



THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
M A T T H E W



PART 10

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Lesson 89 (10-19-25)

The End of the World As We Know It? (Matthew 24:1-28)

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole

¹⁵ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

- Matthew 24:1-28 ESV

Summary

Jesus leaves the temple, and His disciples marvel at its buildings, but He predicts its complete destruction. When they ask Him privately about the timing of these events and the sign of His coming and the end of the age, He warns them first not to be deceived. Many false christs and deceivers will arise, along with wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution—yet these are only “the beginning of the birth pains.” Believers will face hatred, betrayal, and apostasy, but those who endure to the end will be saved. The gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world before the end comes.

Jesus speaks of “the abomination of desolation” (foretold by Daniel), urging those in Judea to flee immediately when it appears. Great tribulation will follow, more severe than anything before. False christs and false prophets will arise, performing signs and wonders to mislead—even the elect, if possible. Jesus warns not to believe claims that He is secretly in a certain place; His coming will be as visible and unmistakable as lightning flashing across the sky.

Observation

1. What do the disciples point out to Jesus as they leave the temple (v. 1)?
2. How does Jesus respond about the future of the temple (v. 2)?
3. Where does Jesus sit when the disciples come to Him privately (v. 3)?
4. What two questions do the disciples ask Jesus (v. 3)?
5. What warning does Jesus give first (v. 4)?
6. What kinds of people will come in His name (v. 5)?
7. What events does Jesus say the disciples will hear about (v. 6)?
8. What must happen before the end comes (v. 6)?
9. What kinds of conflict and disaster does Jesus describe in verses 7–8?
10. What does Jesus call these events in verse 8?
11. What will happen to His followers during this time (vv. 9–10)?
12. What false influences will arise (v. 11)?
13. How will lawlessness affect people (v. 12)?
14. What promise does Jesus give in verse 13?
15. What must happen before the end (v. 14)?
16. What does Jesus describe as “the abomination of desolation” (v. 15)?
17. What instructions does He give those in Judea when this happens (vv. 16–18)?
18. What warnings does Jesus give about the severity of those days (vv. 19–22)?
19. What false signs will be performed (vv. 23–24)?
20. How does Jesus warn His disciples about false reports of His coming (vv. 25–26)?
21. How does Jesus describe the true coming of the Son of Man (v. 27)?
22. What imagery does He use in verse 28?

Interpretation

1. Why does Jesus begin by warning His disciples about being led astray?

2. What is the significance of calling wars, famines, and earthquakes “the beginning of birth pains”?
3. Why does Jesus connect the spread of the gospel to the timing of the end?
4. What does “the abomination of desolation” likely refer to in historical and prophetic terms?
5. Why does Jesus emphasize urgency in fleeing without hesitation?
6. What does the shortening of those days “for the sake of the elect” reveal about God’s care?
7. Why does Jesus highlight the deception of false christs and false prophets?
8. What does the comparison to lightning teach about the visibility of Jesus’ return?
9. How does verse 28 (“wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather”) fit with the theme of judgment?
10. How should we understand the balance between present suffering and ultimate hope in this passage?

Application

1. In what ways might I be vulnerable to deception about Jesus’ return?
2. How do I respond to troubling world events in light of Jesus’ teaching?
3. How can I endure faithfully when facing opposition or suffering for my faith?
4. What role can I play in the spread of the gospel to all nations?
5. How does this passage call me to live with urgency and readiness for Christ’s return?
6. How can I encourage others not to be led astray by false teaching or fear?
7. What does this passage teach me about trusting God’s sovereignty in history?
8. How should the certainty of Jesus’ return shape my daily priorities?
9. What practical steps can I take to remain steadfast in love and faith amid increasing lawlessness in the world?
10. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 348–364.*]

“End of the world as we know it” speculation continues, but the form is generally more secular. Today we hear that global warming will flood coastal cities. It will create vast deserts and food shortages. We will run out of oil and other commodities, or hostile nations will control them. Rogue nations and terrorists will gain access to nuclear weapons and create the ultimate suicide bomb. Increased longevity will consign entire generations to the task of caring for the hyperold. Objective measures show that in terms of material wealth, health, and education, conditions have steadily improved in virtually every nation since the end of World War II, but (perhaps for good reason) we constantly contemplate the cataclysm around the corner. Secular apocalyptic scenarios may not foretell the end of everything, but they threaten the end of our world, which seems just as bad. In Matthew 24, Jesus teaches about the future. As we read, we

must acknowledge that his teaching may not answer our most urgent questions. We ask: “When will the end times begin? When and how will our world end? With nuclear war? With an ecological disaster? As electromagnetic catastrophes? Or with a more traditional disease or plagues?”

Jesus has the right to question our questions and he exercises it here. Jesus refuses to state *when* he will return. He answers “who” and “how” questions and ignores our “when” questions. He tells us *who* will enter God’s eternal kingdom and *how* to prepare for that day when we will meet the Lord.

UNDERSTANDING JESUS’ ESCHATOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

The Setting

Jesus’ discourse on final things falls during his final week in Jerusalem. Throughout Matthew 21–23, Jesus taught the crowds and his disciples in the temple precincts. He also called out a series of woes that both summon the leaders to repentance and warn his disciples against their pernicious influence. Eventually it was time to leave the temple area. As he did, “his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings” (Matt. 24:1). Mark says they urged him to look at the “massive stones” and “magnificent buildings” (Mark 13:1). The temple was indeed spectacular. With polished limestone walls, sheathed (in places) in gold leaf that glistened in the sun, it was the architectural wonder of the region.

Still, Jesus urges his disciples not to marvel at the temple’s grandeur but to attend to its transience. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (24:2). That is, splendid buildings do not impress God, nor do monuments and honors. He treasures our daily service, using our gifts, our programs to serve others. God himself will strike down every false religion. What counts is faithfulness.

The Disciples’ Questions

The disciples asked Jesus to explain. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). It is crucial that we understand this inquiry correctly. “When will this happen?” means “When will Jerusalem fall and the temple be destroyed?” The disciples thought they were asking one question; the fall of Jerusalem, the coming of Christ, and the end of the age were essentially one event in their minds. In English they appear to ask three questions: (1) When will city and temple fall? (2) What is the sign of Jesus’ return? (3) What is the sign of the end of this age?

A close reading of Matthew 24:3 in Greek shows that Jesus heard and answered two questions. The sentence is governed by this duo: First, when will the temple be destroyed, and second, what will be the sign that foretells both Jesus’ coming and the end of the age? Whatever the disciples intended, Jesus heard and answered two questions, one at a time. The first part of his reply predicts events that will take place in “this generation” (24:34), that is, within forty

years—the lifetime of the disciples. Jesus’ purpose for this element of his reply is practical. He wants the disciples to be prepared—rather than shocked or alarmed—for the troubles they will see in their generation. Those troubles are not signs of the end; therefore, the disciples must be ready to “stand firm to the end” in hard times (24:13; cf. 24:6, 8).

The Structure of Jesus’ Reply

Jesus begins his reply with a warning: “Watch out that no one deceives you” (24:4). During their days, there will be events that look like the final cataclysm, but there will be no mistake then. When Jesus returns, all the nations will see him, for he will come with angels and trumpets, with power and glory.

The disciples *do* need to watch for signs of the fall of Jerusalem. That sequence will be important. We notice that the word “then” starts to appear: *Then* you will face persecution (24:9). *Then* many will renounce the faith (24:10). *Then*, when Jerusalem is attacked, the disciples should “flee to the mountains” (24:16). Jesus staked his name and authority on the prophecies of Matthew 24:4–32. As he closed, he promised, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (24:34–35). Jesus’ word held: within forty years, in A.D. 70, Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed, just as he said.

In Matthew 24:36, Jesus begins to answer the second question: “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” He answers, “No one knows about *that day* and hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” “That day” is commonly a technical term, roughly like the term “the Super Bowl” in American football. If, in the dead of winter, I say, “I am going to watch the Super Bowl,” no one thinks I plan to go into the kitchen and stare at a large, exceptionally beautiful bowl. Even people who hate the sport know that the Super Bowl is a professional championship game. Similarly, the people of Israel knew “that day” meant the last day, the judgment day (see Matt. 7:22; Luke 10:12; 2 Tim. 4:8). “That day” is the last day, the end of the world as we know it.

To interpret Matthew 24 correctly, we must ascertain where Jesus stops answering the first question and starts answering the second. Jesus clearly finishes answering the question about the destruction of the temple at 24:34–36. He begins, “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.” Jesus’ prophecy of troubles in his generation has all the authority of God and his word. It would be easier for the universe to disintegrate than for Jesus’ prophecy to fail; “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (24:35). As we will soon see, all that Jesus foretold did occur—at least provisionally—within a generation. The switch to the last day occurs in 24:36, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” So then, Jesus promised that certain things *would* happen in that generation, and they *did happen* in that generation.

Nonetheless, as often happens with prophecies, some of Jesus’ prophecies point beyond his generation. Prophecy often has a double fulfillment. In 2 Samuel 7, the prophet Nathan told

David that he would be a great ruler because he would defend his people from their enemies (2 Sam. 7:8–11). Furthermore, his line would continue after his death: “I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, ... and I will establish his kingdom.... I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him.... But my love will never be taken away from him as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (7:12–16).

This prophecy applies first to David’s son Solomon, who had a long, peaceful reign. When he sinned, as the prophet said, God punished him, but did not remove him, as he removed Saul. So the prophecy was fulfilled in the next generation. Yet the prophecy also says David’s kingdom will last forever, and that certainly did not occur in Solomon. Indeed, his kingdom was weak within seventy years and was utterly annihilated four hundred years later. Four hundred years is a long time, but not forever. Did the prophecy fail? No, for it points beyond Solomon to another “Son of David”—Jesus. His kingdom does “endure forever.” Matthew 24 works the same way. Jesus’ word was fulfilled in his generation, as he said. He staked his reputation on it, yet there was more to come.

Notice that the disciples ask questions about *timing*. They want to know, “When will these things be?” They want to know what sign signifies that the end is near. But Jesus does not reply with a *when*—a set of dates or signs—but with a *what* and a *how*. He tells us what sorts of things are coming and how to prepare for them. In that way, he prepares us to stand firm in the storm and to stand ready to meet him when he returns.

If this view of Jesus’ teaching is correct—and many scholars from every tradition agree that it is—then many readers, weaned on prophecy conferences that headline signs of the parousia, will need to break with their customary way of interpreting the passage. Matthew 24:1–14 predicts wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, and the preaching of the gospel through the world. One group of Bible teachers insists that such events are signs of the end of this age. But if our structural analysis of the passage is correct, the prophecies predict events leading up to the fall of Jerusalem. To recapitulate, this section answers the disciples’ first question, which asked when the temple would be thrown down (24:3). That said, we must add that this prophecy seems to invite us to look for a double fulfillment. It describes God’s judgment on Jerusalem and on the generation that (by and large) rejected Jesus. But some of the language, as we will see, breaks the bonds of first-century events and points toward the last day.

EVENTS _____ THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Jesus warns against credulous fearfulness and fear-mongering so strongly that it almost seems to be his main goal (24:4–14). In this passage, Jesus predicts specific events that will occur between his resurrection and Rome’s sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But the same predictions appear to point beyond that period and to describe the days before Christ returns. This makes sense if the fall of Jerusalem foreshadows or prefigures the last day. Or we could call the fall of Jerusalem a prototype of the last day. A dress rehearsal resembles a play yet it is not quite the

play. With costumes complete, lines memorized, and the director almost silent, the dress rehearsal is much like the play. The fall of Jerusalem was a major event in itself, yet it also rehearses for and foreshadows another event, the last day. Therefore, even though Jesus is telling his disciples about the fall of Jerusalem, his terms also seem to fit the end of this world as we know it. To be more precise, the fall of Jerusalem was the last day for many who then lived in Judea, yet it is also a template for the cataclysmic day of Christ's return and teaches us to be ready for that day...

Taking the prophecies one at a time, *false christs* (24:5) and false prophets "will appear and deceive many people" (24:11), claiming to be God's spokesman or the God-anointed deliverer of Israel. In fact, false prophets and false deliverers did claim to be God's agents to restore Israel. Some will even perform signs; others will claim to know where the Christ is (24:23–26).

Indeed, many self-appointed deliverers did rise and fall before the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 30–70)...Time and again, these insurrectionists claimed divine inspiration and empowerment for their proposed battles with Rome. Even during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, a self-appointed "prophet" promised imminent deliverance. So then, just as Jesus said, false prophets and self-styled deliverers were heavy in the water in the generation following his ministry. Scripture also teaches that there will be a final recrudescence of evil before the last day. Of that season, Paul says "that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction" (2 Thess. 2:3).

It would be a mistake, however, to think that deceivers belong exclusively to the past and the future. Each generation has its false prophets and their gullible followers. Writing some years after the fall of Jerusalem (hence in a time to which Matthew 24 did not directly refer), the apostle John said, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). In every age, especially in times of distress, false teachers offer false comfort. The prosperity gospel says, "If you have enough faith, all will be well." The liberal gospel says all religions are equal and all roads lead to God. Meanwhile cults and syncretists abound. We must be watchful, questioning too facile promises of deliverance (24:4, 11).

"Wars and rumors of wars" do not signal the end of the age (24:6). As we just saw, Israel constantly lived in the shadow of strife throughout the generation following Jesus' ministry. Rome was often at war or near to it. When Jesus said, "Such things must happen, but the end is still to come" (24:6), he instructed his disciples, then and now, to resist the impulse to catastrophize, to panic, over the latest military conflict. War is a terrible evil but it is a *common* evil. In recent years, experts have concluded, there have been at least a dozen conflicts simmering in Africa, Asia, Europe, or the Americas at all times. Outside the final conflict (called Armageddon in Rev. 16:16), no war bears *special* theological significance. All demonstrate the sinfulness of mankind, but none portends an imminent end of this age.

Famine and earthquakes are also common events, with close to twenty major quakes (7.0 or more, Richter) and close to twenty thousand minor quakes (4.0 or more, Richter) every year.

The historian Tacitus documented major quakes in Antioch, Phrygia, and Laodicea before A.D. 70. A famine also struck the empire around A.D. 50, during the reign of Claudius. Neither earthquake nor famine especially signifies the nearness of the end. War, famine, and earthquake are merely “the beginning of birth pains” (24:8).

Jesus also predicted hatred, betrayal, and persecution (24:9–13). Jewish leaders persecuted Stephen, James (brother of John), Peter, and Paul, to name a few, before A.D. 70 (e.g. Acts 7:54–60; 9:23–25; 12:1–5). Nero murdered many Christians after the great fire of Rome. So Jesus’ prophecy of persecution in that generation was fulfilled. Because of such hostility, Jesus said, “many will turn away from the faith” and “the love of most will grow cold” (24:10–12). Josephus testifies in painful detail to the brutality of the months before the fall of Jerusalem.

Yet every generation faces adversity and every witness must expect hostility (Matt. 10:22), so that every generation is tempted to forsake its “first love” (Rev. 2:4). In time of persecution (whether in the apostolic era or later), when false prophets deceive and wickedness grows, some professing believers will renounce the faith (Matt. 24:9–12). Jesus says the season of adversity is the season for perseverance. The true disciple “stands firm to the end [and] will be saved” (24:13). Jesus never hesitated to warn his disciples of impending troubles. He knew that many would falter under the strain. Superficial disciples would fall away entirely, but even the best would stumble, as the parallel stories of Peter and Judas in Matthew 26 will show. Still Jesus forbids fear (24:6). God’s children stumble, but do not fall...We do not fall because God lifts us when we stumble. Thus we “stand firm to the end” (Matt. 24:13)... God commands his people to persevere and by his grace we do. Perseverance makes marriages last, even when couples clash a bit. Perseverance makes friendships last, even when flaws become clear. Likewise, we persevere with the Lord when we suffer tests or persecution.

The gospel preached in the whole world. The last sentence of this section seems to shift to the future, for (we think) the gospel was not “preached in the whole world” (24:14) before Jerusalem fell. In fact, it was, in a way. First, the term for “world” can mean the civilized world, that is, the empire. Second, Jesus says only that the gospel will be proclaimed (*kērussō*). He does not promise successful evangelism or discipleship. Third, the Bible says the gospel was proclaimed in principle through the empire in less than forty years. Men from every nation under heaven heard the apostles’ speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:5). When Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, he addressed a man from a land that Homer and Herodotus called “the end of the earth” (Acts 8). Paul says the faith of the Romans was reported all over the world (Rom. 1:8), and he told the Colossians the gospel “has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Col. 1:6, 23).

So the prophecy was fulfilled in part. Of course, Jesus commissions us to pursue a second, more thorough fulfillment, taking the gospel to every people and tongue, not in principle, but in full, with conversion and discipleship, not merely proclamation. After we reach that grand goal, “then the end will come” (24:14).

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM, A _____ OF THE LAST DAY

Matthew 24:4–14 was a prophecy with a dual fulfillment, one before A.D. 70, and one before the return of Christ. The last phrase in 24:14—“then the end will come”—spoke first to the fall of Jerusalem. In 24:15–20, the focus on the fall of Jerusalem intensifies and secondary references recede. These verses are urgent and require decisive action.

In the strongest possible terms, Jesus tells his disciples how to survive the coming siege and sack of Jerusalem. When you see the Romans coming, he says, RUN! Get out fast and don’t return (24:15–20). Luke’s version of the same discourse has a small but clarifying difference. He begins this way: “When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city” (Luke 21:20–21). The difference is not so great as it seems, for the Roman army *is* “the abomination that causes desolation.” They were an “abomination” because the army carried images essential to emperor worship. Idols in tow, they besieged the city, starved the people, breached the walls, torched the city, smashed the temple, and slaughtered innocents and combatants alike.

When the disciples see this coming, they must “flee to the mountains” (24:16). They must go *at once*. None may dash home to retrieve treasured possessions or even a cloak (24:17–18). Woe to the pregnant woman, the nursing mother, for the added burden they carry. Woe to all if they see the abomination in cold winter or on the Sabbath with its restrictions (24:19–20).

This prophecy, this warning, speaks to the fall of Jerusalem and only the fall of Jerusalem. Its prime commands cannot possibly apply to Jesus’ return. When he comes, it will be utterly pointless to flee to the mountains. Indeed, Revelation says unbelievers will wish to be buried under mountains on that day (Rev. 6:16). Why would a believer want to flee anyway? And how could it be worse for mothers at Christ’s return, or worse if he came on a cold winter day? But it is imperative to flee, at once, from a vengeful army, and cold and children do compound the troubles of flight.

The line “let the reader understand” (24:15) means that those who read Matthew had to be ready to act—ready to flee—when the Romans came. The Christians did flee, so that many lives were spared. When the Romans fell upon Jerusalem, “the church at Jerusalem ... left the city, and moved to a town called Pella.” Only in the last verse does Matthew begin to hint that this prophecy points to anything but the events coming in one generation. Is this “great distress” literally “unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (24:21)? How can “those days” be “cut short ... for the sake of the elect” (24:22)? What would come after that shortening? We will have to answer these questions later. Just now, we must harvest lessons from our passage.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DISCOURSE AND THE FALL OF JERUSALEM SPEAK TO US

To return to the beginning, we notice again that Jesus declined to answer the disciples' "when" questions. He did not state when Jerusalem would fall, nor did he reveal when he would return. No, he repeatedly said we do not and cannot know when: "No one knows about that day" (24:36). "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (24:42). "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (25:13).

We must not be duped, therefore, by dire predictions of the end of the world. Because reports of disaster draw an audience, because they sell, such reports get more play than they deserve. "Empty headed credulity is as great an enemy of true faith as chronic skepticism." The goal is critical realism, avoiding naïve optimism and sensationalism-driven pessimism. We should be sober-minded, ready to live faithfully every hour, for we never know what an hour will bring...Must we know the date, the signs, of his return? Surely it is enough to be faithful every day so that we are ready every day, whenever he may come.

SIGNS OF THE _____

Jesus raised the question of false teachers as he prepared his disciples for coming trials in Matthew 24. As Jesus left the temple precincts, the disciples marveled at the magnificent buildings, only to hear that they would become a pile of rubble (24:1–2). This startling revelation led the disciples to ask when the temple would fall and when this age would end.

The temple, Jesus said, would be destroyed in "this generation" (24:34), that is, within forty years. To protect the infant church, Jesus told the disciples how to face that dreadful season. Still, the disciples must not take war, famine, earthquakes, or persecution as imminent signs of the end and must not be alarmed. They will be tempted to believe reports that the end is at hand, that Christ has returned, but it will be impossible to mistake when that day arrives. "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it" (24:23). When Jesus returns, he will come with angels and trumpets, with power and glory.

Nevertheless, Jesus did tell his disciples to watch out for the Roman army, the "abomination of desolation" that would besiege and destroy Jerusalem. Then the disciples should "flee to the mountains" at once (24:15–20; Luke 21:20–21). Just as Jesus foretold, the Romans came within a generation, and because they remembered his word, many disciples were spared.

Scholars and commentators have long struggled to follow the precise flow of thought in Matthew 24:21–28. We will be content with what is clear. First then, as Jesus' teaching progresses, it becomes more ominous in its description of the brutality and suffering that attended the fall of Jerusalem. "Then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" (24:21–22).

Second, as we just saw, no one should trust fear-mongering reports that we have missed some secret return of Christ to a hidden corner of the earth. Jesus flatly rejects that possibility (Matt. 24:23–28). The main point is clear—it is impossible to “miss” Christ’s return—even if the line about the carcass is mysterious. Most likely, it underscores the prior point, that no one will be able to miss the return of Jesus. If so, the proverb probably means we will no more miss the return of Christ than a vulture will miss the sight of carrion. At the moment, Christians are not prone to fret that Jesus has landed in the desert without our knowledge, but the problem of false prophets is as acute in our day as it was then. There are still false deliverers and false prophets who would “deceive even the elect” if they could (24:24).

