the things I feel I

can't do. That is exactly our problem when it comes to the Law of God. By nature, we don't like it, and we can't do it, so our first instinct is to leave it on the list of good intentions for another day.

Jesus came to save us from that. He came to make you the person God always intended you to be. He will do that by giving you a hunger and thirst for righteousness and with that new desire, the power of the Holy Spirit so that your life may move in the direction of the Law of God.

When I was fourteen, our family went for a vacation in the town of Torquay in England. The accommodation was poor, the beaches were crowded, and it was one of those vacations that just didn't work out well. I remember traveling home in the backseat of the car. None of us was happy, and at one point I remember saying a very foolish thing. "Dad," I said, "I don't ever want to go to that town again."

My mother pointed out that this was the sort of thing that one might regret saying. She was right. Six years later, I met a girl from that town. I fell in love with her and married her. At the age of twenty, I said to my mother, "I want to go to Torquay." I've enjoyed going there ever since!

When God's Spirit begins to work in your life, you will have a new hunger and a thirst for righteousness. You will begin to own the Law of God as your To Do list. You may be a long way from doing it fully, but you will discover a new desire to grow in it. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). They have come to want what God wants for them, and their desire will be satisfied.

Jesus died to save us from the condemnation of the Law. He lives to lead us into new lives in which we fulfill the Law by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ accepts us as we are, but He never leaves us as we are. It is the purpose of God to make us righteous so that we will reflect His glory in a life that fulfills the Law of God.

If you roll the story of the Bible forward to the end, you learn that on the last day Christ will stand before the Father and say, "Here am I, and the children God has given me" (Hebrews 2:13). We shall not only see Christ, but we will be like Him. The day is coming when God will take you off His To Do list. He will look at you and He will say, "Done!"

UNLOCKED

Jesus cannot be compared to the Old Testament prophets or the prophets of any other religion. The prophets announced what God required and what God would do. Jesus came to fulfill what God requires, and to accomplish what God said He would do. He fulfills both the Law and the Prophets by delivering what God promised through them. All that God had placed on His “To Do list” is done through Jesus Christ.

Christ fulfills the Law in three ways: (1) by living a life that perfectly reflected everything that God requires of us in His Law; (2) by absorbing the condemnation of the Law for our sin through His death on the cross; and (3) by making it possible for us to live a new life in line with the Law of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. He came to demonstrate the Law to us. He died to fulfill the Law for us, and He lives to fulfill the Law in us.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

Almighty Father,

Thank You for every one of Your promises, and for the knowledge that every one of them will be fulfilled. Thank You for sending Jesus Christ so that in Him everything You promised would be done.

Thank You for the life of Jesus in which all that You are is perfectly expressed. Thank You for the death of Jesus, in which the condemnation of my sin is fully absorbed.

Help me by the power of Your Spirit to grow in the new life that is Your purpose for me. Strengthen my desire to live according to Your Law, and for Your glory, as I look forward to the day when Your work in me will be done, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note

1. Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1974), 572.