The terms “false Christs” and false prophets” sound mysterious, but their sense is clear enough. A “false Christ” is simply someone who claims to be a deliverer, and is not. A false prophet is someone who claims to speak for God and does not. There were dozens of false deliverers and false prophets in the generation following Jesus’ resurrection. Most of them claimed that God would spare Jerusalem or deliver the people of Israel from Rome’s power, perhaps through them. But Jesus said Jerusalem would fall and it did. The false prophets of our day make very different claims. Typically, they are religious figures of some kind. They offer spiritual or emotional deliverance, often through enlightenment. There is always a new book that captures the media’s attention, sells more copies than it should, and popularizes classic criticisms of the historic Christian faith. Behind them, there is always a far more scholarly version of some, even many, of the same ideas.

Conclusion

The challenges of the moment simply present the standard criticisms of Christian orthodoxy in new packages. We prepare for them less by attending to the critics and more by knowing the faith. From early days, the apostles encountered people who sought certain benefits of associating with the church while denying elements of its essential theology, such as the reality of the incarnation or the offer of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from works. The apostles’ principal strategy was not refutation of falsehood but rearticulation of the truth. The best antidote to heresy is deep knowledge of the truth about Jesus and his redemption. This brings us back to the apostles, who asked Jesus when Jerusalem would fall and when he would return. Jesus promised that certain things would happen in that generation and they did. The first Christians had to be ready for the siege on Jerusalem to save their lives. But the fall of Jerusalem is not to be confused with the return of Christ. He comes, without signs, like a thief in the night, “at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:43–44).

Lesson 90 (10-26-25)

The Coming of the Son of Man / The Lesson of the Fig Tree (Matthew 24:29-35)

²⁹ “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

- Matthew 24:29-35 ESV

Summary

Using typical apocalyptic imagery, Jesus describes the arrival of the end of the age in terms of great disturbances in the sky (cf. Isa 13:10). This language may point to both physical phenomena as well as political and spiritual disruptions. Jesus’ language in verse 30 echoes Daniel’s prophecy and points to his return at the end of the age (Da 7:13–14; cf. 2Th 1:7–10; Rev 19:11–16). Jesus is the Son of Man, the one to whom the Ancient of Days (Da 7:13) gives glory and power and the one designated to receive worship as the divine King. Jesus’ return is the sign of the consummation of the age (cf. Mt 16:27; 26:64). At his return he will gather the elect, all Jews and Gentile believers. These events most likely refer to his coming at the end of the “great distress” (24:21), which would correspond with the time of judgment of the nations (25:31–46).

Jesus begins to address attitudes that should characterize disciples who live during this age and await his coming. Using the fig tree as an illustration, Jesus teaches his disciples to be alert for the signs he has given, which will forewarn them that the end is near. His words serve as a promise of the summer to come, the age of blessedness and fruitfulness that his return will bring. Jesus’ words carry the full weight of divine authority. Disciples can be assured that though the events of history may seem painful and out of control, though heaven and earth will not continue to exist as they are now, Jesus’ teaching is eternally trustworthy.¹

¹ David Gundersen, “Psalms,” in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1333.

Observation Questions

1. What events are described as happening “immediately after the tribulation” (v. 29)?
2. How does verse 30 describe the sign of the Son of Man?
3. What will all the tribes of the earth do when they see the Son of Man (v. 30)?
4. With what power and glory will the Son of Man come (v. 30)?
5. Who does the Son of Man send out, and what do they gather (v. 31)?
6. From where are the elect gathered (v. 31)?
7. What comparison does Jesus use in verse 32, and what does the fig tree illustrate?
8. What lesson are the disciples to learn from the fig tree (v. 33)?
9. What assurance does Jesus give about “this generation” (v. 34)?
10. What does Jesus say about His words in verse 35 compared to heaven and earth?

Interpretation Questions

1. What is the significance of the cosmic signs (darkened sun, falling stars, etc.) in verse 29?
2. What does the “sign of the Son of Man” mean, and why does it cause the tribes of the earth to mourn?
3. How does the description of Christ’s coming contrast with His first coming?
4. What is the role of the angels in verse 31, and what does this teach about God’s gathering of His people?
5. How does the parable of the fig tree illustrate readiness for Christ’s return?
6. What does “this generation will not pass away” mean in verse 34?
7. Why does Jesus contrast the passing away of heaven and earth with the permanence of His words (v. 35)?

Application Questions

1. How do the cosmic signs remind me of the certainty and power of Christ’s return?
2. What emotions does the thought of the Son of Man’s return stir in me—joy, fear, urgency? Why?
3. How can I live with readiness and discernment, like watching the fig tree for signs of summer?
4. What does Jesus’ promise that His words will never pass away mean for my confidence in Scripture?
5. How can this passage shape the way I think about temporary versus eternal things?
6. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 373–385.*]

As vice president, Harry Truman was locked out of President Franklin Roosevelt's inner circle. When Roosevelt died, Truman had scant foreign policy experience and was ill prepared to lead America through the last stages of World War II and the ensuing cold war. He told a friend, "I'm not big enough for this job." Yet he faced the challenge. When Soviet armies began to occupy eastern and central Europe and Churchill declared "an iron curtain has descended across the Continent," Truman was at his side. Together they resisted tyranny and promoted freedom in Europe, and Truman steadily became ready for the challenges of his day.

Truman was hardly alone in his fear that he would not be ready for a challenge. We all want to be prepared for great events and we all fear that we will not. Therefore, in sports, we train for the big game, in academics we study for major exams, and in business we prepare for strategic presentations. The spiritual sphere is similar: disciples want to be ready for coming challenges. Matthew 24 equips us for just that. As a discourse, it is long and complex enough that we will greatly advance our study of the last segment (24:29–51) if we begin with a review of the earlier portions.

GREAT _____

As the disciples left the temple and marveled at the magnificent building, Jesus told them that one day it would be no more than a pile of rocks and rubble. Within a generation, "not one stone here will be left on another" (24:2). This calamity would befall Israel as a divine punishment. The priests, elders, and Pharisees had rejected and murdered Jesus. As a consequence, they would lose their place in God's economy, and Jerusalem and its temple would fall. Then, Jesus told the priests and the Pharisees, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43). That "people" is the church, a spiritual nation that has no borders.

The disciples quickly asked Jesus for more information: "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (24:3) The disciples probably thought they were asking one question, for they expected the fall of the temple to coincide with Jesus' return and the day of judgment. In fact, they asked and Jesus answered two questions. Most of 24:3–35 answers the first question and 24:36–51 essentially answers the second.

ORDINARY TROUBLES, GREAT TROUBLES, AND THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

The temple, Jesus said, would be destroyed within a generation—within forty years (24:34). During that generation the disciples would face various sorrows. Every generation faces war, famine, and earthquakes; they do not signify the end of this age (24:6). Some will interpret such events as signs of Christ's return; some will even say Christ returned secretly (24:4, 11), but disciples must disregard such reports. Jesus will return with angels and trumpets, with power and glory, summoning all men to account for their lives. No one can miss that day.

Jesus' disciples must persevere through ordinary troubles (24:9–13). But the fall of Jerusalem was extraordinary, so he revealed the sign that would precede it. When the disciples in Judea see the Roman army—"the abomination that causes desolation"—they must "flee to the mountains" at once, without even pausing to collect the most basic possessions (24:15–20; Luke 21:20–21). Just as Jesus said, the Roman siege ended in misery for Israel. After the starvation of the siege, the army breached the city walls, then looted, slaughtered, and burned at will. Yet because Jesus' disciples believed his prophecy, they survived by fleeing to Pella, east of the Jordan, at Rome's approach.

"GREAT _____"

Next, Jesus predicts a "great tribulation" (KJV, RSV, ESV) unequalled since the world began: "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened" (24:22). During those days, false prophets and false christs will be so impressive that they will "deceive even the elect—if that were possible" (24:23–28).

Some scholars think that this "great tribulation" (the phrase appears in at most three verses: Matthew 24:21 and Revelation 2:22 and 7:14 [some translations have fewer]) refers to the fall of Jerusalem. Rome's war with Israel did cause terrible suffering, but it is hard to conclude that it was the darkest hour in world history, so that it had to be shortened or "no one would survive." Other scholars think that the "great distress" immediately precedes the return of Christ. A third view, which I adopt, reasons that the "great tribulation" refers to the period before the fall of Jerusalem, but also to the entire age before Christ's return.

Our earlier studies concluded that Matthew 24:15–20 refers exclusively to the fall of Jerusalem. Matthew 24:15–20 has specific predictions about that defeat and advice for surviving it. The rest of Matthew 24, we asserted in the exposition of 24:1–14, is prophecy that has a double fulfillment, one before A.D. 70, the other preceding the return of Christ. We added that the predictions also contain principles that apply to Christians of every era, so that the woes Jesus forecast speak to every generation from the resurrection to the return of Christ. So then, Matthew 24 alternates between prophecies that apply to the entire age following the work of Christ (including the period before his return) and prophecies that strictly apply to Jesus' generation.

That era and ours are marked by great blessing and terrible suffering. There are wars, rumors of war, famines, and earthquakes (24:6–7). Three times Jesus says false deliverers and false prophets "will deceive many" (24:5, 11, 24). Jesus' disciples will suffer persecution, even death, and many putative disciples will deny the faith (24:9–10). Yet there is good news. The "gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (24:13–14). Further, those who stand "firm to the end will be saved" (24:13).

Jesus says his prophecies speak to all humanity (literally "all flesh") and to "the elect" (24:22, 24), leading to the conclusion that they apply to us. That is, all the prophecies of Matthew 24:4–

14 were partially fulfilled before Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70, and all have been fulfilled again in the last century. To list a few:

- We have suffered two wars and decades of “cold war” (24:6). At the moment, asymmetrical wars, also known as terrorism, are constantly in the news. Political scientists estimate that ten to twenty-five armed conflicts rack the world each year.
- Famines claimed millions of lives in Ukraine, Russia, India, and Africa (24:7).
- Christians have been persecuted in communist lands and Muslim countries (24:9).
- False prophets proliferate (24:11). Some advance false religions, some oppose all religion, others promote cults that pervert Christianity.
- Love is cold and hate strong in the genocides of the last century: the Holocaust first, then in Rwanda, Cambodia, and many other places (24:12).
- Yet the gospel advances (24:14). Slowly, it reaches ever more places and the Bible is translated into ever more languages.

This means that “the great tribulation” of 24:21 encompasses the distress of A.D. 70, the distress of the last days before Christ returns, and all the distress of disciples living in the gospel age. Every Christian martyr falls during the great tribulation (Rev. 7:13–15). To address a related phrase, we note that the New Testament often calls the period between the ascension and the return of Christ “the last days” (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3). Hebrews says “the last days” began when God spoke to us through his Son. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but *in these last days* he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb. 1:1–2). These are the last days in the sense that there is nothing that God must yet accomplish in history other than the return of Jesus himself. There is no trigger, nothing that must happen to set the clock for Jesus’ return. Henceforth, Jesus can return at any time.

A GREAT _____

We have seen that Matthew 24:4–28 foretells the fall of Jerusalem and the troubles of our age. Now 24:29 seems to shift our attention to the last day: “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” This certainly sounds like the end of human history. Truly, when Jesus returns, earth and sky will be shaken.

Yet the prophets point us to other days when the heavens change. Isaiah first used this language of darkened sun and moon, of stars falling from the sky, to describe God’s judgment on Babylon (Isa. 13:1–20). Isaiah said, “See, the day of the LORD is coming ... with wrath and fierce anger” (13:9). On the day when Babylon was to be overthrown, “the stars of heaven ... will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light” (Isa. 13:10). Later, Isaiah used the same language to describe God’s judgment on Idumea (Edom), a neighboring country that opposed Israel whenever it could (Isa. 34:5–11). Ezekiel

used the same images of sun, moon, and stars losing their light to describe God's judgment, when Egypt and Pharaoh fall (see Ezekiel 32, especially 32:7–8).

A little reflection reveals why the prophets use “end of the world” language to describe God's judgment upon a nation and its collapse. For those nations—for Babylon, Egypt, and Israel—the day of their collapse was the end of *their* world. It was the last day they were strong and whole. Thus their cataclysms brought a foretaste of the last day. When any great city (including Jerusalem) falls, it foreshadows the final judgment. Yet the Bible also says there will be a final judgment day for all nations (Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; 2 Peter 3:10–11). Then the convulsion in the heavens (Matt. 24:29) will prefigure the purging of evil and the renewal of all things. A new earth, a renewed universe, will become the home of God's people. The judgment that Jesus foretold and that came upon Jerusalem is a foretaste of the worldwide judgment that will occur when Christ returns. It resembles and foreshadows the final judgment, with its awesome manifestation of God's wrath against sin and unbelief.

Several essential traits of the last day emerge from Matthew 24:30–31: “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.”

First, Jesus' return will be unmistakable when he appears to all, attended by angels and trumpets, “on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (24:30). Second, his return will be universal. His angels “will gather his elect” from every corner of the world, wherever they may be (24:31). Third, the thought that “the nations of the earth will mourn” implies that every nation, every person, will answer to Christ. The implication is that these nations did not repent but will still render an account to him, find themselves wanting and facing judgment. This is explicit in Matthew 16:27, where Jesus says he “will reward each person according to what he has done.”

Pause to consider this. First, *everyone* answers to the Lord Jesus, whatever one's origin or religion. He is Lord of all. Second, *we* answer to Jesus and every last thing we say or do matters to him. We will even “give account on the day of judgment for every careless [or idle] word” (12:36–37). Consider a simple case of idle words—the talkative “morning person.” She loves to call out, “HELLO everyone! It's a beautiful morning. The sun is smiling, the flowers are dancing, and the coffee is delicious.” Proverbs says, “If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse” (Prov. 27:14).

So if that young woman loves her family, she will control her early morning enthusiasm. Perhaps someone else wakes up grumpy most days. If he talks, he is prone to sound irritated or angry. So he seeks solitude until he is ready for civilized society. For both people, early morning silence is an act of love that flows from the heart to the mouth. At best, that silence is even an act of faith. We watch our speech, taking care to bless each other with it, because Jesus inspires us to do so. He loves us with his mouth, and because we love him, we want to do the same. The

day of judgment, when Christ returns, is frightening for the wicked, but wonderful for those who love Jesus. He forgives our sins and we rest in him. As we trust in him, we change. We can be ourselves—in Christ.

The next section marks a shift from the description of the return of Christ in Matthew 24:30–31, to comments that wrap up Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question about the fall of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:32–35). Just as spring leaves precede the summer, so the disciples know “it”—the judgment Jesus foretold—“is near” when they see “all these things” (24:33). “These things” would be the events Jesus predicted in 24:4–28, with the coming of the Roman army, “the abomination that causes desolation,” as the centerpiece.

Conclusion

Jesus closes the section with a vow that “this generation” will not pass until his prophecy is fulfilled. And just as he said, the temple was crushed, by Rome, within one generation. This was the cost that the keepers of the temple paid for slaying their Redeemer. Jesus underscores the power and immutability of his word in the strongest possible language. It would be easier for heaven and earth to disintegrate than for his word to fail: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (24:35). All that he says will surely come to pass.

Lesson 91 (11-2-25)

No One Knows That Day and Hour (Matthew 24:36-51)

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- Matthew 24:36-51 ESV

Summary

In answer to the disciples’ earlier question (v. 3) concerning the time of his coming, Jesus says that only the Father knows. The unexpectedness means that people will be like those of Noah’s generation, who were more concerned with everyday activities than with spiritual realities, so they were caught off guard by God’s judgment in the flood. Jesus also gives two images that illustrate the unexpectedness of his return. The images depict the same truth: the Son of Man will gather his disciples to enjoy the fullness of the kingdom (vv. 40–41). Though it is possible that those left behind will experience God’s judgment, the context favors the interpretation that those who are taken are taken in judgment (v. 39) and that those who are left behind experience God’s grace. Jesus draws a comparison between his coming and the unexpectedness of a thief’s activity. Since the timing of the Son of Man’s coming is unknown, like a homeowner thwarting a thief, the disciples should keep vigilant watch to be prepared at all times.

Jesus stresses the deep division between those who are ready and those who are not; they will receive blessing or judgment, respectively, when the Son of Man comes. In this parable, the true nature of the servants is revealed by their actions—their faithfulness or unfaithfulness

during their master's absence. The parable serves to contrast true and false believers and addresses the consequences of those who show by their lives that they are deserving of hell. The way one thinks about the Lord's return will eventually influence what one says and how one acts. The period of time before Jesus' return serves as a test to the heart of each person who professes to believe.¹

Observation Questions

1. Who knows the day and hour of the Son of Man's coming (v. 36)?
2. What past event does Jesus compare His coming to in verses 37–39?
3. What were people doing in the days of Noah before the flood (vv. 38–39)?
4. How sudden was the flood's arrival for them (v. 39)?
5. What examples does Jesus give in verses 40–41 about two people being separated?
6. What command does Jesus give in verse 42?
7. What illustration does Jesus use in verses 43–44 about a master of the house and a thief?
8. What point does Jesus make from that illustration (v. 44)?
9. How does Jesus describe the faithful and wise servant in verses 45–47?
10. What reward is promised to the faithful servant (v. 47)?
11. How does Jesus describe the wicked servant's thoughts and behavior in verses 48–49?
12. What will happen to that servant when the master returns unexpectedly (vv. 50–51)?
13. How is the servant's punishment described in verse 51?

Interpretation Questions

1. Why does Jesus emphasize that no one knows the day or hour of His coming?
2. How is the comparison to the days of Noah significant for understanding readiness?
3. What does the separation of two men in the field and two women at the mill teach about Christ's return?
4. What does the thief-in-the-night illustration reveal about the nature of Christ's coming?
5. Why is the faithful servant contrasted with the wicked servant?
6. What qualities make a servant faithful and wise according to this passage?
7. What does the master's judgment of the wicked servant reveal about accountability?
8. What does "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in verse 51 signify?

Application Questions

1. How does the uncertainty of the timing of Christ's return affect the way I live each day?
2. In what ways might I be tempted to live like those in Noah's day, ignoring the warnings of judgment?
3. How can I cultivate alertness and faithfulness in my walk with Christ?

¹ David Gundersen, "Psalms," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1333–1334.

4. What would it look like for me to be a “faithful and wise servant” in my current responsibilities?
5. How can I guard against the mindset of the wicked servant who delays obedience?
6. What specific areas of my life need greater watchfulness and readiness for Christ’s return?
7. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 373–385.*]

A GREAT _____

With his answer to the first question complete, Jesus moves to the second: “What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). Jesus answers that there is no sign. When Jesus returns, there will be no warning, no preliminary events. He will come like a thief in the night, when people are least prepared (24:43–44). As a result, “no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (24:36). The implications are obvious. First, if no one knows the day, we can and should tune out those who say they do know. We should stop thinking about when Jesus returns and live as if every day could be that day. Scripture never promotes the question, “When will Christ return?” Rather it asks, “Will you be ready?”

Consider the preparation for the landfall of a hurricane. When a storm rumbles toward the coast, the media constantly forecasts when the storm will land. The better question is “Will the people be ready when it lands?” For decades everyone knew that New Orleans, with so much of its land below sea level, was vulnerable to a direct hit from a big hurricane. Residents had decades to prepare, but when Hurricane Katrina struck, the city was not ready. As a result, over a thousand citizens died, hundreds of thousands lost their homes, and the city lost most of its population. More importantly, we have a general warning that Christ will return. No one—not even Jesus himself—knows when. But we can be ready, if we trust him, seek his mercy, and live with him day by day.

A NOTE ON JESUS’ _____

Some are baffled by Jesus’ assertion that he does not know the hour of his return. If Jesus is God, how can he not know? Remember that Jesus chose to limit his divine powers when he became a man (Phil. 2:6–8). God is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. Jesus possessed these powers, but chose not to exercise them at most points in his ministry.

Jesus is omnipresent, yet he traveled from place to place by foot (typically) or by boat or donkey (occasionally). When Jesus wanted to go to Jerusalem, he *walked*. He didn’t stand in

Capernaum and tell the disciples, “Since I am omnipresent, I am already in Jerusalem, so I’ll stay here and see you there when you arrive!” When he walked, he laid aside his omnipresence.

Jesus is omnipotent, yet unless he ate food, he became hungry. Without sleep, he became tired. Eventually he slept—hard (Matt. 8:23–25). He did not draw on his omnipotence to fill his empty stomach or to refresh his weary body.

Jesus is omniscient, yet he laid aside his knowledge too. Jesus asked genuine questions in the Gospels. In Mark 5:30–32, Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” and “looked around” to see who it might be. In Mark 9:16, he asked the disciples, “What are you arguing about?” In John 5:6, he asked a man how long he had been sick. On other occasions, he asked visitors, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Matt. 20:32; cf. 20:21).

Indeed, if Jesus had constantly exercised his divine attributes, he would not have led a genuine human life. If he endured no human limitations, his incarnation was a charade. If the crucifixion caused Jesus no pain, how could he suffer for us? If no bodily desires touched him, how can we say he was “tempted in every way” as we are (Heb. 4:15)?

So Jesus truly did not know when he would return. He did not need to know, nor do we. He finished his work, so he is ready to return. If we are faithful, we will be ready too. On the other hand, if we fail to stay ready, yet patient, we can easily fall into error. If we are too eager for Christ’s return, we will be deceived by false reports that he is coming tomorrow. If we are too eager, we may not be ready to live out a full life. If you think the Lord is coming in five years, why go to school? Why save money? But if we are too casual about his return, we may not remain ready every day. We should neither be frightened by dire predictions of cataclysm, nor should we act as if he will never return. We should be ready every hour—like soldiers who are ready, every hour, to defend their people.

THE DAYS OF _____ AND LIFE ON THE _____

Jesus used two images to underscore his point, one from the life of Noah, one from life on the farm:

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. (24:37–41)

Jesus assumes we know that Noah preached the coming judgment to his generation (2 Peter 2:5). Year by year, his actions proved his sincerity. Every time he lifted a hammer, the message rang out. For 120 years (Gen. 6:3) he built an ark—a great wooden box, suitable for just one thing—floating. While he worked, one day was the same as the next. There was no sign—no

scattered showers—that hinted at the big rain to come. Noah’s neighbors went about their business as usual. They ate, drank, worked, and planned weddings as if entire lives stretched before them. They “knew nothing ... until the flood came and took them all away” (Matt. 24:38–39). One day, without any additional warning, the floods came and took them away. Likewise, when the end of this age approaches, the world will roll on, unsuspecting that judgment is near. There will be no special warning; Jesus will return as we go about life. People will miss their wedding, the birth of their first child, graduation, retirement, by a single day, a single hour.

Next Jesus pictures two people laboring side by side in a field. Perhaps they share water and tools as they tend the same crop. Elsewhere, two women work opposite sides of a hand mill. Each pulls the wheel halfway around the circle. Turn and rest, turn and rest, they form a perfect team as they laugh, talk, and prepare the grain. In each case, “one will be taken and the other left” (Matt. 24:40–41).

Advocates of the rapture theory claim that it is good to be taken away, bad to be “left behind.” But a close reading of the text indicates the opposite. The term translated “take away” (*airō*) usually has overtones of violent action in Greek, and commonly means to remove, destroy, or kill. More telling still, we notice that 24:39 says that those who did not listen to Noah “knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.” Because the available terms of Greek and English fail to match here, we can miss the fact that “took away” translates one Greek word, *airō*. But after the flood, Noah and his family were left behind on the earth. So the evil were taken away and the covenant family was (blessedly) left behind.

This world is God’s good creation. The highest hope of the Christian is not to escape this world or bodily life, but to enjoy a renewed world in renewed bodies when the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven (Rev. 21:2). Jesus concludes with an imperative that should now be obvious: “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (24:42). He then illustrates the point with two short parables reiterating that he comes at an unknown time: “But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:43–44).

The first parable compares Jesus’ return to the coming of a thief in the night. Robbers use force; thieves use stealth. Thieves break in when the owner is unprepared, when no one is watching or even knows they should (24:43). Since Jesus comes at an unexpected time, we must always “be ready” (24:44). The second parable envisions a master who entrusts his household to a head servant before he departs for a time:

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says

to himself, “My master is staying away a long time,” and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 24:45–51)

If the servant in this parable is constantly faithful, the master will reward him whenever he returns (24:46–47). If he is wicked, he sees the master’s delay as an opportunity for self-indulgence—drinking and abusing his fellow servants. Forgetting that the master will eventually call him to account, he gets drunk and abuses his fellow servants (24:48–50). For him, whenever the master returns, it will be unexpected, it will be sooner than he thinks, and it will lead to severe punishment and ceaseless anguish (24:51).

In what is actually the third parable in this series, Jesus next pictures a bridegroom who is delayed (25:1–13). In this parable the Lord comes later than the servant thinks. So then, Jesus comes sooner than some expect and later than others expect. Finally, some never expect Jesus at all. Yet all should prepare, for the Master *will* return. Our reward or punishment depends on our preparation for that day. We prepare not by hard work but by remaining faithful, full of trust in and love for the Lord day by day.

Conclusion

So, Matthew 24:29-51 presents three great truths. First, we will see great troubles in this age. Second, this age will end in a great day, when Jesus returns with the whole world as witness. Third, we have a great calling, to stay ready to meet him every day...Everything counts—the tender care given to an unconscious patient, the prayers spoken over a sleeping child, the honor to a rude boss. Whatever we do, if we do it in the presence of the Lord, as service to him and his world, it counts. Two ways lie open to us. We can forget the Lord, indulge ourselves, meet him at an unknown hour and face his wrath, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (24:51). Or we can serve our neighbors, knowing that the Lord observes every word, every deed, every affection, we offered to him. Then the master will smile when he returns and “it will be good” (24:46)—very good.

Lesson 92 (11-9-25)

The Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:1-30)

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ ¹² But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

¹⁴ “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

- Matthew 25:1-30 ESV

Summary

The parable of the ten virgins teaches readiness since the time of the coming of the Son of Man is unknown. Jesus, as the Son of Man, is pictured as a bridegroom proceeding to his wedding banquet. According to Jewish custom, after the wedding ceremony the entire wedding party would form a processional to an evening wedding banquet at the bridegroom's home. The ten virgins are bridesmaids in the wedding party. Being prepared is a personal responsibility that cannot be shared. The wise virgins were prepared for what could be a long wait, so when the bridegroom arrived, they were ready to go with him to the banquet. On the other hand, the foolish virgins were rejected by the bridegroom because they were unprepared. Jesus teaches that his true disciples will be ready for his return. True disciples have a genuine saving relationship with Jesus. They are known by God. But false disciples are not ready for his coming, because they never had a saving relationship with Jesus. Jesus will turn them away from heaven because he never knew them.¹

The theme of 'being ready', which dominated the last section, is still at the centre of this parable, which again portrays a 'coming' and its consequences for those who should have been preparing for it. But this parable takes up the question which that of the bridesmaids left unanswered: what *is* 'readiness'? It is not a matter of passively 'waiting', but of responsible activity, producing results which the coming 'master' can see and approve. For the period of waiting was not intended to be an empty, meaningless 'delay', but a period of opportunity to put to good use the 'talents' entrusted to his 'slaves'.²

Observation Questions

Parable of the Ten Virgins (vv. 1–13)

1. How many virgins are in the parable, and how are they described (vv. 1–2)?
2. What do the wise virgins take with them that the foolish do not (v. 4)?
3. What happens when the bridegroom is delayed (v. 5)?
4. What event wakes up all the virgins at midnight (v. 6)?
5. How do the foolish virgins respond when their lamps are going out (vv. 7–8)?
6. What do the wise virgins tell the foolish ones to do (v. 9)?
7. What happens while the foolish virgins are away buying oil (v. 10)?
8. How does the bridegroom respond when the foolish virgins return (vv. 11–12)?
9. What command does Jesus give in verse 13?

¹ David Gundersen, "Psalms," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1334.

² R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 355.

Parable of the Talents (vv. 14–30)

1. How many servants are entrusted with talents, and how many talents does each receive (vv. 14–15)?
2. What do the servants with five and two talents do with their money (vv. 16–17)?
3. What does the servant with one talent do (v. 18)?
4. How does the master respond to the first two servants (vv. 19–23)?
5. How does the third servant explain his actions (vv. 24–25)?
6. What does the master call the third servant, and what does he say should have been done (vv. 26–27)?
7. What happens to the one talent of the third servant (v. 28)?
8. What principle does Jesus state in verse 29?
9. What is the final outcome for the worthless servant (v. 30)?

Interpretation Questions

Parable of the Ten Virgins

1. What does the oil represent in the parable?
2. Why is the delay of the bridegroom significant?
3. What does the closed door symbolize in the parable?
4. What does Jesus mean by “I do not know you” in verse 12?
5. How does verse 13 summarize the meaning of the parable?

Parable of the Talents

1. What do the talents represent in this parable?
2. Why are the first two servants commended in the same way, even though their amounts differ?
3. What does the third servant’s fear and inaction reveal about his view of the master?
4. How does the master’s judgment of the third servant demonstrate God’s expectations of stewardship?
5. What does “outer darkness” represent in verse 30?

Application Questions

Parable of the Ten Virgins

1. How can I be spiritually prepared for Christ’s return?
2. What “oil” do I need to have in my life to remain ready?
3. How does this parable challenge me to remain watchful and alert in faith?

Parable of the Talents

1. How am I using the resources, gifts, and opportunities God has entrusted to me?

2. Am I more like the first two servants (faithful and diligent) or the third servant (fearful and unproductive)?
3. How can I grow in faithfulness so that I might hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant”?
4. What excuses do I sometimes make for not serving or risking for God’s kingdom?
5. How does this passage challenge my view of responsibility and accountability before God?
6. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 386–407.*]

BASIC TEACHINGS ON THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Whatever the differences among Christians, orthodox and evangelical believers agree upon a number of basic principles. Above all, we believe that Jesus will return. Immediately after he ascended into heaven, an angel told his watching disciples that he would “come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). The apostles use varied language to describe Jesus’ return. Most often, the New Testament simply says Jesus will “come” or “appear” again (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Thess. 4:16; 5:23; James 5:7–8; 2 Peter 3:4; 1 John 2:28). His coming is “the day of the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10) or “that day” (Matt. 24:36), the “great day” (Rev. 16:14), or “the day of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 1:14).

Let us consider seven leading teachings about Jesus’ return, each of them supported by several Scriptures. First, Jesus will return *unexpectedly*. Jesus said, “Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matt. 24:42, 44).

Second, Jesus will come *personally*. Paul says, “The Lord himself will come down from heaven” (1 Thess. 4:16). Jesus will send his angels, but he will not simply dispatch them; he will bring them with him (Matt. 24:30–31).

Third, Jesus will return *visibly and audibly* to all (Matt. 24:27). At his return, John says, “Every eye will see him” (Rev. 1:7; cf. 19:11–14). Jesus will be “revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (2 Thess. 1:7). Just as all will see him, so all will hear him. He will come “with a loud command”—as a ship’s master commands his rowers, as an officer commands his soldiers. Jesus will come with “the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God” (1 Thess. 4:16; cf. Matt. 24:31). He will come “on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30).

Fourth, Jesus will *gather his people*, whether living or dead. His angels “will gather his elect from the four winds” (Matt. 24:31; cf. 2 Thess. 2:1–2). He will raise up “those who belong to him” (1 Cor. 15:23).

Fifth, when Jesus comes, he will *judge the world*. He will come “in his Father’s glory with his angels” to “reward each person according to what he has done” (Matt. 16:27). He will call all humanity to account. When he comes in glory, “all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (25:31–32). At that time he will “overthrow” his foes “with the breath of his mouth” (2 Thess. 2:8; cf. Rev. 19:11–16).

Sixth, Jesus *welcomes his people into his presence*. He raises the dead and greets those who are alive at the moment he returns. All will then “be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:16–17). The Bible’s principal promise for the believer in the hour of death is that we will be “with the Lord.” Our central hope is that we will be with the Lord, not that we will “go to heaven.”...The Bible emphasizes the *who*, not the *where* of eternal life. We will be with the Lord. Notice that Jesus said, “Today you will be *with me* in paradise.” When Paul contemplates his death, his confidence is that he will be with the Lord. Facing possible death, he says he “would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). When Paul is in jail, he is ready to die, because “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” He believes he must continue his work as an apostle, yet he does not fear death: “I desire to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:21–23). He promises the same for all Christians. When Jesus returns, “we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17)...

Seventh, when Jesus returns, he will *raise the dead*. His people will gain bodies like his resurrection body—powerful, imperishable, suited to our new life in a renewed creation (1 Cor. 15:43–45). At that time, we will resemble the first Adam less and resemble Jesus, the second Adam, more: “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (15:49). At that time, “when the dead will be raised ... and we will be changed” (15:52), heaven and earth, as we know them, will melt away (2 Peter 3:10–12). Then the Lord will fashion “a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). At that time, we do not go away to dwell in the skies; rather, we live on a renewed earth, a restored home for a perfected race. This is the vision of Revelation 21: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” (Rev. 21:1). In this case, the sea represents the “unruly part of God’s creation.” In Revelation, the sea is also a symbol of the origin of evil, the rebellious nations, and the place of the dead.

John also “saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Then God will dwell with mankind: “They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’ ” (21:2–3). Because God is there, tears, death, and pain will cease. Heaven and earth will be one. By one definition, heaven is where God is and hell is where he is not—or more precisely, where his blessed presence is not. Since the Lord dwells in the new Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem is part

of heaven. The new earth is part of heaven. Heaven and earth will be one, “under one head, even Christ” (Eph. 1:10). When the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven, the Lord will be with his people on a renewed earth, a perfected creation...

TWO RESPONSES TO THE “DELAY” OF CHRIST

Jesus’ teaching on final things covers several pages and almost a hundred verses. Throughout, he repeatedly urges his disciples to watch, to be ready, because they do not know the hour (Matt. 24:42, 44, 46). Several parables present this principle in graphic fashion. The parables portray people who are surprised by the timing of Jesus’ return. Some never thought about his return at all (24:37–41, 43). For some, he comes sooner than they think (24:45–51). For others, he comes later (25:1–13).

In one parable Jesus pictures a master who goes away and entrusts his household to a leading servant or steward. The parable imagines that the steward is faithful every day. So then, whenever the master returns, he will be pleased to find his chief servant fulfilling his duties. That servant will be rewarded; the master “will put him in charge of all his possessions” (24:45–47). On the other hand, a servant may be wicked and say to himself, “My master is staying away a long time.” He may act as if no one can call him to account. He may begin to “beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards.” Then, whenever the master returns, it will be “on a day when he does not expect him.” The displeased master will punish his wicked servant (24:48–51).

The call to watchfulness must have been important to Jesus because he makes it yet again in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The setting is a wedding: “The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom” (25:1). In that era weddings could last all day. After dancing early in the day, the groom took the bride from her house to his, at night, for the formal ceremony and a final feast. The journey to the groom’s house featured an impressive torchlight procession. Timing was imprecise, so guests waited.

Ten young maidens (virgins, for so an unmarried woman was) awaited the groom. “Five of them were foolish and five were wise” (25:2). The foolish ones were half-prepared; they “took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps” (25:3–4). For a torch to work, oil had to be poured onto the rags attached to the end. The oil made them burn brightly to enhance the procession. A candlelight service at Christmas may look similar. As Jesus tells it, “The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ ” (25:5–6). Everyone awoke; it was time to light the torches for the procession, but the foolish now had no oil (25:7). Most likely, they simply soaked their torch in oil once and brought nothing more. If they lit their torches a little early, they were soon going out. Whatever the precise source of their problem, they should have known to bring more oil. Their negligence was culpable.

The foolish begged the wise for help: “Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out” (25:8). But the wise refused to share their reserves. “No,” they replied, “there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves” (25:9). A textual variant affects the tone. It either reads, “No, lest there not be enough,” or “No, there surely is not enough.” Either way, the main point remains. The wise had every right to preserve their own supply. Since there is no place for people without torches at a torchlight procession, the foolish girls hurried to seek oil at midnight—no easy task. As they went, however, “the bridegroom arrived.” Then “the virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut” (25:10). We do not know if the foolish virgins obtained oil or if they failed and simply came to the banquet, hoping for the best: “ ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said, ‘Open the door for us’ ” (25:11). The foolish maidens had been invited and certainly do not lack interest in the banquet. Now they are present, too. Yet the door remains shut. The groom explains, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you” (25:12).

We can misconstrue the parable by attending to the details rather than the main points. Some ask if the wise women, who had oil, were cruel not to share it. No, what is enough for one may not be enough for two. The procession would be ruined if all ten torches ran out of oil. Others wonder how the groom, who had invited the foolish virgins in the first place, could later say that he did not know them. Clearly, the groom is acquainted with them, but “I do not know you” establishes distance between them. Why? It was a privilege to be invited to the wedding. The guests had to do just one thing—bring oil and a torch. What a shame for them and what an insult to the host that they did not prepare. Their negligence shows that they were no friends of the bridal party.

Yet we must not dwell on such questions, lest they distract us from the lesson. We must stay ready (25:10). We must “keep watch, because [we] do not know the day or the hour” (25:13). If not, we will not enter the wedding feast. As in so many stories, the lead character, the bridegroom, represents God: “Like the bridegroom, God may delay his coming longer than people expect.” Like the wise wedding guests, faithful disciples must be prepared for a long delay: “Discipleship may be more arduous than the novice suspects.” Like the foolish maidens, those who fail to prepare for Jesus’ coming will discover a point of no return. When Christ comes, it will be too late to reverse a life of neglect.

WATCHING FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST

Jesus is not afraid of repetition. One more time, “and in a most sobering way,” this parable warns that preparation for Christ is supremely important. There are terrible consequences for those who know they should watch and be ready but do not. Logically enough, people who listen to this parable may wonder: How shall I stay ready? What must I do to prepare for the Lord? Reading carefully, we notice that Jesus offers no practical advice. Why not? First, Jesus is not a five-step, how-to sort of teacher. Second, even if he were, this is not the kind of question that lends itself to how-to instructions. Readiness is a lifelong matter...

Jesus promises to return, and he steadily builds upon this theme in Matthew 24 and 25. He will return at an unexpected hour. He will return personally. He will return in power and glory. He will return with an army of angels, with a trumpet blast, with lightning blazing across every sky. When he returns, he will raise the dead and judge the world. He will gather his people, so that we may be with him forever...We should watch, every day, because no one knows when Jesus will return. Be ready, because he will call us to account. He may come later than we think. He may come earlier than we think. And even if we do not think about it at all, we should be ready.

The Parable of the Talents

The first parable in Matthew 25 imagines two classes of people that appear to be close enough to Jesus that he invites both to a family wedding. Both groups plan to come. But one prepares for the wedding and the other does not. As a result, one group enters the wedding feast and the other, which did nothing to prepare, does not (25:1–13). The variations speak to our several situations. The first section of Matthew 24:36–25:13 says we must always be ready because Jesus comes while we go about routine business. Or he comes like a thief in the night, when we think of nothing at all (24:37–44). The second says that even if we do consider Jesus' return, he may come *sooner* than we think, while we go about our business. People suppose there is still lots of time to repent and to serve him; indeed, they think, there is so much time that they can still get away with some mischief (24:45–51). The third section says Jesus may come *later* than we think. Therefore we must stay ready for his return. We must live our faith in Jesus every day, even if he delays his coming for a long time (25:1–13). The following section, which we now consider, tells us how to live during the delay.

THE MASTER _____ AFFAIRS TO HIS _____

Our parable compares the wait for Jesus to “a man going on a journey.” The scope of his resources shows that he was wealthy. He had servants and funds and he “entrusted his property to them” (25:14). He commissioned his servants to put his money to good use while he was away. While the servants wait for the master, they must work to improve his kingdom. The master knows his three servants are not identical triplets: “To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability” (25:15). Then he departed.

Today a “talent” means a skill or ability, but in New Testament times a talent was a unit of money, or to be precise, a weight of a precious metal, typically silver, but sometimes gold or copper. A talent was, therefore, most often an amount of money. The weight of a talent varied over the years, but it was typically seventy-five pounds of silver. The basic unit of money at that time was a denarius, which was a good day's wage for a laborer. One silver talent equaled six thousand denarii. A talent equaled six thousand days' wages, that is, twenty years' wages.

Thus the master entrusted great resources to his servants—funds worth one hundred, forty, and twenty years' wages respectively. If Jesus told the parable today, he might say he gave his

servants five million, two million, and one million dollars, according to their ability. Jesus' parable uses no trifling sums and implies no small responsibilities.

This aspect of the story certainly mirrors the real world. Just as the master in the story entrusted large sums to his servants, so Jesus entrusts vast resources to his followers. He gives to each according to his design and our abilities. Then he expects us to be productive. For their labors the master leaves no instructions. The servants are free to use their judgment. The servant "who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more" (25:16–17). Both men were responsible, diligent, and effective. They started with different sums and gained different amounts. But both doubled their sum.

The third man was different. Having received the one talent, he "went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money" (25:18). To hide money in a hole in the ground was considered a safe way to secure money, especially in times of turmoil. But even in those days, people had something like banks too. What motivated the man to act this way? He was a small-minded fellow. By burying his money, he guaranteed that there would be no loss, but he also guaranteed there would be no gain.

THE HEART AND THE REWARD OF A _____ SERVANT

The master returned to inspect his servants' work: "After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them" (25:19). His men approached, starting with the man who doubled his master's five talents. "The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more' " (25:20).

The servant tells and shows his results. The master, most pleased, bestows a fourfold commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

- The master *approved*. "Well done" or "Bravo."
- He *praised*. "Good and faithful servant." He fulfilled his master's wishes.
- He *granted privileges*. "You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things." This master is great indeed if he can call ten talents—millions in today's terms—"a few things." But he does and he promises even greater leadership positions.
- He *rewarded*. "Enter into the joy of your master" (25:21 ESV). Beyond approval and rewards, there is joy in the master's presence. Some people are fun to be around, some are exciting, some make us feel warm and safe, some open new horizons. Jesus surely does them all. That is the joy of the master's presence.

Next, the man with two talents came. The scene is nearly identical: "Master ... you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more" (25:22). The master commended the second servant in exactly the same terms as he did the first (25:23). He was just as pleased with the

second man because he did his best and multiplied his resources. Like a mother or father, like the best teacher or coach, the Lord does not demand that everyone become a star. He takes pleasure in watching each of us do our best, according to our abilities.

Imagine the Lord designs and manufactures all kinds of cars: a sports car that does 185 m.p.h., a muscular truck, a spacious van, and an efficient family sedan. The maker will not berate the van for failing to go 120 m.p.h. He does not blame the sports car for poor gas mileage. Each car is pleasing when it performs the task that suits its design. When the sports car flies, when the van carries seven passengers safely, when the truck hauls timber and boulders, when the sedan travels the miles efficiently, the designer is pleased. Raw power or productivity matters little. The Lord is pleased with us when we do what we can with the abilities he gives.

THE HEART AND REWARD OF A _____ SERVANT

The third servant simply returned the one talent he received. He explained, “Master, I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you” (25:24–25). This little outburst mixes insults and excuses. As the servant saw it, he stood in a no-win situation. If he toiled and gained, the master would seize the proceeds. That, the servant thought, was his custom. But if he toiled and lost, he would be punished. Either way, he saw nothing positive. The root of his sin was his bitter judgment that his master was harsh and grasping. We see how mistrust paralyzes people.

The master sees through his servant’s excuses: “You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest” (25:26–27).

- The master *condemns* the man. He is a “wicked, lazy servant.” The problem lies not with a hard master but with a selfish servant who does not want to labor for someone else.
- The master *corrects* him. If he knew that the master was demanding, that he harvested where he did not plant seeds, at least he should have deposited the master’s money and received interest.
- He *removes privileges*. “Take the talent from him,” says the master, “and give it to the one who has the ten talents” (25:28). Talents must be used or they will be taken away: “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (25:29).
- He is *punished*. “Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (25:30). This is the place of punishment and of grief, of rejection and regret.

Talents must be used. If the gifted refuse to use their gifts, the Lord will call on someone else and will grant his favor there. In every sphere of life, our gifts grow when we use them and they shrink when we do not. Whether at work, in community service, or in physical activity, we grow

when we wisely take on challenges that stretch us. And we wither a little every time we refuse an opportunity...Abilities must be used. Money should be used. If we do not use our gifts, we lose them. The Lord passes us by and works with others. If we do use our gifts, we develop even more...The Lord sees our strengths and weaknesses more clearly and evaluates more accurately. He says, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). The Lord has given much to the great majority of all who hear or read this. If the Lord has shown us no ordinary generosity, he expects no ordinary service. We should look and pray for every opportunity to use our God-given gifts.

SERVING THE MASTER IN OUR _____ PLACE

To serve well we must first think accurately about service. Above all, we know the Lord has a plan and a place for each of us. He prepares a place of service. He plants innate abilities in us. He leads us to mentors and experiences. Speaking of the Lord, Isaiah says, "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa. 64:8). The Lord fashions us in our mother's womb, before our birth (Psalm 139:13-16)...you must know that the Lord took interest in you before your birth. He chose the color of your skin, hair, and eyes. He set the length and thickness of your bones and muscles. He designed things we see only indirectly, such as our emotional and mental character.

God's providence includes our course of life. David says, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (139:16). He chooses our families (Ps. 68:6 implies). Jeremiah says, "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). When Esther became a queen of Persia, her uncle told her it was no accident, even though she came to the position through a series of sinful compromises. She came to her "royal position for such a time as this," a time when Israel needed an advocate (Esth. 4:14). The Lord also puts us in positions that let us become advocates for this world's needs.

Conclusion

We need no secret guide to staying ready for Christ's return. The counsel of Christ is familiar. We should pray as Jesus taught us. We should remember all his teachings, learn from his example, and imitate his kindness, patience, and boldness. We should identify and dethrone our gods, whether wealth, honor, or security. Above all, we should embrace the gospel daily. We believe that Jesus is Son of God and Savior. We live in the light of his grace daily. We seek mercy when we sin or fail, and we extend mercy to others who sin or fail us. To embrace the gospel is to receive it as the supreme form of love. The gospel reminds us that no creature can satisfy our longings as God can. Work, achievement, family, play, and pleasure have their place, but they are good servants and poor masters...

We need to be ready for the wedding feast, lest we be excluded from it. Jesus the groom is fair, not severe. He welcomes all who respond to the privilege of an invitation by preparing themselves for the great celebration—not in the real world for his wedding, but for the celebration that will take place when he returns. Failure to prepare for a wedding insults the bride and groom and shows that true friendship never was there. Similarly, we dishonor the Lord if we fail to prepare for his return. On the other hand, if we know and love Jesus, our King and Savior, we will stay ready to meet him...

Like the master in the Parable of the Talents, the Lord entrusts a great portion of his resources to his servants. If we believe in Jesus, we are his servants, his representatives, his plenipotentiaries. He expects us to steward his gifts. But there is a paradox in the use of talents in the kingdom. We invest them by giving them away. We invest money by giving it away. We invest time and talent by giving our time and energy and skill in order to grant God's favor to others...It is also our duty to stay in the place where we can use our talents or to seek the places where we can serve. If in doubt, start with two questions: Where do you want to serve? Where are wise people asking you to serve? Then find a place, alongside the many who serve the Master, as we await his return.

Lesson 93 (11-16-25)

Judgment Day (Matthew 25:31-46)

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

- Matthew 25:31-46 ESV

Summary

This passage uses figurative language (**shepherd ... sheep ... goats**) drawn from Ezk 34:17–19 in Mt 25:32–33, but the rest is too literal to be classified as a parable. The passage is therefore best taken as a literal description of the final judgment. Verses 31 and 34 define the title **Son of Man** as **King** (see note at 8:18–20). The King, Jesus, will judge people based on their reception and treatment of **the least of his brothers and sisters**. In light of 12:50, the words refer to Jesus’s followers who seek to do God’s will. Humble and compassionate treatment of Jesus’s followers necessarily accompanies acceptance of the gospel that they proclaim (10:40–42). Those who show no compassion to Jesus’s followers betray their lack of devotion to him. As in 7:21–23, Jesus identifies himself as the final Judge, a role that Jews expected the Lord to fulfill.¹

¹ Charles L. Quarles, “Matthew,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1545–1546.

Observation Questions

1. Who is the “Son of Man” and what will He do when He comes in His glory (v. 31)?
2. Who will be with Him when He sits on His throne (v. 31)?
3. What will He do with all the nations gathered before Him (v. 32)?
4. How are the people separated, and what imagery is used (v. 32–33)?
5. What will the King say to those on His right hand (vv. 34–36)?
6. How will the righteous respond to the King (vv. 37–39)?
7. What will the King answer them (v. 40)?
8. What will the King say to those on His left hand (vv. 41–43)?
9. How will they respond (v. 44)?
10. What will the King answer them (v. 45)?
11. What is the final outcome for the righteous and the unrighteous (v. 46)?

Interpretation Questions

1. What does the coming of the Son of Man in glory signify?
2. What is the significance of the imagery of sheep and goats?
3. What does it mean to “inherit the kingdom prepared... from the foundation of the world”?
4. Why are acts of mercy (feeding, clothing, visiting, etc.) emphasized in this judgment scene?
5. What does Jesus mean when He says, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”?
6. What does this passage teach about the relationship between faith and works?
7. Why are the condemned surprised by the King’s judgment?
8. What does eternal punishment vs. eternal life teach us about the finality of judgment?

Application Questions

1. How does the certainty of Christ’s return and judgment affect how I live today?
2. In what ways can I show practical love and mercy to “the least of these”?
3. Do I tend to overlook opportunities to serve Christ by serving others?
4. How does this passage challenge my understanding of what true righteousness looks like?
5. What motivates me more: fear of judgment or love for Christ and His people?
6. How can my church community live out this teaching together?
7. How does this parable encourage me to evaluate the authenticity of my faith?
8. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew 1 & 2*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 409–420.]

Jesus says, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory” (25:31). Every phrase makes a point. Jesus, the Son of Man, will return to the earth personally. He will return in glory, accompanied by the host of his angels. In his power, he will take his throne.

At that time Jesus will gather “all the nations” and all angels to his throne and seat of judgment (25:32, 41; cf. Rom. 14:10). Then “he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (25:32). Over and over, Jesus implored his disciples to watch and be ready for that day. Since no signs will forecast the hour of Jesus’ return (24:36), the only course is to be ready and watchful at all times. Then Jesus told two parables that describe the way of preparation; both parables deserve a review.

In the first parable, ten maidens wait for a wedding procession that was long delayed (25:1–13). Five maidens brought enough oil for the wedding procession, and five did not. The five who had no oil asked the other five to share their oil, but the five who were prepared refused. This hardly seems loving or neighborly, but the parable has no concern for the golden rule. Jesus bends the details of the story to the main lesson: We must be ready and *readiness is not transferable*...

The second parable, the talents (25:14–30), portrays readiness in active terms: “Vigilance is not a passive waiting and watching, but consists of active responsible service. When Christ returns, he will not ask if one had the date right but ‘What have you been doing?’ ” Whenever Jesus may return, we will be caught in the act—in the act of serving him, or not...So then, we prepare for Jesus’ return by performing “evidential works of righteousness,” works that grow from love of the king. The virgins’ oil and the stewards’ talents both represent deeds of loving obedience. Such deeds keep us ready for the day of judgment, Matthew 25 shows.

WE STAND BEFORE THE _____

With the nations arrayed before him, Jesus will separate mankind as easily as a shepherd separates sheep and goats—sheep to the right and goats to the left: “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left” (25:32–33). This image was familiar to Jesus’ hearers. Sheep and goats grazed together by day, but shepherds separated them nightly because goats needed more warmth. Sheep were more docile and more valuable than goats, so Jesus, shepherd and king, invites them to the right side, the side of favor in antiquity (Matt. 20:21). Jesus will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (25:34). See how sweetly Jesus speaks of the redeemed. We are blessed; we inherit the kingdom prepared for us. This inheritance is no afterthought; it is the culmination of God’s plan, which he was always determined to fulfill for us and in us. By grace, he gives us a kingdom, yet the judge remembers our every good deed.

THE JUDGE REMEMBERS SIX _____

Jesus is not afraid of repetition. Jesus lists six acts of service and repeats them four times in all (Matt. 25:35–36). The righteous ask *when* they performed these deeds and, in the asking, repeat the entire list (25:37–39). Next Jesus tells those who are cursed that they failed to perform the same six acts (25:41–43). They answer that they never saw the opportunity to show the same six forms of kindness (25:44). The repetition lets the list sink in. These were, and to some extent still are, the typical, essential acts of kindness.

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.” Hunger was commonplace in the ancient world. People were not lean or trim, they were thin—because they lacked food, not because they dieted. The righteous feed the hungry.

“I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.” Water was scarce too, especially during the dry season (which lasted nearly half the year), when people cautiously drew water from cisterns filled with water collected during the rainy season. The righteous give water to the thirsty.

“I was a stranger and you invited me in.” Even in the Roman Empire, travel was difficult and fraught with dangers. Inns were dirty and crime-ridden, yet it was dangerous to sleep in the open. The righteous invite strangers into their homes.

“I needed clothes and you clothed me.” Since clothing was costly, the poor often lacked adequate covering. The righteous clothe the poor if they can.

“I was sick and you looked after me.” The righteous looked after the sick. Medical care was spotty, but a friend could at least offer comfort and companionship.

“I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Prisons were dark, dismal places. Ordinary folk never came near them. But the righteous visit prisons.

If we review this list, we see that it encompasses the basic human needs: for food, clothing, and companionship. Today most of us have plenty of food, water, and clothing. But some do not and many are lonely. Jesus still wants us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked when we meet them. The sick still need care. Travelers and prisoners feel isolated. When someone joins a prison ministry and goes for the first time, he can expect one question: Will you come back?

Jesus praises the righteous for performing these acts of kindness to him, and he blames the rest for failing to show kindness. The righteous are surprised by Jesus’ commendation. We should observe the precise form of both his praise and their surprise. Jesus blesses the righteous not for feeding the poor, but for feeding him. They cannot recall the event: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?” (25:37). Jesus replies, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (25:40). By contrast, the wicked are surprised, but in the opposite manner: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?”

(25:44). Jesus replies, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (25:45). Thus if anyone failed to help Jesus’ brothers, they failed him. As Jesus sees it, failure to aid the least of his brothers is sacrilege—a refusal to aid Christ himself. In Calvin’s words, “So then, whenever we are reluctant to assist the poor, let us place before our eyes the Son of God, to whom it would be base sacrilege to refuse anything.”

Jesus describes both *what* we ought to do and *for whom* we ought to do it—for “the least of these brothers of mine” (25:40, 45). By “my brothers” Jesus means “my disciples,” as Matthew 12:48–49 and 28:10 show. The term “little ones” means disciples throughout Matthew (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14; cf. 5:19), and “least” is the superlative of “little.” The least seem to be the weakest members of Jesus’ spiritual family.

Along this line, when Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, he said that anyone who welcomed his disciples welcomed him and would be rewarded for it (10:40–42). This makes us wonder: is Jesus saying he will judge the nations on the basis of the way they treat his disciples? Yes and no. The Bible certainly says believers ought to be especially quick to come to the aid of fellow believers (Gal. 6:10). Love for Jesus’ disciples and messengers certainly proves that someone has responded properly to the gospel message. But Moses and Jesus both command, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” so we also have a debt to all neighbors (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19; 22:39). Further, the Bible often says our treatment of the poor and the needy tests the genuineness of our faith (e.g. Prov. 31:20; James 2:14–16). For example, when Amos accuses Israel of faithlessness, he cites their treatment of the poor. They sell out, crush, and trample the needy (Amos 2:6–7; 4:1; 8:4–6). But when Job proves he is God’s friend, he says, “I was a father to the needy” (Job 29:16).

THE KING APPRAISES OUR _____

The sheep showed the six acts of love to Jesus’ disciples and to the world. The goats did the opposite. They “depart” and go “into the eternal fire” prepared for them, for they did not feed the hungry or visit the sick and the prisoner (25:41). They, too, will be surprised, for they failed to recognize the test when it came to them. Our actions prove our faith—or disprove it. The Bible says this over and over, often citing similar acts of kindness in passages such as Isaiah 58, Ezekiel 18, and Job 29 and 31. This prompts a question: How can salvation by grace and justification by faith coexist with the thought that Jesus inspects our works on judgment day? The Bible answers that works are the evidence, not the ground, of our judgment.

Again, works are *the evidence*, but *not the basis* for Jesus’ judgment. The basis or cause is our heart response to Jesus. But our works either prove or disprove our claim that our heart and mind trust in Jesus. We can see the wisdom and justice of this procedure. The English say the true gentleman is the one who lifts the proper fork when no one is watching. Likewise, the true believer loves God and neighbor when no one is watching. The offhand remark, the casual encounter, the moment when we are hardly aware of ourselves—these are the true tests of our faith. Our incidental, unpremeditated words and deeds best reflect our heart. Our routine acts and trivial words best reflect our character.

We know the Bible says we are justified by faith. How then can we be judged by works? First, the entire Bible teaches all our works will be examined. We will account for them all on the last day (Ps. 62:12; Jer. 17:10; Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; Rev. 20:12). But this is not salvation by works because our works *follow* our heart commitments...So then our words and deeds witness and testify to our heart commitment on judgment day. They supply public, verifiable evidence of our heart's condition (Matt. 7:17–18; 12:33–35; James 2:14–26). This means we should examine ourselves afresh and consider: What do my incidental words and deeds reveal? Do they show that Jesus is my king, that his life permeates mine?

JESUS _____ MANKIND

Our passage teaches several important things about eternal destinies. First, they are eternal. Jesus tells the righteous: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (25:34). But he tells the cursed: “Depart ... into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41).

There is symmetry here. The wicked “go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (25:46). Yet there is a difference. The Lord always intended to spend eternity with his people. We inherit “the kingdom prepared ... since the creation of the world” (25:34). But God prepared hell for the devil and his angels, not for mankind. Hell was no part of God’s original intent—which counts as a point for sublapsarianism.

The basis for our eternal destiny is our response to the gospel and the messengers who bring God’s word, whether they do so by formal preaching or quiet testimony. Jesus says both the sheep and the goats will be surprised on the last day—but not at their destiny. If you love Jesus, repent of your sins, know him as Savior, and follow him daily, it is your enduring aspiration to see Jesus face to face. Believers will be joyful, not surprised at their destiny. Nor will unbelievers be stunned to hear that Jesus neither knows nor welcomes them. After all, they neither knew nor welcomed him and they had no desire for heaven. The surprise lies not with the destiny assigned, but with the reason given. Neither sheep nor goats knew their deeds were so weighty. The righteous did not perform to gain a reward, but to show love to the needy, especially Jesus’ disciples. But then such deeds will count because they were free gifts, not calculated acts.

THE CHARACTER OF HEAVEN

The Bible says little about the character of heaven. Yet we cannot help but wonder what it will be like... speculation is inescapable, for Paul says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). Then “we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17). Our identity will remain; we are not absorbed into the Godhead or the mass of humanity. We will recognize others, even as the apostles recognized Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8; Luke 9:28–36; cf. Luke 16:19–31).

It is best to admit our ignorance, for eternal life—unending time—is beyond our comprehension. We can hardly imagine a world where there will be no sin or flaws, no brokenness and repentance, no poverty, envy or greed, no need to improve. We wonder, “Will I want to improve? Play the flute or guitar better perhaps?” Yet if we draw on as much biblical data as possible, our guesses may be well informed. We may begin to settle on a method by thinking about hell for a moment. In hell, Jesus says, the wicked are removed from Christ, the source of all our blessing. The Bible’s descriptions of hell are symbolic. Taken literally, they seem contradictory. For example, hell is described as a lake of fire (Rev. 20:14–15), which suggests heat and light. Yet Jesus also says unbelievers are cast “outside, into the darkness,” which sounds cold and dark (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Yet the point is clear. We should not aspire to be in hell.

We should aspire to heaven, where we will enjoy the presence of the triune God we love—Father, Son, and Spirit. Whether ten-year-olds thrill at the thought or not, we *will* worship in heaven. When we see the Lord “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12), the vision will transform us: “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). This means our worship on earth is preparation and practice for heaven. Ultimately, choirs do not practice for their director or their audience, they practice for heaven. But there will be other activities too...

Conclusion

Our task today is to prepare to meet Jesus our good king. We do this not by looking for signs of his return but by trusting him, loving him, looking to see the Great Shepherd, the Son of David, the Son of God, every day. We follow him and live as he lived, not to earn his favor, but from pure delight in him. And when we fail, we remember. The same Jesus who urged you to love your neighbor died on the cross, to bear the penalty of sin when you do not love him or your neighbor. Grace will cover those failings, so that he will bless us. Because of our faith and the good deeds that sprang from it—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner—he will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!... Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matt. 25:21). This world is good but flawed and very short compared to eternity. Through time and eternity, God the Father, Son, and Spirit is Lord of the living. By his love he put the powers of death to death. As we trust him, we prepare to live with him forever. I hope to see you there.

Lesson 94 (11-23-25)

What Is Jesus Worth? (Matthew 26:1-16)

When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ²“You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” ³Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ⁵But they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.”

⁶Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. ⁸And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, “Why this waste? ⁹For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.” ¹⁰But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹²In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”

¹⁴Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, “What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?” And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.

¹⁶And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

- Matthew 26:1-16 ESV

Summary

In Matthew 26:1–16, Jesus tells His disciples that the Passover is approaching and that He will soon be delivered up to be crucified. Meanwhile, the chief priests and elders plot to arrest Him secretly and kill Him, though they decide to avoid doing so during the feast to prevent an uproar. While Jesus is in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman anoints His head with expensive ointment. The disciples criticize her for wasting something that could have been sold and given to the poor, but Jesus defends her act as a beautiful preparation for His burial. He declares that her deed will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. Following this, Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, goes to the chief priests and offers to betray Jesus to them in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. From that time on, Judas looks for an opportunity to hand Him over, setting in motion the events that will lead to Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

Observation Questions

1. What did Jesus say to His disciples after finishing His teaching (vv. 1–2)?
2. What were the chief priests and elders plotting, and where did they gather (vv. 3–4)?
3. Why did they decide not to arrest Jesus during the feast (v. 5)?
4. Where was Jesus staying when a woman came to Him, and what did she bring (v. 6–7)?

5. How did the disciples react to the woman's act of anointing Jesus (vv. 8–9)?
6. How did Jesus defend the woman (vv. 10–11)?
7. What did Jesus say the woman's action prepared Him for (v. 12)?
8. What lasting remembrance did Jesus promise for the woman's act (v. 13)?
9. Who went to the chief priests after this event (v. 14)?
10. What did Judas ask them, and what agreement was made (vv. 15–16)?

Interpretation Questions

1. What does Jesus' statement in verses 1–2 reveal about His knowledge of coming events?
2. Why were the religious leaders plotting in secret, and what does this reveal about their motives?
3. What is the significance of the woman anointing Jesus with expensive ointment?
4. Why did the disciples criticize the woman's actions, and what does this reveal about their values?
5. How does Jesus' response redefine what true devotion to Him looks like?
6. What does Jesus mean when He says, "You always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me"?
7. Why does Jesus connect the woman's anointing to His burial?
8. What does Jesus mean by saying her act will be told "wherever this gospel is proclaimed"?
9. What motivated Judas to betray Jesus?
10. How do the religious leaders and Judas serve as contrasts to the woman's devotion?

Application Questions

1. How does Jesus' foreknowledge of His death strengthen my confidence in God's plan?
2. In what ways am I tempted to value money or "practical concerns" more than devotion to Christ?
3. How can I show extravagant love and devotion to Jesus in my own life?
4. Do I sometimes criticize or undervalue others' acts of devotion because they don't fit my perspective?
5. How does Jesus' defense of the woman encourage me in serving Him boldly?
6. What does this passage teach me about the cost of discipleship—both in devotion (the woman) and betrayal (Judas)?
7. How can I guard my heart against greed or compromise like Judas?
8. What opportunities has God given me to honor Christ publicly, even at personal cost?
9. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 421–431.*]

We have moved toward the climax of Jesus' life and ministry for some time, and now we come to the first part of the climax. Jewish leaders have long been hostile to Jesus, but the source and form of the antagonism change. At the midpoint of his ministry, Jesus said he would "suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law," be killed, and then rise again to life (16:21). A little later, he said someone would betray him to death (17:22). Later still, he said the priests would "turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified" (20:19). This day, after he finished his disputes with Jewish teachers, after he finished teaching his disciples (26:1), he said, "As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified" (26:2). Certain Jews will hand him to Romans, who will execute him.

Because Jesus *predicts* his death, we understand that he *controls* it. Yet the chief priests and elders are certainly following their instincts. As always, we notice the players. The priests and elders, not the Pharisees, plot Jesus' death. To be sure, the Pharisees were often so angry at Jesus that they thought they should kill him. But their threats had limits:

- They had no authority to kill anyone. Further, as leading citizens, it was most unlikely that they would murder Jesus.
- For all their differences, the Pharisees shared many of Jesus' beliefs and practices, above all a belief in a personal, covenant-making, law-giving God.
- After Jesus' resurrection, some Pharisees repented, believed, and joined the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:5).

The anger of the Pharisees was familial. They cared about the same topics, but came to opposite conclusions. It was emotional; they cared about Jesus because he looked like one of them at first, but then veered off. The chief priests, on the other hand, were cold and calculating. They cared nothing for Jesus' agenda. Jesus and the Pharisees both wanted to *win the nation*, but the chief priests wanted to *keep their position*. They were aristocrats, politicians, and servants of Rome. Jesus seemed to threaten Israel's stability, so they planned to kill him.

The story told in Matthew 26:3–5 appears in more detail in John 11. There we learn that one of Jesus' most public miracles rattled the high priests (and some Pharisees). They convened what seems like an informal meeting of their governing council, the Sanhedrin (John 11:47). Someone asked, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (11:47–48 ESV). There is ambiguity here, for their remarks possibly show a genuine fear that Jesus will somehow bring disorder and that Rome's wrath would then follow. Their comment could also be entirely selfish—they fear that Jesus will lead to the loss of their place, their eminence, as leaders of Israel. Whatever their precise motive, they believed the only way to preserve themselves was to kill Jesus.

People have an enormous capacity for self-deception. So while John's Gospel wants us to detect their self-seeking malice, the Sanhedrin's members probably told themselves they were Israel's servants. Jesus and his rabble threatened to cause disorder. If the Romans have to

restore order, they could lose their “place”—the temple. (The term “the place” can mean the temple, which was the heart of the nation, in Acts 6:13 and 21:28, for example.)

The high priest Caiaphas gave his answer to the problem of Jesus. In a period when the Romans deposed and replaced high priests so readily that the average tenure was little more than a year, Caiaphas was cunning and pliable enough to last eighteen years. His counsel was shrewd, yet with it, he unwittingly played the role of a prophet when he called for Jesus’ death. He said, “It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish” (11:50). He *meant* it is expedient to kill an essentially harmless and innocent man to avoid tumult and many more deaths. But he *said*, “It is better for *you* that one man die for the *people* ...” Jesus will die for the people in a far deeper sense than Caiaphas knew—and John wants us to see the full Christian meaning.

That day the council resolved in principle that Jesus must die. They issued a command that if anyone knew where Jesus was, he should give them the information. They “plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him” (Matt. 26:4 ESV). It was Passover, so there were many pilgrims in Jerusalem, and the Galileans admired Jesus. The authorities wanted to operate quietly, lest the arrest of Jesus cause “a riot among the people” (26:5).

Our passage shows (again) that Jesus is Lord and master of history. The schemers decided they would arrest and kill Jesus after the Passover, at least nine days later. But Jesus said it would happen in two days, and so it was. It happened at that time so that Jesus would die during Passover, the festival that celebrates God’s deliverance of his people. At Passover, a lamb was slain. Its blood symbolically covered the sins of Israel. Jesus fulfills and deepens the Passover. He is not a symbol, he *is* the Passover Lamb. His blood covers our sins. His resurrection is our life, if we trust in him. Jesus defeated the powers arrayed against him and exercises that same power to fulfill his purposes for us.

If Jesus illustrates the way power should be used, the chief priests and elders showed how it should not. They were supposed to be leaders, but their view hardly transcended crowd control and self-preservation. They met secretly because they knew their counsels could not bear open scrutiny and had no popular support. Jesus wins people by plain and open teaching, by spiritual persuasion, and by blessing people with his powers. The priests have nothing but guile and Roman backing.

Peter encapsulates the New Testament model for leadership in one sentence when he tells Christian leaders: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2–3). These principles apply to church leaders, business leaders, parents, and more.

- Leaders watch over those who are under their care.
- Leaders are motivated by God’s call, not guilt or cold duty.

- Leaders are eager to serve, not eager to gain.
- Leaders set the tone by their example, not by their commands.

A _____ GIFT FOR JESUS

Since both Mark and John tell the story of Jesus' anointing at greater length, we will draw on them, noting that John tells us precisely when this anointing occurred—six days before Passover. Matthew 26:2–3 says the chief priests resolved to kill Jesus two days before Passover. Given that the anointing took place six days before Passover (as John says), it occurred just before Jesus entered Jerusalem, before the triumphal entry and the teaching found in Matthew 21–25. Clearly then, Matthew moves the event out of its strict chronological order—in order to present a thematic order. Matthew's order connects two events in order to set up a question: What is Jesus worth?

The chief priests said, "He is worth more to us dead than alive." Ironically, in a way they never intended, they were absolutely right. They meant their position was worth more than their integrity, that they would kill an innocent man to keep their place. But God knows that Jesus is worth more than ever to us after his death and resurrection. The woman who anointed Jesus said Jesus was worth all she had. She anointed him with a single flask of perfume worth three hundred denarii—at least a year's wages (John 12:5). Judas decided to sell Jesus out for thirty pieces of silver. If pieces are (as is most probable) Tyrian shekels, Judas sold Jesus for about five months' wages.

Matthew's composition uses the literary technique called intercalation (or sandwiching) to pose a question and a choice. The chief priests betrayed justice in order to kill Jesus, Mary offered a rich gift to Jesus, and Judas betrayed Jesus for a middling sum of money. What then is Jesus' worth—absolutely, and in your appraisal? Matthew does not name the woman who anointed Jesus, but John tells us it was Mary, the sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead (John 11). Mary, Lazarus, and their sister Martha had long been friends of Jesus. In Luke 10:38–42 they fed Jesus and his disciples. At that meal, Martha exhausted and exasperated herself preparing a fine meal. Mary irritated her sister by sitting at Jesus' feet, listening, rather than standing by Martha's side, working. Martha complained and told Jesus to send Mary back into the kitchen. But Jesus said Mary was right to sit at his feet and learn. She was singularly devoted to Jesus, and she understood perhaps better than the disciples. She knew he must go to the cross, grasped his burden, and planned to honor Jesus and support him as he faced death.

In Bethany, "in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper," some friends gave a banquet in Jesus' honor (Matt. 26:6). Lazarus restored from death was there. Martha served, and Mary anointed Jesus. She "came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table" (Matt. 26:7; cf. John 12:1–2). The jar or flask was made of the best material, probably carved stone, tapering to a thin neck—hardly a common spray bottle. Perhaps Mary broke the neck of the vial as she poured all the perfume on Jesus. The aroma filled the room; moments later complaints followed (John 12:3–5).

AN _____ TO THE GIFT

The disciples were indignant. “Why this waste?” they asked. “This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor” (Matt. 26:8–9). The value was certainly high; still, we must pin down the reason for the disciples’ objection. First, the disciples simply did not have much money. The Twelve could have lived for a month or more on what she spent in one moment. Besides, if she had so much money, they thought she should give it to the poor. Second, comparing Matthew and John, we see that Judas led the complaint. Judas was a thief—he kept their common purse and “used to take what was put into it” (John 12:6 RSV).⁸ Judas thought of pilfering the money, so his talk of the poor simply gave his greed a veneer of piety. Third, the disciples did not understand the hour. They had not listened when Jesus described his imminent death. They still thought one day was the same as another.

Mary knew better. In the Old Testament, kings and prophets are anointed. The long-expected Messiah was *the* anointed. Mary knew who Jesus was and anointed him. Jesus defended her: “Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial” (Matt. 26:10–12). Mary’s gift showed that she understood what he was about to do and loved him for it. She knew because she listened. When Jesus first came to her house, Mary listened at Jesus’ feet (Luke 10:39). When Lazarus died and she met Jesus, she fell at his feet again (John 11:32). To sit at someone’s feet, in biblical parlance, is to adopt the posture of a disciple. She listened more than the disciples, therefore she knew...

THE GIFT AND THE _____

When Jesus spoke up in defense of Mary, he said, “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me” (26:10–11). When Jesus says, “The poor you will always have with you,” he does not mean poverty is a hopeless problem that defies remedy. Those who take that view ask, “If there will always be poor people, whatever we do, why try to help them?” But Jesus was virtually quoting a law of Moses: “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deut. 15:11)...Jesus himself was certainly generous to the poor. He fed them and healed them, even though he knew more people would become hungry and sick. Jesus devalues neither the poor themselves nor gifts to them. Poverty is neither an insignificant nor hopeless cause. God’s concern for the poor remains; therefore we should take an abiding interest in the poor.

Yet as the hour for Jesus’ death approaches, it is time to lay aside our ongoing duty to the poor. When the woman poured perfume on his body, “she did it to prepare me for burial” (26:12). This is a unique moment, unparalleled in the history of the universe. The poor are important, but we can always care for them. Mary was right to give Jesus an extravagant gift right before his death. Custom (which Jesus’ disciples later refused to follow) said an executed criminal cannot expect a proper burial with a proper anointing. Mary had saved up for this hour and

now anoints Jesus, in advance, for his burial. Jesus deserved this honor. The incarnate Son of God would soon finish his days on earth. The poor would always be present, but he would not. Mary was thanking Jesus in advance for giving his life for her.

Jesus adds emphatically, “I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her” (26:13). This promise assumes that the gospel of Jesus will one day be preached throughout the world. His death will not be the end of his movement, but its beginning. He adds that this woman, this act, will be part of the story. She gave a great gift, at a unique moment, to a unique person.

The Bible says we should make “the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). As the Lord showed Mary, he may show us singular opportunities to do small things that make a big difference, and we should be ready to seize them. Time is not simply a continuum. On occasion, a choice, an act, is “now or never.” Curiously, Matthew said that what she did will be remembered, but he does not mention her name (only John does). Why? Memorials are interesting things, not just because of the problem of pigeons sitting on them and thereby desecrating the hero that is to be honored. After World Wars I and II, war memorials were planned throughout Europe and with the plans came debates. What should they say? Memorials, in winning countries, “chiefly celebrated victory and sacrifice” and in defeated countries they celebrated “sacrifice and courage.” But a great many celebrated an unknown soldier, because the unknown soldier represented sacrifice to the cause. Just so, Matthew lets her name pass. Her name is not what matters, her cause is.

AN ACT OF _____

“Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over” (Matt. 26:14–16). We wonder what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. Some say Judas was a revolutionary. The name Iscariot might be derived from the Latin term *sicarii*, which means “dagger-men,” that is, insurrectionists. Had Judas expected Jesus to lead an armed revolt against Rome? Had he become disillusioned with Jesus’ lack of action? Sickened by his talk of death? Did he believe Jesus was a failed leader who had to be removed so someone else could lead Israel against Rome? No one knows.

But Judas was not merely misguided. We cannot neglect old-fashioned greed. John says Judas stole from his fellow disciples (John 12:6) and hoped to get more money for betraying Jesus. He sought out the priests and bargained for thirty pieces of silver. After that “Judas watched for an opportunity”—literally, a good time!—“to hand him over” (26:16). Thirty pieces is an interesting sum:

- In Exodus 21:32, thirty pieces of silver is the fine a man must pay if his ox accidentally gores a slave to death.

- In Zechariah 11:12–13, God’s faithful shepherd rescued Israel from evil shepherds and they paid him thirty pieces of silver—the price of a slave. So Judas sold Jesus for the price of a slave.

It is ironic. Judas bristled that Mary spent 300 denarii to anoint Jesus, then he betrayed Jesus for 120 denarii. Mary showed “uncalculating generosity” while Judas drove a “calculated bargain.” The Bible says Judas was led by Satan and destined for judgment (John 13:27; 17:12; Acts 1:15–20). Still, we wonder how a disciple—one who witnessed everything Jesus did—could turn and betray him. This invokes a broader question: how can *any* creature turn against the Creator? Ultimately all sin and rebellion are mysterious, yet God uses even dark mysteries to accomplish his purposes. Wicked men betrayed Jesus to death, but “God intended it for good”; it fulfilled his “set purpose” (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23).

Conclusion

We thank God for his ability to bring good out of evil. We also hear the warning in this story. It is possible for us, as for Judas, to see all the evidence for Jesus and still turn away. Even something as banal as greed can blind us. May the Lord have mercy on us!

Mary’s sacrifice should inspire us to love Jesus and sacrifice for him. We cannot anoint Jesus, but we can still seek ways to love him. We love him when we love the poor, especially his poor...May the Lord show us where we should make sacrificial gifts today. Our passage has three elements and each ascribes a value to Jesus. The priests said he is worth more dead than alive. They put supreme value on their position in their society. Judas either loved money or he loved the hope of a revolution (or both), and he priced Jesus at thirty pieces of silver. And there is Mary. Judas “seeks only what he can get from Jesus,” but sweet Mary “seeks what she can offer Jesus.” Each of us must ask, “What about me? What value do I place on Jesus?”

Lesson 95 (11-30-25)

Tested in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:31-56)

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' ³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³ Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." ³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ⁴³ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." ⁴⁹ And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. ⁵¹ And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. ⁵⁶ But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.

- Matthew 26:31-56 ESV

Summary

In this section, Jesus states that the disciples—even Peter—will abandon Him. He takes them to a secluded place to pray, but the disciples, failing to grasp the urgency of His distress, fall asleep. A short time later, an armed mob led by Judas arrives to arrest Jesus. As predicted, the disciples flee.¹

Observation

1. What prediction does Jesus make about the disciples in verse 31?
2. What Old Testament prophecy does Jesus quote, and how does it apply to the disciples (v. 31)?
3. What promise does Jesus give in verse 32?
4. How does Peter respond to Jesus' prediction (vv. 33, 35)?
5. What do the other disciples say after Peter?
6. Where does Jesus go with His disciples (v. 36)?
7. What instruction does He give to the disciples at Gethsemane (vv. 36, 38, 41)?
8. How does Jesus pray in verses 39, 42, and 44?
9. What emotions or posture does Jesus display in His prayers?
10. What are the disciples doing while Jesus prays (vv. 40, 43, 45)?
11. How does Jesus respond to their sleepiness (vv. 40–41)?
12. Who arrives in verse 47, and who is with him?
13. What signal does Judas give, and how does he identify Jesus (vv. 48–49)?
14. How does Jesus respond to Judas (v. 50)?
15. What action does one of the disciples take in verse 51?
16. What does Jesus say about using the sword and His ability to call on angels (vv. 52–53)?
17. How does Jesus explain that the Scriptures must be fulfilled (v. 54, 56)?
18. How do the disciples respond in verse 56?

Interpretation

1. Why does Jesus say the disciples will fall away, and what does this reveal about human weakness?
2. How does the prophecy of the shepherd being struck (Zechariah 13:7) help explain the disciples' actions?
3. What is the significance of Jesus promising to go before them into Galilee?
4. What does Peter's confidence in verses 33 and 35 reveal about his understanding of his own strength?
5. Why does Jesus take Peter, James, and John deeper into the garden with Him?
6. What does Jesus' prayer, "not as I will, but as you will," reveal about His submission to the Father?

¹ John D. Barry, Douglas Mangum, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Mt 26:31–56.

7. Why are the disciples unable to stay awake and pray, and what does this teach about spiritual vigilance?
8. How does Jesus' repeated prayer emphasize His struggle and obedience?
9. Why does Jesus willingly allow Judas to betray Him and submit to arrest?
10. What is the meaning of Jesus' teaching about the sword (vv. 52–54)?
11. How does Jesus show His power and authority even while being arrested?
12. What role does the fulfillment of Scripture play in this passage?
13. Why do all the disciples flee in verse 56, and what does this show about fear and faith?

Application

1. How do I respond when my faith is tested—like the disciples when they scattered?
2. In what ways do I sometimes overestimate my spiritual strength like Peter did?
3. What can I learn from Jesus' example of prayer in Gethsemane when facing trials?
4. How can I better submit my will to God's will in daily life?
5. What does Jesus' rebuke about the sword teach me about trusting God rather than worldly power?
6. How do I find encouragement in Jesus' promise to go before His disciples even after their failure?
7. What role does prayer play in helping me resist temptation?
8. How can I remain spiritually alert when my flesh is weak?
9. What does this passage teach me about Jesus' willingness to suffer for my salvation?
10. How can I live with greater trust in God's plan, knowing that He works through even dark and confusing circumstances?
11. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 443–453.*]

In our journey with Jesus through the final week, we have followed him as he ate his last supper with his disciples. In that meal they celebrated the Passover and celebrated the release of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Jesus used the occasion to tell his disciples that his death fulfilled God's plan of redemption. When the meal ended, they sang a hymn, and left for the Mount of Olives, where they stopped in a private garden (Matt. 26:30). After the meal, "Jesus told them, 'This very night you will all fall away on account of me'" (Matt. 26:31). Earlier, Jesus had said, "One of you will betray me" (26:21). That would be Judas. But now Jesus says all will at least fall away. This reminds us of the parable of the sower. That parable said that some who heard the word of God would fall away (same Greek word, *skandalizō*) due to persecution. Others would fall away due to love of riches (Matt. 13:21–22). Now then, "as Judas has succumbed to the lure

of wealth like the seed choked by thorns (13:22), the other disciples will wilt at the first sign of persecution like the seed that landed in rocky soil (13:21)."

This, Jesus says, fulfills the words of the prophet Zechariah, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (26:31b). As we know, others carried out the action, but God foreknew and foreordained it, so the action is also his. One more time, Matthew insists that we notice God's sovereign control over unfolding events. The Lord predicted that Jesus would be slain. But the catastrophe is not final, Jesus says. "After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (26:32). Although most of Jesus' resurrection appearances were near Jerusalem, the disciples will be reunited to Jesus in Galilee, where their time with Jesus began. The disciples will fail Jesus, but Jesus will restore them in Galilee.

Earlier, Jesus had predicted that one of the disciples would betray him, and all anxiously asked, "Surely not I, Lord?" (26:22). But now Peter abandons his earlier humility, crowing, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (26:33). So he swings from sensible self-doubt to a reckless boast. If only one stands, he will be the one! So "Peter promised more ... than he was able to give" and displayed "the intoxication of human selfconfidence." Jesus rejects Peter's braggadocio: "This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times" (26:34). But Peter hardly lets Jesus finish before he doubts Jesus and redoubles his assertion. "Even if I have to die with you," he says, "I will never disown you." This time "all the other disciples" followed Peter's boast and "said the same" (26:35).

Within hours, the band disintegrated at the sight of the arresting soldiers. Courage shattered, they abandoned their promises. That very night, a rooster's crow punctuated Peter's failure. All did fall away. Overwhelmed by fear, they stumbled. When they boasted that they would never fail Jesus, they were foolish, but sincere. They *intended* to be loyal. But it is easy to make vows when conflict, danger, and temptation are invisible. We should watch ourselves. We should be "slow to speak" (James 1:19). When we do speak, we should add, "If it is the Lord's will" (James 4:15).

But we should watch Jesus even more than we watch ourselves. The disciples will fail, but Jesus will not. He says he will rise and he does. He says he will go before them into Galilee. They will not return, downcast, to their homes, while Jesus remains in the grave. He will rise from the dead and precede them. Then they will follow, for even if they abandon him, he will not abandon them. This is an immense comfort...

IS TESTED IN GETHSEMANE

Gardens twice hosted crucial events in the drama of redemption. In Eden, the story of salvation began when Adam and Eve failed the test of obedience to God's will. In Gethsemane, Jesus (the second Adam) passed the test of obedience to the Father's will. Jesus' anguished plea for release from the cross prompts questions. Jesus had always been calm in the face of adversity. Why such agony now? Jesus has been so sure of God's purpose and his role in the plan of redemption. How can he now waver? He has long been sure of God's sovereign plan. Why is he

now unsure? What is the source of Jesus' angst, his fear of death? Is it the physical pain of crucifixion? Death itself?... Even if Jesus' anguish baffles us at first, we know Gethsemane happened. Even skeptics must admit that the scene raises so many potentially embarrassing questions that no Christian would make it up. Further, the scene is consistent with the Jesus of the Gospels, which constantly display both his deity and his humanity.

Since Jesus got hungry when he did not eat, thirsty when he did not drink, and tired when he did not sleep, he would also feel the pain of crucifixion. Jesus also felt the range of human emotions. Since he sighed and groaned over sin and brokenness (Mark 7:34; 8:12), he could certainly groan over the evils he would suffer and the pain he would bear.

Still, the anguish is mysterious. Jesus had long foretold his death. Why the anguish, visible in every line, when it is finally at hand? When Jesus arrived in Gethsemane, he told his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray," then walked a short distance away (26:36). He wanted to be alone, yet not entirely alone, so he took Peter, James, and John with him and "began to be sorrowful and troubled" (26:37). He said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (26:38). The phrase "with me" is touching. His sorrow is so great it threatens to kill him, so he wants his closest friends to stay and keep a vigil with him. Finally, Jesus went a little farther off, "fell with his face to the ground," and prayed this amazing prayer: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (26:39). A little later he prayed to much the same effect: "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (26:42; cf. 26:44).

We must draw on every resource to fathom this. First, we notice our Lord's gesture. Face to the ground, he adopts the posture of the humblest petitioner. Second, Matthew has hinted that Jesus' death would be unique. An angel directs Mary to name her child "Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). Later, Jesus says he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). Similarly, in John, Jesus compares himself to a seed: he must fall to the ground and die before he bears fruit (John 12:24).

Third, Jesus prays that "this cup be taken from me." The image of drinking from an unpleasant cup appears a number of times in the Old Testament. God pours a cup of wine which he portions out to wicked nations. They drink it down as punishment. As they drink, they stagger and fall. Calamities come—"ruin and destruction, famine and sword"—as the nations drink from "the goblet of [God's] wrath" (Isa. 51:17–23). The Lord told Jeremiah that when the nations drink the wine of God's wrath, "they will stagger and go mad." They will be "a ruin and an object of horror and scorn and cursing" (Jer. 25:15–18; cf. Ps. 75:7–8; Ezek. 23:31–34; Rev. 17:3–6; 18:3–6). But Isaiah says God will take the cup away one day, so that Israel "will never drink again" (Isa. 51:22). In Isaiah, God says he will give the cup to evil nations that torment Israel. But Jesus says he will drink the cup of God's wrath. This symbol of the cup begins to explain Jesus' fear: he fears tasting the wrath of God...

Jesus was sinless and perfectly good. His heart detested sin. His eyes were “too pure to look on evil” (Hab. 1:13). In his humanity, he never knew sin personally. But on the cross, Jesus bore our sin and punishment and identified with us in our sin. When Jesus drank the cup of wrath, the Father turned away from him. This turning, this temporary separation from the Father, was the second thing he feared. So Jesus’ fear of death included the natural human aversion to pain and suffering, but much more. As we notice the precise language of Jesus’ prayer in the garden, we see his faithfulness:

- The address is warm and trusting: “My Father.”
- The petition is humble: “If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.” In a sense all things are possible with God (19:26) and Jesus could have avoided the cup—by not redeeming mankind. The cross was necessary if and only if he intended to redeem his people. Sin has a price—death—and either we pay it or Jesus does.
- Even as he faces the cup and asks for relief, he yields to the Father: “Yet not as I will, but as you will” (26:39).

Jesus prayed for some time (“one hour” may simply mean “for a good while” in 26:40). But the Father strengthened him (cf. Luke 22:43); Jesus accepted the cup in his second prayer: “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done” (26:42). His anguish was strong enough that he prayed a “third time, saying the same thing” (26:44), but then he petitioned no more. Thus Jesus stated his desire to avoid the cup, yet he submitted to the Father’s will and obeyed it.

We say Jesus is tempted in this place, and rightly so, but it might be better to call it a test, for this hour tests his character and it proves him righteous. We can learn how to face temptation and pass tests by following Jesus. First, he prays. He prays, “Your will be done,” with exactly the same words he told us to use in the Lord’s Prayer (26:42; cf. 6:10). He prays humbly, from a meek posture, face down. His words are submissive: he does not object to the Father’s will, he simply asks, “Is it necessary?” Second, he asks for help from friends, if only for the comfort their company brings. Even if he knows they will fail him, he seeks help.

ARE TESTED IN GETHSEMANE

Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to “keep watch with me” while he prayed. Sadly, when he “returned to his disciples [he] found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter” (26:40). Later, he again asked them to “watch and pray”—and they fell asleep again (26:41, 43). There was plenty to pray about. Jesus had told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me” (26:31). They had promised to be faithful unto death (26:35). Did they think their promise would be enough? But they let themselves succumb to drowsiness and left Jesus to face his trial alone. They neither watched nor prayed, but fell asleep.

There are many ways to fall into sin. Occasionally the root is pure *malice*. This is rare, for almost all sin seeks some personal gain, yet a few people are drawn to evil for its own sake. It satisfies

them to hurt people, even if they gain nothing from it (Num. 35:20; Rom. 1:29). *Curiosity* leads some people to hear a prohibition and think, “Why not? What am I missing?” (Rom. 7:7–11). We also sin as a matter of *habit* or lifestyle. Laziness and gossip can be habit-forming (1 Tim. 5:13). Hebrews mentions believers who make it a habit to forsake their gatherings (Heb. 10:25). Some people fall into sin under the influence of *expediency*. They know where they want to go and will take any road to get there. The ends justify the means. For example, interviewers will delete the context of a remark to make it more controversial, hence more marketable. The disciples, however, fell into sin for other reasons: at least four of them are illustrated in this passage.

Overconfidence. When Jesus told the disciples they would all scatter, Peter denied that he would fall away. He swore that he would never disown Jesus. “ ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’ And all the other disciples said the same” (26:35). But they were all wrong. Eagerness and weakness live side by side.

Following the crowd. Earlier that night, Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him. When they heard this, each was humble enough to say, “Surely not I, Lord?” (26:21–22). A couple of hours later, when Jesus said they would fall away, Peter insisted he would not and they all followed, insisting that they would never fail him (26:35). They were following each other instead of examining themselves.

Ignorance. The disciples failed Jesus in part because they were oblivious. Jesus asked his friends to “Keep watch with me for one hour.” He also said, “The hour is near,” but the disciples did not take it in; they simply had to sleep (26:40, 45). There are other ways to sin due to ignorance. Some people simply do not know God’s will. They do not know that living together outside marriage is wrong or that the gambling culture is destructive. They have not heard, or at least have never listened to, God’s standards.

Weakness. Jesus told the disciples to “watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (26:41). After Jesus prayed a while, Matthew says, “when he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy” (26:43). We see that noble desires are spoiled by physical weakness. Vince Lombardi once said, “Fatigue makes cowards of us all.” There were many reasons why the disciples failed Jesus; fatigue was one of them. Whatever challenges we face, exhaustion makes them worse. It is one reason why we cannot do the good we want to do (Rom. 7:14–20).

There are times when we should not sleep, however tired we feel. When Jesus found his disciples sleeping one more time, he gently chided them...Jesus challenges his disciples, yet he is tender. He knows they are overwhelmed and forgives them. It is now too late to find strength in prayer, so they might as well sleep a bit more until the moment of the arrest: “Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (26:45–46).

JESUS AND _____ TESTING

Matthew 26 contains several practical helps. First, it is a comfort to know Jesus faced hard tests just as we do. The Bible says Jesus is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” because he “has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Heb. 4:14–15). If Jesus faced the test three times over, it reminds us that testing is part of the human condition. We are liable to it. The old spiritual says, “Nobody knows the trouble I seen, nobody knows like Jesus.” He faced false accusation, betrayal, misunderstanding, physical violence, and he faced it alone. He prayed and did not get what he sought. He heard only “the hard answer of events.” Hebrews says he “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8) and so can we, if we follow him and learn from the way he faced temptation.

Second, we endure temptation as he did, by prayer. This is not a new thought, but we can meditate on it. He prays humbly and repeatedly, face on the ground, seeking the Father’s will. In the test, he seeks the Father’s perspective...Jesus says “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” That is why we fail. What can we do? As a lesser point, we can care for our physical flesh—our sleep, nutrition, and exercise—so that it serves us well. But the term “flesh” has another sense in Scripture. Our flesh is our sinful nature, our aversion to the things of God. When we pray, we call on God’s Spirit to strengthen our spirit, burdened as it is by sin. Surely this will help us resist temptation.

Third, in the test Jesus sought help from his friends, if only for their company. We often falter because we foolishly fail to enlist help. But even if a burden is ours, even if no one can help us perform a task, they can at least befriend us and pray for us. When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he compounded his mistake by dismissing his servant in Beersheba. A day later he is lamenting, “I alone am left.” But if he had at least kept his servant, at least he would not have been alone (1 Kings 19:3–4, 10).

Fourth, we must consider a tension. The disciples said they would rather die than abandon Jesus; hours later they abandoned Jesus to save their skin. Peter says he will never fall away; mere hours later, he falls away. Once again we see the limits of human resolve. How often we resemble Peter! We resolve to control our impulses, to stay calm as we prepare to enter a potentially tense meeting. Easier said than done! An hour later, we are ashamed because our emotions and impulses got the best of us again.

What shall we say? The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that our resolutions cannot finally protect us. There is always a gap between our will and our flesh. What shall we do then? Redouble our efforts? We should keep on trying, but we should also remember the end of our story. The crucifixion occurs because God knows we cannot keep our resolutions to be good. Every disciple fails, but that does not thwart God’s work. Parents fail, but God still calls children to himself. Spouses fail, but the Lord rekindles love and models the forgiveness we need in families. Jesus empathizes with us in our weakness, but he also overcomes our weaknesses. Only Jesus resolves and achieves every time. Therefore, let us “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to

help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:16). If we have been tested and failed, if we have been tempted and succumbed, we can find mercy in Christ.

Conclusion

While Jesus is speaking with His disciples in Gethsemane, Judas arrives with a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and elders. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, identifying Him to the crowd. One of Jesus’ disciples (John 18:10 identifies him as Peter) strikes the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. But Jesus stops him, reminding that those who take the sword will perish by the sword, and that He could call on His Father to send more than twelve legions of angels if He wished. Instead, He submits, noting that the Scriptures must be fulfilled. Jesus is then arrested, and His disciples desert Him and flee. Here’s a few takeaways from Matthew 26:47-56:

Jesus’ Willing Surrender: Jesus was not overpowered—He chose to submit in order to fulfill God’s redemptive plan. His restraint shows divine strength and obedience to the Father.

God’s Sovereign Control: Even in betrayal and arrest, God’s plan was unfolding exactly as Scripture foretold. This encourages trust that God’s purposes prevail even when circumstances seem dark.

Misguided Zeal vs. Kingdom Purpose: The disciple who drew the sword meant well, but acted in the wrong way. Christians are called to trust God’s plan, not to advance His kingdom through worldly force or human impulse.

The Pain of Betrayal: Judas’ kiss highlights that betrayal often comes from those closest to us. Yet Jesus responds with calm and composure, modeling forgiveness and steadfastness in the face of hurt.

The Cost of Discipleship: The disciples fled in fear, showing the weakness of human resolve apart from God’s strength. It reminds believers to depend on the Spirit for courage and endurance when faith is tested.

Lesson 96 (12-7-25)

Jesus on Trial / Peter Denies Jesus (Matthew 26:57-75)

⁵⁷ Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸ And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. ⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹ and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.' " ⁶² And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, ⁶⁸ saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ⁷¹ And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

- Matthew 26:57-75 ESV

Summary

Jesus is taken to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and elders have gathered. Peter follows at a distance and waits in the courtyard. The chief priests and council seek false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but they cannot find consistent witnesses. Finally, two claim He said He could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. When pressed, Jesus remains silent until the high priest asks directly if He is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus answers affirmatively, adding that they will see Him seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven. The high priest tears his robes, declaring Him guilty of blasphemy, and the council condemns Him to death. They mock, spit on, and strike Him. Meanwhile, in the courtyard, Peter denies Jesus three times when questioned by a servant girl

and bystanders. Immediately a rooster crows, and Peter remembers Jesus' prediction. Overcome with grief, he goes out and weeps bitterly.

Observation Questions

1. To whom is Jesus led after His arrest (v. 57)?
2. Who followed Jesus at a distance, and where did he sit (v. 58)?
3. What were the chief priests and council seeking against Jesus (v. 59)?
4. What kind of witnesses came forward, and what did they claim (vv. 60–61)?
5. How does Jesus initially respond to the accusations (v. 63)?
6. What does the high priest demand Jesus to declare under oath (v. 63)?
7. How does Jesus answer, and what does He predict about Himself (v. 64)?
8. What is the high priest's reaction to Jesus' words (v. 65)?
9. How do the council members respond to Jesus (vv. 66–68)?
10. Meanwhile, what happens with Peter in the courtyard (vv. 69–70)?
11. How does Peter respond to the servant girl's accusation (vv. 70–72)?
12. What happens when Peter is accused a third time (vv. 73–74)?
13. What occurs immediately after Peter's third denial (v. 74)?
14. What does Peter remember, and how does he respond (v. 75)?

Interpretation Questions

1. Why were the religious leaders seeking false testimony against Jesus?
2. What does Jesus' silence before His accusers reveal about Him?
3. Why is Jesus' confession before the high priest (v. 64) significant?
4. What does Jesus mean when He speaks of sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds?
5. Why did the high priest consider Jesus' statement to be blasphemy?
6. What does the mockery and striking of Jesus show about the hearts of His accusers?
7. Why is Peter's threefold denial significant in light of Jesus' earlier prediction (vv. 31–35)?
8. What does the rooster's crow symbolize in this narrative?
9. What does Peter's bitter weeping reveal about his heart?
10. How do Jesus' trial and Peter's denial highlight the contrast between Jesus' faithfulness and human weakness?

Application Questions

1. How do I respond when I face pressure to deny or hide my faith?
2. What can I learn from Jesus' calmness and silence in the face of false accusations?
3. How can Jesus' bold confession before His enemies encourage me to speak truth in difficult situations?
4. In what ways am I sometimes tempted to act like Peter, following Jesus "at a distance"?
5. What does Peter's denial teach me about overconfidence in my own strength?

6. How can I find hope in Peter's repentance and restoration later on?
7. How should this passage deepen my gratitude for Jesus' willingness to suffer injustice for my salvation?
8. What practices can help me remain faithful when I face trials or opposition for my faith?
9. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 460–473.*]

JESUS ON _____

The Jewish leaders sought Jesus' death, nothing less. To reach this goal, they needed to convict him of a capital offense. More to the point, since the Roman governor reserved the right of execution to himself, at least in Judea, they had to find Jesus guilty of a capital crime in both Jewish and Roman law. But what was Jesus' offense against Jewish law? And since he paid taxes and lived peacefully, how could the Romans condemn him? But the authorities did have Jesus in custody, so "those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled" (26:57). Peter, meanwhile, "followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest" and "sat down with the guards" (26:58).

John mentions a preliminary but pointless hearing with the former high priest, Annas (John 18:19–24). After it ended, the soldiers took Jesus to a gathering that appears to have been an informal conclave of leaders of the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin. In attendance were the high priest Caiaphas and representative or leading teachers and elders. It was still night and this must have been a preliminary hearing. Matthew 27:1 says, "Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death." This seems to mean that the full Sanhedrin met in the morning to ratify decisions reached in principle the previous night.

Some make much of alleged illegalities in Jesus' trials (such as a nighttime trial), but the acts are judged illegal by comparing them to the rules governing trials in the Mishnah. While the Mishnah often relied on much earlier sources, it was not completed until nearly A.D. 200. This means that judging Jesus' trial, which took place around A.D. 30, would be roughly like judging the presidential acts of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln against laws in force in 1960 and 2030, respectively. We cannot safely judge the actions of the Sanhedrin, recorded in the Gospels, against the Mishnah. Jesus' trial, conducted at night, in haste, and with few safeguards for the accused, does violate the Mishnah's standards. But the authorities had a high opinion of their legitimacy. Their willingness to disregard the word of questionable witnesses (below) demonstrates this. The authorities might have been willing to bend the law to their purposes,

not to break it. The great problem with the trial is that the quest for truth was trampled by the desire to convict Jesus of a crime that warranted death.

Matthew says, “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death” and they called forth “many false witnesses” (26:59–60). The witnesses are not false because they are all telling lies. There is a quest for real *evidence against* Jesus. The proceedings are false because they are not a genuine quest for the *truth about* Jesus. Rather the proceedings seek enough truth to reach the goal—to condemn Jesus, then have him executed.

Despite the leaders’ desire to gather testimony against Jesus, the first witnesses accomplished nothing. Jesus’ moral excellence made it next to impossible to bring charges against him (cf. John 8:46). But eventually two came forward and testified, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’ ” This is ominous because desecration of a temple was a capital crime in the ancient world. Perhaps that is why the high priest marveled that Jesus did not answer the “testimony that these men are bringing against you” (26:62).

The charge is a garbled account of Jesus’ words, together with a certain interpretation of certain recent actions. Jesus had said the temple would be destroyed in Matthew 24:2. And much earlier, Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19), but he meant that if they killed him, he would rise in three days (2:21). They also saw his actions in the temple, described in Matthew 21, which probably looked like a desecration to them, even though we know it could more aptly be called a symbolic judgment of the temple.

Yet perhaps even that court could see that the accusations were worthless. Jesus did not even reply—why should he attempt to untangle their confusion about his words and deeds? Would they even listen? As Proverbs 26:4 says, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.” Sometimes we debase ourselves by answering a fool. Jesus’ silence also fulfilled Isaiah 53:7: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth ... and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

JESUS _____

Since the words of the false witnesses could not stand, the high priest tried a direct question. Knowing that Jesus had made certain claims, even that very week (Matt. 21:23–46), he said, “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God” (26:63). The question is not “Are you the Messiah?” The Messiah is the deliverer of Israel, but most thought the Messiah would be a talented but ordinary man—a charismatic or military leader—who would liberate Israel from Rome. To claim to be the Messiah is bold, but not blasphemous. The question is, “Do you claim to be the unique Son of God, partaking in the Lord’s deity?”

However Jesus answers, it can be used against him. If he says he is the Messiah, they will accuse him of rebellion against Rome (cf. John 19:12). If he says he is the Son of God, they will accuse

him of blasphemy. Jesus replies (literally), “You have said so. But ...” (Matt. 26:64 ESV). That is, “what you say is true, but I must explain ...” ... Yes, Jesus is Messiah, but not the political sort: “But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (26:64; cf. Ps. 110:1; Dan. 7:13–14). Jesus is no rival to Rome. He is the eternal king, sitting on the right hand of the Father. He will rule over all peoples for all time.

If the high priest had wanted to conduct a genuine investigation, there was much to consider. Did Jesus fit the prophecies for the Messiah? At point after point, he did: born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, from David’s line, performing mighty healings, entering Jerusalem on a donkey, acclaimed by the people, yet betrayed by a friend, and despised by his nation. These are just eight of the many prophecies Jesus fulfilled.

JESUS _____

But the high priest was not interested in investigating such things and did not care to understand Jesus’ precise claims. He showed dismay when he “tore his clothes” (26:65). But he must have been thrilled, for he could use everything Jesus said against him. First, he declared his judgment, “He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” “ ‘He is worthy of death,’ they answered” (26:65–66). Jesus’ claim that he will sit on the right hand of majesty and come on clouds (from Daniel 7) sounds like a claim of deity. Since the priest assumes it is false, he cries “blasphemy” and blasphemy brings liability to death in Jewish law (Lev. 24:16). Further, the claim to be Messiah opens him to a charge that he is a rival to Caesar, so he is liable to death by Roman law. After this, the officials abused Jesus for a while: “Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?’ ” (26:67–68). In the morning, the full Sanhedrin ratified their prior decisions and led Jesus off to Pilate (27:1–2).

JESUS _____ AND SO SHALL WE

These hours lead us to consider how Jesus stood firm and what we can learn from him. The events that Matthew describes reveal much about Jesus himself and about the way he stood firm in his arrest and trial. First, as we saw, he faced the situation as it was and brought it before God. He asked, “Can this cup be removed?” No, but he had to ask... Second, whatever happened, Jesus stayed within the Father’s moral or revealed will. At his trial, Jesus told the truth, as God’s law said he should. Peter was in greatest danger when he disregarded the law, let anger or panic rule him, and started swinging his sword. Like Jesus, we are safe when we obey God’s law and trust him in it. We stand firm when we rest in him.

We can learn from Jesus’ example at many points, but one surpasses the rest. The Father revealed to Jesus that he must die; therefore, he did not call legions of angels. He fulfilled God’s plan of salvation and died for us. We cannot imitate that, we can only receive it. It should be

clear by now that Jesus' sacrifice is quite different from Socrates'. Both Jesus and Socrates taught with passion, but Jesus far exceeds Socrates, who was merely a teacher. The closer we look, the more we can see pride and arrogance in Socrates, but the closer we look, the more we see Jesus' moral beauty. Yet Jesus outdoes Socrates in a more profound way. We can stand firm in Jesus because he loved us and gave himself for us. He planned good for us—eternal life, spiritual life we can enjoy, beginning now. If the Father has given us his Son, if the Son has given us his life, surely we can trust him and stand firm in that. Until then, the Spirit of Christ helps us remain loyal to him in all the trials of life.

PETER FAILS, DENYING CHRIST THREE TIMES

To understand Peter's failure, we should place it in its full context. First, Matthew placed the trials of Jesus and Peter side by side (Matt. 26:59–75). This sets up a dramatic contrast between them. Jesus is falsely accused of sedition and blasphemy; Peter is rightly "accused" of being Jesus' disciple. Jesus is questioned by high priests; Peter is questioned by the priest's servants. Both men take oaths, swearing that they tell the truth. But while Jesus stands before his questioners "denying nothing, Peter cowers before his questioners and denies everything." Indeed, he denies that he even knows Jesus. Because Jesus stood firm, he offered his life for Peter. Because Peter swore "I don't know the man!" (Matt. 26:74), he saved his skin.

Earlier events, at the Last Supper, shed more light on Peter's actions. Near the end of that meal, Jesus predicted his betrayal and death, as he had before. But this time he added a wrinkle, saying that one of the Twelve at the last meal would betray him. Worse, while the disciples wondered who this might be, Jesus added, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me" (26:31).

Peter was not the betrayer, but (as Luke says) Jesus warned him that a trial awaited him that night. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you [plural] like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (22:31–32 ESV). Jesus tells Peter three things. First, he will face a terrible temptation. Second, he will not ultimately fail, but will fall away before he returns to Jesus. Third, after he is restored, he must help restore others, for they will fail too.

Peter ignores this prediction and confidently replies, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will [disown or deny you]" (Matt. 26:33). Peter thinks Jesus has made a mistake; he is ready to go with Jesus "both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33 ESV). But Jesus knows Peter is not quite so strong as he thinks, so he says, "I tell you the truth, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown [or deny] me three times" (Matt. 26:34).

MEDITATING ON PETER'S FAILURE

If we would learn from Peter's errors, let us notice first that his sins are those of a believer. He had tried to defend Jesus in the garden, he had intended to be faithful, he had followed Jesus

into the courtyard in an effort to be true. In Peter's defense, we know he was caught off guard, that the instinct for self-preservation is strong. So Peter's sin is comprehensible. But it is also repugnant. When Peter denies that he even knows who Jesus is, many factors aggravate Peter's sin:

- Peter denied Jesus repeatedly, solemnly, and vehemently.
- Peter failed from a position of leadership among the disciples, and set a bad example for them.
- Peter denied Jesus despite his warning and prediction.
- Peter did this despite his resolve to the contrary. He said "even if all fall away, I never will." He said he would die first (26:33, 35).

Two features of Peter's failure speak directly to us. First, Peter *lost confidence in Jesus*. Jesus said he would die and rise. But Matthew tells us Peter was now following Jesus "to see the end" (26:58 ESV)—that is, Jesus' death. His confidence in Jesus' prophecy also faltered. When Jesus said, "You will all fall away," Peter said, "Not I." That is, he believed Jesus had made a mistake.

Second, Peter was *self-confident*. He told himself he belonged in a unique category, that he was better than the rest, that they may fall away, but he will not. But we are rarely as strong or unique as we think. Peter lost his fear of God; fear of death gripped him. Peter never intended to say, "May I perish if I have any part in Jesus and his work." But panic overwhelmed him and he did say it....

There is a better way. Jesus told the disciples, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (26:41 ESV). This is true for all of us. We all become frightened and panic and succumb to temptation. Therefore, we should make use of the means of grace—our friends, the Scripture, and the Holy Spirit. Peter failed to do that and trusted his own strength. Most obviously, he failed to pray. Jesus said, "Watch and pray," but Peter neither watched nor prayed (26:41). He thought he would never fail a test so he did not even prepare, did not even seek help. Peter wandered into temptation unprepared, therefore he fell...Peter fell because he was weak but also because he dreamed that he was self-sufficient. His failure shows the folly of self-reliance. Peter shows us how to believe in Jesus and resolve to live for him and yet to fall on our face. The story would be tragic except for the mercy of Jesus that triumphs after Peter's fall.

JESUS _____ PETER

Peter sinned from weakness, not malice; therefore, when the rooster crowed and he realized what he had done, he went out and wept bitterly. The Spirit pierced his heart and he repented. This is the last time we read Peter's name in Matthew. But Jesus has predicted that he will see the disciples again, in Galilee, after the resurrection, and he does (26:32; cf. 28:10, 16). After Peter denied Jesus the third time, Jesus was arrested, condemned, and slain. On the third day, he rose again. He suffered death for our sins, and then, by rising, defeated death itself. Death could not hold him. It took the disciples some time to digest these things, so Peter and others returned to fishing for a while. As he said he would, Jesus met Peter in Galilee; it happened

after a night of fishing on the lake. Jesus prepared breakfast for the disciples, then questioned Peter: “Simon, do you truly love me more than these?” It is not immediately obvious what Jesus means by “these.” Is Jesus asking if he loves him more than “these” fishing implements? More than Peter loves “these” other disciples? More than “these” other disciples love him? The third option is most probable. After all, Peter had claimed that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples did. He had said, “Though all betray you, I will never betray you.” But Peter knows better now. When he answers Jesus’ question, he does not say, “I love you more ...,” he says, “I love you.”

Conclusion

Jesus asked Peter three times: “Do you truly love me more than these?... Do you truly love me?... Do you love me?” (John 21:15–17). It grieved Peter that Jesus asked him the same question three times. But Jesus is not needling Peter or doubting his sincerity. Notice the symmetry:

- Peter denied Jesus three times publicly, solemnly.
- Jesus questions him three times, “Do you love me?”
- This allows Peter to affirm three times, publicly and solemnly, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”
- Finally, Jesus reinstates Peter, commanding him three times to care for his sheep.

Thus Jesus fully restores Peter. From that point on, he was a disciple, an apostle, a church leader, and an author of Scripture. This reminds us that it is God’s nature to restore individuals, families, and churches. Our failures feel catastrophic to us, but God sees a way to redemption. For the believer, failure is never the final word. Peter did not deserve reinstatement, did not deserve a second chance. But Jesus gave him one, as he does to us.

Lesson 97 (12-14-25)

Courage and Cowardice (Matthew 27:1-26)

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ² And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

³ Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵ And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. ⁶ But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." ⁷ So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸ Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰ and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." ¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" ¹⁴ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

¹⁵ Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶ And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸ For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. ¹⁹ Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." ²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. ²¹ The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." ²⁵ And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" ²⁶ Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

- Matthew 27:1-26 ESV

Summary

As the day dawns, the religious leaders take Jesus to Pilate to be sentenced. Recognizing his guilt in Jesus' death sentence, Judas hangs himself. The religious leaders hand Jesus over to Pilate. Jesus, however, does not respond to the fabricated charges brought against Him (compare Isa 53:10 and note). Apparently wanting to free Jesus, Pilate offers to release a prisoner, but the crowd calls for Barabbas instead of Jesus. In order to prevent a riot, Pilate submits to the crowd's wishes and hands Jesus over to be crucified.¹

Observation Questions

1. What do the chief priests and elders decide to do in the morning (v. 1)?
2. To whom do they deliver Jesus (v. 2)?
3. What does Judas do when he sees that Jesus is condemned (v. 3)?
4. What does Judas confess to the chief priests and elders (v. 4)?
5. How do they respond to Judas (v. 4)?
6. What does Judas do with the thirty pieces of silver (v. 5)?
7. What happens to Judas afterward (v. 5)?
8. What do the chief priests say about putting the silver into the treasury (v. 6)?
9. What do they decide to do with the money (v. 7)?
10. What name is given to the field bought with the money (v. 8)?
11. What prophecy is said to be fulfilled in this action (vv. 9–10)?
12. What question does Pilate ask Jesus (v. 11)?
13. How does Jesus respond to Pilate's question (v. 11)?
14. How does Jesus respond to the accusations of the chief priests and elders (vv. 12–14)?
15. What custom did the governor have during the feast (v. 15)?
16. Who were the two prisoners mentioned in verses 16–17?
17. What message does Pilate's wife send him (v. 19)?
18. What do the chief priests and elders persuade the crowd to do (v. 20)?
19. How does the crowd respond when Pilate asks whom he should release (vv. 21–22)?
20. What do the people shout concerning Jesus (v. 22)?
21. What does Pilate ask in verse 23, and how does the crowd respond?
22. What symbolic act does Pilate perform in verse 24, and what does he say?
23. How do the people answer Pilate (v. 25)?
24. What final action does Pilate take in verse 26?

Interpretation Questions

1. Why do the religious leaders bring Jesus to Pilate instead of condemning Him themselves?
2. What does Judas' remorse and confession reveal about his understanding of his actions?
3. Why do the chief priests dismiss Judas' confession so coldly?

¹ John D. Barry, Douglas Mangum, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Mt 27:1–26.

4. What is the significance of the thirty pieces of silver being used to buy the potter's field?
5. How does this fulfill Old Testament prophecy?
6. Why does Jesus respond so briefly to Pilate yet remain silent before the religious leaders' accusations?
7. What does Pilate's wife's dream suggest about Jesus' innocence?
8. Why do the chief priests and elders stir up the crowd to ask for Barabbas' release?
9. What does the choice between Barabbas and Jesus symbolize?
10. Why does Pilate wash his hands before the crowd, and what does this mean?
11. What does the people's cry, "His blood be on us and on our children," signify?
12. How does Pilate's decision to release Barabbas and deliver Jesus reveal both human weakness and God's plan?

Application Questions

1. In what ways do I sometimes betray Christ for selfish gain, like Judas?
2. What does Judas' despair teach me about the danger of unrepented sin without turning to Christ for forgiveness?
3. How do the priests' actions warn me about hardened hearts toward sin?
4. What can I learn from Jesus' calmness and silence in the face of injustice?
5. How do I respond when pressured by others, like Pilate before the crowd?
6. How does the crowd's choice of Barabbas challenge me to consider what or whom I choose over Christ in daily life?
7. How does this passage remind me of the cost of my salvation?
8. In what ways should I stand more firmly for truth and justice rather than yielding to pressure?
9. How can I live more gratefully in light of Christ taking my place, like Barabbas being set free?
10. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 473–488.*]

JUDAS _____ BY _____ JESUS

After Peter declares, "I do not know the man," after he realizes what he has done, and goes out weeping, Matthew briefly sends us back to another phase of Jesus' trial: "Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people came to the decision to put Jesus to death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, the governor" (27:1–2).

This is the official decision of the supreme council of Israel. We understand the finality of this phase of Jesus' life as they condemn him, bind him, and lead him away. The story then turns to

Judas. “When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders” (27:3). Judas realized that Jesus was not going to exercise his powers to save himself, saw that his betrayal would lead to Jesus’ death. Once he saw the result of his betrayal, Judas began to act differently.

First, Judas “was seized with remorse.” The typical Greek word for repentance is *metanoeō*. It means to change one’s *mind* or heart. Matthew uses another word of Judas, *metamelomai*. It means to change one’s *feelings* about something. Matthew’s choice of terms makes a crucial point. Judas feels sorry and guilty about what he did, but he does not repent. His grief focuses on his act of betrayal. He seeks relief in the temple, the priests, and the return of his blood money, but he does not take his grief to the Lord. His feelings have changed about what he did, but his heart has not. He is not willing to see himself as a sinner in need of repentance.

Second, Judas felt that he had to do something about his mistake, so he returned the money “to the chief priests and the elders” (27:3). A moment later he said, “I have sinned for I have betrayed innocent blood” (27:4). This sounds like repentance, but it is not. First, Matthew says he felt remorse, not repentance. Second, Judas does not go to Jesus to make his confession, but to Jesus’ enemies. Third, *he does not take his sin to the Lord, he takes it upon himself*. In a vain attempt to atone for his sin and remove his guilt, he returns the “blood money,” the thirty pieces of silver the priests paid Judas for betraying Jesus.

Ironically, the priests say they have no interest in making atonement for Judas’ sin. Hours earlier, they paid the same money to purchase information leading to Jesus’ death. Now they suddenly develop scruples about accounting and purity and refuse to help. Hearing Judas’s anguish over his guilt, they coldly reply, “What is that to us? See to it yourself” (27:4 ESV). This is a callous failure of duty for men who are called to help with such cases of remorse and repentance. Still, Judas is determined to do something. So he “threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself” (27:5).

We could view Judas’s suicide as an impulsive act or an act of despair. Surely guilt, anger, and despair seem to be present, but there is more. The episode reminds us of Ahithophel, who betrayed David and hung himself when he saw that his plans failed (2 Sam. 17:1–23). Judas has blood guilt on his mind. The law said, “Cursed is the man who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person” (Deut. 27:25). Judas believes he is under this curse. The priests will not help him. Therefore, another law applies: to remove such blood guilt, the guilty party must pay for his crime by his own death (Num. 35:33–34). Judas took his life “in an anguished attempt to atone for his guilt.”

The lesson is vital. Judas feels terrible, but because he does not take his sin to the Lord, he is forced to take it upon himself. It is a tragic, extreme case of man-made religion, a desperate effort to save oneself. Yet it is an extension of the common tendency in godless religions to do something to make atonement for sin. Sadly, individual Christians can fall into the same

mentality. Worse, theological concepts of penance can promote the same denial of the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work.

When we review Judas and Peter, they seem similar in certain ways. We wonder how Judas could be the son of perdition, under the word of woe, when Peter, who did something not too dissimilar, was forgiven and restored as an apostle. Peter denied Jesus, Judas betrayed Jesus. They seem similar, but there are differences. First, Peter was caught off guard and panicked while alone, surrounded, and under pressure. He intended to be loyal, not to betray Jesus. Peter's sin was not calculated, it was an act of weakness. He fooled himself with his prior self-confidence. By contrast, Judas volunteered to betray Jesus and negotiated to gain money for it. Second, Judas felt sorry, but Peter repented. Judas took his sin and guilt upon himself, but Peter reaffirmed his faith and took his sin to the Lord.

THE POTTER'S FIELD

Matthew rounds off his account of Judas with a note of the money Judas tried to return—the money he received for betraying Jesus. He left the money in the temple, but the authorities determined that they could not keep it (27:6–10). Once again, Matthew reminds us that no element of Jesus' final hours was accidental. Even minor details such as the use of the blood money find their place in God's plan to redeem his people. Matthew will never let us forget that all things happen according to the Lord's plan of redemption.

Earlier, we called this a tale of two failures. In truth, we are all failures. All of us could serve as arguments for the human extinction movement, as we become frightened and panic, as we start down the wrong path and cannot seem to escape, as we even commit premeditated sins. Whatever our failure, an option remains. We can bear the burden ourselves or we can give it to Jesus. We can repent and receive his grace, for he made us in his image and remains committed to us. If he could restore Peter, he can restore us.

THE HEARING BEFORE _____

After the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus, they led him to the palace of Pilate, the Roman governor (John 18:28). The trial begins with Jesus standing before the governor, not resisting or defending himself. The Gospels are not giving a legal account of a trial. They present the thrust of events and the way they reveal the character of Jesus, the priests and elders, and Pilate.

The priests state their accusation, hoping to convince Pilate that Jesus deserves to die. The charge of blasphemy will hardly interest him, but sedition will. In Luke, the charge has a political ring: Jesus leads the nation astray, forbids the payment of taxes, and claims to be Christ, a king (Luke 23:2). Perhaps the priests think that if they feed Pilate the right information, he will sign off at once. But Pilate could see that Jesus was no rebel or warrior. He takes interest and asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Matt. 27:11). All four Gospels record Pilate's question and Jesus' response: "You say [it]" (Matt. 27:11). "You" is emphatic; *Pilate* is the one who says

this. Further, “you say [it]” implies that Jesus is not a king in the sense that Pilate thinks. In John, Jesus clarifies, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest” (John 18:36).

Is Jesus a king then? Yes, but not in a political sense. Under Pilate’s questioning, Jesus explains, “For this reason I was born ... to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). He is, we might say, king of truth...A typical Roman hearing before a procurator included charges, the governor’s questions, the prisoner’s self-defense, then a verdict. But Jesus did not defend himself. He knew he had come to the time appointed for his sacrifice. Besides, it was pointless: his accusers had no interest in the truth in his case. Therefore, “when he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer” (Matt. 27:12). Pilate was astonished; did Jesus not hear the charges? They threatened a death sentence (27:13). Still, “Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor” (27:14). Somehow, Jesus’ silence convinced Pilate that he was innocent, not guilty. Pilate saw no fault when Jesus said nothing. Perhaps we should conclude that a vigorous self-defense is not always necessary. Some accusations are simply absurd.

THE RELEASE OF _____

Pilate repeatedly said that he saw no basis for the charges against Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14; John 18:38; 19:4, 6). Since Jesus was innocent, he judged that the priests must have another reason for seeking his death. In Luke 23:5, the priests charge that Jesus’ teaching causes an uproar. In John, they first say that he is a criminal who deserves to die (18:30). Later, they say he must die “because he claimed to be the Son of God” (19:7). Pilate concluded that the leaders want to use him to execute Jesus. He believed Jesus was innocent, that “it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him” (Matt. 27:18). But Pilate was unable to stand on his convictions. Instead, he tried to evade responsibility for a decision by making a crucial compromise.

The governor laid aside the question of Jesus’ innocence and chose to treat him as an ordinary prisoner. Then, acting as if Jesus deserved to be a prisoner, Pilate offered to set him free, for “it was the governor’s custom at the [Passover] Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd” (27:15). (The release of a prisoner was viewed as a token of good will in the ancient world.) Since the governor began to hear cases at 6 a.m., few people were on the streets. But Pilate wanted to give the people a choice: “At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’ ” (27:16–17).

Matthew calls Barabbas a “notorious prisoner” or—probably a better translation—*prominent* prisoner (27:16). Barabbas was well known because he “had committed murder” during an insurrection in the city of Jerusalem (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19). He and at least two others had been captured. That is probably why three crosses were ready for crucifixions. By tradition, translations typically say Jesus was crucified between two thieves (KJV) or robbers (NIV, ESV), but the Greek term, plus the fact that they were executed, almost certainly means rebels or insurrectionists. The crosses were thus intended for Barabbas and his two cohorts in rebellion

(Jesus ultimately took Barabbas's place). The name Barabbas is also interesting: it means "son of the father." Since "father" was a title given to prominent teachers, he may have been the son of a "father," that is, a renowned teacher. This fact, taken with the murder, would account for his prominence.

For reasons that are not stated and seem obscure, Pilate let the crowd choose whether Jesus or Barabbas would be released. Pilate hoped they would choose Jesus...Pilate evidently gave the crowds time to think over their choice, but they were not left to deliberate independently: "The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed" (27:20). As a result, when Pilate repeated his question—"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?"—they answered, "Barabbas" (27:21). The crowd rejected the man who told them to love their enemies (the Romans) and called for a man who would murder those enemies if he could.

Pilate, who may have been surprised, invited the crowd to consider the consequences of their decision: "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" In fact, a man convicted of sedition could be crucified, banished, or executed less gruesomely. But the mob mentality now ruled and the crowd howled, "Let him be crucified!" (27:22 ESV). Even in that harsh age, when brutal punishments were common, crucifixion was considered an unspeakable horror. So Pilate protested, "Why, what evil has he done?" Why should an innocent man suffer such a fate? "But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!' " (27:23 ESV).

The call for crucifixion fit the godless goal of the priests. They wanted to kill Jesus, but a crucifixion would also discredit him. The law says "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23). The priests will be pleased because such a death implies that Jesus is under God's curse. More important, the Father will be pleased, because by this dreadful death Jesus fulfilled his purpose and bore sin's curse for us.

THE _____ OF JESUS AND THE _____ OF PILATE

Pilate could see that the mob was getting unruly, so he gave up his quest for justice for Jesus. When he saw "that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves' " (Matt. 27:24 ESV). Other Gospels tell us that Pilate took other halfhearted steps to secure Jesus' release both before and after this point (John 19:1–16; Luke 23:7–16). He had Jesus scourged (John 19:1). He dressed Jesus in a ridiculous robe and crowned him with thorns, hoping these acts would satisfy the mob's blood lust (John 19:4–5). By dressing Jesus in ridiculous kingly garb, it might also show how ludicrous it was to call this pitiful man a king. Twice Pilate said "I find no basis for a charge" against him (John 19:4–6; Luke 23:14–15). But nothing satisfied the crowd.

Pilate is a miserable figure throughout the story. He resists the idea of killing an innocent man and hates the way the Jews manipulate him to kill an innocent man. His wife's dream is alarming, as is the claim that Jesus is in a special sense a Son of God (John 19:7–9). But it is hard to sympathize with Pilate. He constantly struts, blusters, and postures, as cowards often do. He

tries to force Jesus to talk: “Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?” (John 19:10 ESV).

But, as John shows, the priests know how to get what they want. As Pilate vacillates, they play their trump card: “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar” (19:12). The prime task of the governor is to protect Caesar’s rule. The priests threaten to report Pilate to the emperor if he fails so to protect the emperor. An exquisite irony: to get Pilate to kill Jesus they pretend to be more loyal to Caesar than is Pilate. Trapped, Pilate resists one last time, with a taunt for the Jews: “Shall I crucify your king?” (19:15). Then, to seal Jesus’ execution for blasphemy, they blaspheme, saying, “We have no king but Caesar” (19:15). At last, Pilate capitulates and washes his hands of Jesus (Matt. 27:24). This common gesture is meant to reinforce his claim to be innocent (Deut. 21:6–7; Ps. 26:6). Of course, that is preposterous, but it is a window into Pilate’s soul, and all human souls...

“HIS BLOOD BE ON US”

Once Pilate capitulated to the priests, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Pilate released Barabbas, then handed Jesus over to be scourged. The Bible does not detail what this means, but it was a practice so brutal that it often led directly to death. After the scourging, they led Jesus off to be crucified: “Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified” (Matt. 27:26).

After he washed his hands, Pilate said, “See to it yourselves” (27:24 ESV). He meant, “Do what you will, I am not responsible.” Not so fast. As governor, Pilate is responsible, whether he admits it or not. Besides, the phrase “See to it yourselves” is exactly what the priests said to Judas when he sought mercy after he betrayed Jesus. When the priests said “you see to it,” they failed to exonerate themselves; Pilate failed too. We cannot eradicate our guilt simply by saying “I am innocent” or “take care of your own problems.”

Pilate had no right to wash his hands of Jesus, but the crowd accepted it and said, “His blood be on us and on our children” (27:25). This is chilling. The mob takes the blame for the death of Jesus. Their statement has been used to promote anti-Semitism, but that is completely misguided. First, Jesus and all his disciples were Jews, so the Bible cannot be anti-Semitic. Second, God would never hold an entire race accountable for what one mob said one day. As much as one generation is intertwined with another, each generation is liable for its own actions.

Still, when that crowd said, “Let his blood be on us and our children” they *did* curse themselves and abandon their covenant with God. But irony abounds in the passion story and this can be the sweetest case. There is another way for Jesus’ blood to be on them—to cover their sinful rebellion. The mob was accountable, but they were also free to repent and, in Acts, the apostles implored them to do so (Acts 3:14–20). Many did, as Acts repeatedly attests. Yet many did not, so that they tasted the judgment Jesus foretold in the war with Rome in A.D. 70, and they will taste it again on judgment day.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 27 displays the innocence, resolve, obedience, and courage of Jesus. Jesus had courage because he knew his purpose and believed in it. His resolve enabled him to persevere and achieve his goal. A businessman endures a start-up, a woman endures childbirth, we all endure if we have a cause—and we are Jesus' cause...Jesus' courage motivates us and gives us hope. But Pilate and the priests warn us. They show that our strongest desires often contradict our deepest needs. Our desires can enslave us just as politics enslaved Pilate and the priests.

False gods and false desires always enslave. Pilate turned to politics for meaning, for salvation. He turned to his power to save his power. Yet he found that the more he clung to power, the less he could use it. He became a prisoner in his own palace, forced to order the death of Jesus because political power said so. His desires did not match his needs; they enslaved them and made him a coward. The same holds for us. So let us examine ourselves...

In Matthew 27 Jesus shows supreme courage and makes a supreme sacrifice by embracing the path and enduring the agony of the cross. There he will shed his blood for his people. The term "blood" appears often in Matthew 27. Judas feels bad that he "betrayed innocent blood" and took "blood money" for it (27:4–6). While the priests demand Jesus' blood, Pilate says he is innocent of "this man's blood." This statement prompts the crowd to say, "His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). The blood of Jesus, the Son of God, covering us, covering our sin, is our hope. No other "god" can do this. The Lord saves. His sacrifice satisfies our deepest needs and inspires us to show courage and to make sacrifices that echo his own.

Lesson 98 (12-21-25)

The Crucifixion, Death, and Burial of Jesus (Matthew 27:27-61)

Summary

After beating and mocking Jesus, Roman soldiers take Him outside the city and crucify Him. While He is hanging on the cross, the Jewish leaders and others ridicule Him. Jesus dies for the sin of the world. The significance of His death is conveyed through supernatural occurrences. Joseph of Arimathea receives Jesus' body and provides a proper burial. The religious leaders place guards at the tomb to prevent Jesus' disciples from stealing His body.¹

Observation Questions

1. Who takes Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and what do they do to Him (v. 27)?
2. What clothing and crown do they place on Jesus (v. 28–29)?
3. What mocking actions and words are directed at Him (vv. 29–30)?
4. What do they do with the robe before leading Him away (v. 31)?
5. Who is compelled to carry Jesus' cross (v. 32)?
6. Where is Jesus taken to be crucified (v. 33)?
7. What drink is offered to Him, and how does He respond (v. 34)?
8. What do the soldiers do after crucifying Him (v. 35)?
9. What is placed above Jesus' head, and what does it say (v. 37)?
10. Who is crucified alongside Jesus (v. 38)?
11. How do passersby mock Him (vv. 39–40)?
12. What do the chief priests, scribes, and elders say as they mock Him (vv. 41–43)?
13. How do the robbers respond (v. 44)?
14. What happens from the sixth hour to the ninth hour (v. 45)?
15. What does Jesus cry out in verse 46, and what does it mean?
16. How do some of the bystanders interpret His words (vv. 47–49)?
17. What happens when Jesus yields up His spirit (vv. 50–51)?
18. What other supernatural events occur at this moment (vv. 52–53)?
19. How do the centurion and those with him respond (v. 54)?
20. Which women are mentioned as witnessing from a distance (vv. 55–56)?
21. Who asks Pilate for Jesus' body (v. 57–58)?
22. How does Pilate respond to the request (v. 58)?
23. What does Joseph of Arimathea do with Jesus' body (vv. 59–60)?
24. Who is mentioned as sitting opposite the tomb (v. 61)?

Interpretation Questions

1. What is the significance of the soldiers mocking Jesus with royal symbols?

¹ John D. Barry, Douglas Mangum, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Mt 27:27–61.

2. Why is Simon of Cyrene compelled to carry the cross, and what might this symbolize?
3. Why does Jesus refuse the wine mixed with gall?
4. What is the meaning of the inscription “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews”?
5. What do the mockings of the religious leaders reveal about their unbelief?
6. Why does Matthew record darkness covering the land during the crucifixion?
7. What is the significance of Jesus’ cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
8. Why does Matthew mention the tearing of the temple curtain?
9. What do the events of the earthquake and opened tombs signify about Jesus’ death?
10. How does the centurion’s confession highlight the truth about Jesus?
11. Why is it important that women are mentioned as witnesses to the crucifixion and burial?
12. What does Joseph of Arimathea’s bold request for the body teach us about discipleship?
13. How does Jesus’ burial in a rich man’s tomb fulfill prophecy?

Application Questions

1. How does Jesus’ endurance of mocking and suffering challenge the way I respond to ridicule for my faith?
2. In what ways do I see myself in the soldiers, the crowd, or the religious leaders?
3. What does Simon carrying the cross teach me about following Christ daily?
4. How does the cross reveal the seriousness of my sin?
5. How does the inscription over Jesus’ head remind me of His true kingship?
6. How should I respond to the reality of Jesus being forsaken for my sake?
7. What comfort do I find in knowing the temple curtain was torn at Jesus’ death?
8. How does the centurion’s confession encourage me to be bold in acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God?
9. How does the faithfulness of the women challenge me to remain devoted even in difficult times?
10. What example does Joseph of Arimathea set for me in publicly identifying with Christ?
11. How should I live differently knowing the power and victory revealed in Jesus’ death?
12. Was there anything from last week’s sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 490–511.*]

The crucifixion of Jesus is the best attested, most emotional, and most misunderstood event in ancient history. We know more about the death of Jesus, from more early sources, than about any other ancient event...The Gospels’ account of Jesus’ death offers both the most facts and the best interpretation. We know the Gospel accounts are true because the crucifixion is hardly

a story Christians would fabricate. Who would choose to start a new movement by declaring that its founder was executed for sedition and blasphemy?

At a factual level, we also know that crucifixion was a painful way to die. The physical pain, which the Bible does not describe, defies imagination. It caused dislocated limbs, extreme hunger and thirst, a struggle to breathe, and an agony that lasted until suffocation, heart failure, or blood loss took the victim. The ancients said so little about crucifixion that we only partially understand the practice and the agony it brought.

Crucifixion was also a shameful way to die. Victims were executed in public before a bloodthirsty mob. This manner of execution was reserved for criminals, slaves, and rebels and used to terrorize the masses. Finally, it was an accursed way to die. Moses says, “Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deut. 21:23). Jesus suffered all this on our account. It is harrowing even to study it. Yet we must, for it is integral to God’s plan of deliverance. So let us follow the Gospels, not dwelling on physical events, but on the spoken words that lead us to the meaning of the cross.

To move from the facts about the cross to the reasons for Jesus’ death on the cross, we must hold two truths in dynamic tension. The humans who placed Jesus on the cross were motivated by hatred, envy, and fear, yet the crucifixion unfolded as God planned. The Greek term *paradidōmi*, translated as “hand over” or “betray” (used forty times in the passion narratives), makes the point. Judas handed Jesus over to the priests out of greed and took money for it. The priests handed Jesus over to Pilate out of envy and self-righteousness. Pilate handed Jesus over to soldiers out of cowardice and they killed him (26:14–49; 27:18; 27:26). Yet God handed him over for us all (Rom. 4:23–25; 8:32). Thus the motive was not (ultimately) Judas’s desire for money, Pilate’s fear, or the Jews’ envy, but the Father’s love.

THE SOLDIERS _____ JESUS AS THE KING OF THE JEWS

Just before the crucifixion, Pilate’s soldiers decided to have some fun at Jesus’ expense. So then, “the whole company of soldiers [gathered] around” Jesus (Matt. 27:27). Jesus was condemned, officially, for claiming to be the king of Israel. The rowdy soldiers took the charge of kingship and mocked it. First, they took Jesus into the Praetorium, which probably included the barracks for the soldiers keeping order in Jerusalem. They engaged in cruel horseplay, dressing Jesus as a king. They took off his old clothes “and put a scarlet robe on him” to mock the proper royal color, purple (27:28). Next, they put a crown or garland of thorns on his head to mock a crown. That surely drew blood.

Next, “they put a staff in his right hand”—to look like a scepter—“and knelt in front of him and mocked him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ ” they said. Later, tired of giving Jesus faux royal treatment, they became more brutal: “They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again” (27:29–30). Soon the time for crucifixion approached, so “they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him” (27:31). The goal was to mock and to degrade Jesus, and in a way the soldiers succeeded. But they

surely degraded themselves even more. It reminds us that whenever we attack someone, we hurt ourselves, not just the target of our wrath.

THE SOLDIERS _____ THE KING

A condemned criminal ordinarily carried the horizontal beam for his own cross to the site of the execution. But by this time Jesus had suffered two ferocious beatings, as well as other blows, so that he was too weak to carry the beam far down the road. So the soldiers pressed into service a passerby, one Simon “from Cyrene ... and they forced him to carry the cross.” With Simon’s help, “they came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull)” (27:32–33).

Having arrived, “they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it” (27:34). Gall is a bitter poison. Some say it was meant as a narcotic, to relieve pain. They cite old traditions and Proverbs 31:6: “Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress” (ESV). But gall is no analgesic. More likely, the gall was one more bit of mockery and torment from the soldiers: they pretended to offer wine to comfort him, but it was too bitter to drink.

The Gospels do not accent the crucifixion itself. In the Greek text of Matthew, the crucifixion itself gets just three words, “and crucifying him.” The emphasis lies on the witnesses and their responses to the event. The soldiers are the first witnesses. Leading up to the crucifixion, they joke around and act cruelly—they mock, spit, and strike. But once the process begins, they are businesslike. When Jesus cannot carry his cross, they get a bystander to do the job. When they arrive, the four soldiers in charge perform their duty, then settle in to await death, watching Jesus, lest anyone try to rescue him (27:36, 54). Their sole pastime is gambling. Clothing was expensive, so they cast stones, like dice, for his remaining clothes, an inner and an outer garment (27:35).

Finally, “above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS” (27:37). This “title” advertised the cost of rebelling against Rome. In one of many ironies, the soldiers tell the truth, despite themselves. They mean to humiliate both Jesus and the Jews, but Jesus *is* king; he reigns from the cross! A king must defend his people and deliver them from harm. On the cross, Jesus delivers us from the greatest harm, the power and the guilt of sin, and our greatest enemies, Satan and death. But the soldiers no more perceive this than cows in the field perceive the beauty of sunrise and sunset. The significance of the hour is entirely lost on them as they sit by Jesus and gamble for his clothes. The crucifixion is just another day’s work. To this day, many people respond to the crucifixion as the soldiers did. It may be a fact, but they simply do not care. Or just as the soldiers saw the chance to gain valuable clothing, some see a chance for gain—perhaps something can be marketed to these Christians.

THE _____ AND _____ MOCK JESUS, KING OF THE JEWS

The soldiers may be indifferent, but most Jewish witnesses mock Jesus as they watch or pass by. There is a certain logic to their position. If Jesus were the Messiah, he would hardly be on a cross between two criminals (27:38). No Messiah, no true king, could die this way! As they see it, Jesus' crucifixion proves he is an imposter. Therefore, "those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God' " (27:39–40). It is tragic to see the crowds do this. A year earlier, the crowds seemed to be on the brink of faith in Jesus. They followed him and praised him. They wondered who he was (Matt. 21:10) and called him David's Son (21:15). But they never called him Lord. Of course, many of them did trust in Jesus, and this crowd, from Jerusalem, may have known Jesus far less than did the crowds in Galilee. But the majority hesitated and because they did, they were susceptible to the malign influence of the priests, who persuaded them to reject Jesus.

Their sad fate reminds us, as the Bible says, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). If the Lord is speaking today, it is perilous to put off a reply. If we wait and wait, thinking well of Jesus, but refusing to commit to him, we may slowly turn against him and his grace. The taunts of the crowd make Jesus face, one last time, the temptation to escape the cross. As he drinks the cup of God's wrath, the temptation continues. If Jesus is mighty, surely he can use his powers to save and prove himself. The leaders of Israel, who are watching more closely, press the point. "In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him' " (27:41–42). The mood was so vicious that "the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him" (27:44).

Once again, we hear ironic truths. In the past, Jesus did indeed save others. It is also true, in a way, that he cannot save himself. He could have come down from the cross, because he is the Son of God. He *could* have come down to demonstrate his power, just long enough to knock some sense into those scoffers. If I were in Jesus' place, I would have found the temptation irresistible. Or Jesus could have come down and stayed down. But if he did, he would not save our fallen race. So if he chose to fulfill his mission and save others, he could not save himself—not that day. They said, "He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God' " (27:43). For our sake, he let them mock, he let them think they knew it all....

Jesus resisted a temptation far greater than ours. This mockery he heard was a fist in God's face. His honor was at stake and Jesus had a perfect answer. Yet with perfect self-mastery, Jesus remained silent. He refused to trade insult for insult: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus' silence announced his reply: "I will not come down from the cross!" He chose to save others, so he did not save himself. Jesus loved his people too much to defend himself. So he did nothing to vindicate himself. When he finally spoke, he called out to God...

JESUS CRIES OUT FROM THE CROSS

After several hours on the cross, when the end was near, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:46). It is a startling cry because it was atypical. Until now, Jesus addressed the Father as “Father” or “My Father.” But now he says, “My God, my God.” Until now, Jesus also enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Father. But now he declares himself forsaken. What has changed? Why does Jesus say this?

First let us admit that it is a sincere cry. Some people try to explain it away. They say pain overwhelmed Jesus so that he was temporarily confused or he was simply quoting Scripture (he did quote Psalm 22). Yet the question “My God, ... why have you forsaken me?” rests on a true perception. Jesus was rightly conscious that he was forsaken by the Father and at that moment he did not fully apprehend why. He groped in darkness, for a moment. The God-man did not clearly see all of God’s purposes and asked, “Why?”

Jesus endured the uncertainty, he felt the separation from God that has tested so many of the faithful. But he did not simply feel it. Jesus *felt* forsaken because he *was* forsaken. Jesus was forsaken due to the great exchange. He bore our sin and gave us his righteousness. When he bore our sin, he suffered its punishment. The essence of that punishment, which is also the essence of hell, is separation from God. Jesus *felt* separated from God because he *was* separated. He who knew no sin became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ bore the curse for us (Gal. 3:13)...The anguish of separation from God is all the more acute for Jesus, since he had enjoyed perfect fellowship with the Father until that hour (Matt. 11:27)...The Father separated himself from the Son. Let us accept that Jesus was forsaken by God the Father, so that we, by faith, would never be forsaken. To press deeper and to speculate may lead to error.

It is an obedient cry. Jesus was not simply emoting, he was fulfilling his goal. He bore sin and its consequences, including separation from God. Richard Sibbes, the English Puritan, said Jesus was never more obedient, never pleased the Father more, than when he uttered these words on the cross. *Jesus* rightly said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” so that *we* would never rightly say, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken *me*?” We may *feel* forsaken at times, but we are not, if we trust in Jesus. He will never leave us, never forsake us...

THE DEATH OF JESUS, SEEN THROUGH MANY EYES

Matthew says, “when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit” (27:50). Consider the scene in Jerusalem just after Jesus’ death. The mockers and blasphemers stare at his corpse with grim satisfaction. The chief priests and elders have slain their foe. Nearby, as insensitive as flies in an art gallery, the soldiers blithely gather the tools of their trade. Jesus’ foes wanted to get rid of him and the soldiers wanted to ignore him. But Jesus is “the transcendental interferer. We resent his interruptions into our privacy, his demand for our homage, his expectation of our obedience.” He will not leave us alone or let us mind our own business. He disturbs the peace and insists that we attend to him.

So Christians proclaim the cross: absurd to a Greek, sinister to a Roman, a curse to a Jew. Yet it is ever the church's core proclamation. It is the way to peace with God. It is also the Christian way of life. It inspires us to action...The life of Christ teaches us not to live for ourselves: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:3–5). Let him be our example, and, more than that, our Lord, whom we love, the one who endured the cross and its shame so that it would not fall to us to bear it.

THE DEATH OF JESUS MISUNDERSTOOD BY WITNESSES

When Matthew 27:45 picks up the narrative of Jesus' life, he has been betrayed by Judas, falsely condemned by Jewish and Roman authorities, beaten, flogged, mocked, and crucified. After Jesus had been on the cross for some time, "from the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land" (27:45). As we keep time, it was dark from noon to 3:00 p.m. The darkness had to be supernatural in origin, not from a storm (no one mentions one) or an eclipse. The darkness of an eclipse is measured in minutes, not hours. Besides, it was Passover. Passover occurs near a full moon and there cannot be an eclipse at full moon.

Unnatural darkness was considered a portent or omen in both Jewish and Greco-Roman thought. Jewish theology held that "the merit of the righteous sustained the world." So when an especially good man died, darkness would follow. Darkness was also a sign of judgment. It was the ninth plague on Egypt, setting up the final, lethal plague (Ex. 10:21–23). Darkness is also prophesied as a feature of the day of God's judgment (Isa. 13:10–11; Amos 8:9–10; Matt. 24:29). If darkness signified judgment, it was first of all God's judgment on sin, which Jesus bore during those very hours. If Jesus was enduring God's judgment on sin, it explains why he cried out from the cross, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (27:46). As we have already seen, Jesus was not simply emoting or quoting Scripture when he said this; his cry of anguish was true. He was in the "outer darkness," separated from the Father, so that we might not be (8:12; 22:13; 25:30 KJV).

In his pain, Jesus reached up to heaven. Yet he felt his Father's distance, so he said "My God" not "My Father." The cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" comes from Psalm 22:1 and it perfectly fits Jesus' situation. At the moment when Jesus bore our sin, the Father was distant because he was too pure to look upon sin. For those moments, Jesus was forsaken. Yet the Father did not forsake him absolutely. He still loved his Son. He never forgot his plan to reconcile our lost race to himself. As soon as Jesus finished bearing our sin, fellowship would be restored, perfectly and forever.

When Jesus quoted Psalm 22 to express his grief, he quoted a part of the Bible that he knew well. David's psalm foretold the crucifixion in astonishing detail a thousand years in advance. David said, "I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him ... since he delights in him' " (Ps. 22:6–8). The psalm describes suffering that

perfectly fits the realities of crucifixion, even though crucifixion was unknown in David's day. It describes dislocated limbs, a failing heart, terrible thirst, pierced hands and feet, even gambling over the garments of the condemned (22:14–18).

Just as important as the prophecy of Jesus' death, the end of the psalm is confident: "But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me" (22:19). Knowing the Father's sympathy (22:24) and impending deliverance, the psalmist begins to praise him (22:22). Moments later, he calls all Israel to a crescendo of praise (22:23). "The poor" and humble will "be satisfied," "the rich ... will feast and worship" (22:26–29). Indeed, "all the ends of the earth will ... turn to the LORD ... and bow down before him" now and forever. "They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn" (22:27, 31).

All this Jesus fulfilled. Because of his sacrifice, the nations have turned to the Lord. We proclaim his righteousness to people who were then unborn. Because he fulfilled his calling, the Gospels show that Jesus died in peace and confidence, not anguish. Matthew says, "When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit" (27:50). This is, first, a way to say that Jesus died; when someone dies, the spirit leaves. Physically, blood loss and dehydration probably took him. Yet Matthew says Jesus gave up or "released" (*aphiēmi*) his spirit. Even at death, we see, Jesus retained self-control. He chose to die, and at that moment. It was 3 p.m., the hour when the priests made their sacrifices in the temple. At that hour, Jesus gave up his life. No one took it from him; he laid it down for us (cf. John 10:17–18).

Luke and John spell this out. Luke tells us what Jesus said in his final cry: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Then, "when he had said this, he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46). He died not in anguish, but in peace—not calling "My God, why?" but confidently saying he expected his Father to catch him. Intimacy restored, he said, "Father, into your hands ..."

John 19 makes the same point another way. There, just before Jesus dies, he says, "It is finished" (John 19:30). "It is finished" is just one word, *tetelestai*, in Greek, and it has two possible meanings. It can be a commercial term. If so, it means "paid" or "it is fully paid" (hence finished). It can be used for a debt or tax bill that is "paid in full." In other words, Jesus paid the debt of sin in full. "It is finished" can also mean—no surprise—"It is finished." That is, some task or project is complete. That fits too, of course. By dying on the cross Jesus fulfilled the task, finished the work, the Father gave him to do. As he said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work" (4:34; cf. 5:36; 17:4; 19:28)...The gospel story describes three hours of shame, followed by minutes of glory that redefine all human life. After Jesus said, "Why have you forsaken me?" he said, "It is finished." That shift changes the course of human history. If we trust Jesus, then whatever lies in our past or waits in our future, we are no longer alienated from God but are his friends, his children. "It is finished" means God's displeasure with us is finished. This is what we must understand and what the priests, elders, and crowds in their smugness did not...

THE DEATH OF JESUS EXPLAINED IN THREE SIGNS

The crowd was missing the point of Jesus' death, but God gave the witnesses and gives us three signs, so we can understand. First, he tore the temple veil. Second, he sent an earthquake. Third, certain believers who had died rose to life again. We consider the temple veil first. "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (27:50–51). There were two temple curtains. One separated the holy of holies, the most sacred space, which the high priest entered only once a year with a sacrifice, from the rest of the temple—the other holy places and the temple courtyards. A second curtain separated the courts of Jews from the courts of Gentiles. The phrase "from top to bottom" means that no man, starting at the bottom, tore the curtain; God himself tore the curtain. Theologically speaking, the death of Jesus destroyed both curtains. It tore the "curtain" that separates Jew from Gentile. It offers an end to all racial divisions, the separation of Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Americans. Jesus offers to unite all humanity. But at a literal level, Hebrews (6:19; 9:3; 10:20) leads us to conclude that the curtain that was torn was the one separating the holy of holies from the rest of the temple.

The tearing of that curtain means that through the finished work of Christ, the separation of God and mankind has ended. The curtain kept sinful men and women away from the holy God. Formerly, they had no right to enter his presence. They would be punished for pushing, while unfit, into his presence. But the work of Christ spells the end of our separation from God. The destruction of the temple curtain means the temple system, which was structured to keep people away from God's presence—for the safety of sinners who had no right to enter God's presence—had become obsolete. Because of Jesus' work, anyone could walk straight into the holy of holies. Today, those who believe in Jesus can approach him directly and confidently...

Romans says, "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Rom. 5:1–2). Hebrews says, "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" since our hearts have been cleansed "from a guilty conscience" (Heb. 10:19–22). Jesus has done everything necessary to reconcile us to God. We can do nothing more; we can only receive and then enter God's presence with confidence...Since Jesus has torn down the curtain that separates us from God, we now have access to God, without fear. Therefore, we ought to treasure the privilege of access to the Lord, and not take it for granted. We must take time to use our privilege and regularly enter God's presence in worship and in prayer. We come without rituals, merits, or mediator, because, thank God, none but Christ is necessary. But let the absence of rituals or processes never delude us into thinking "I can come to him whenever I please" or "I can come to him without any preparation." ...

With the last two signs, the earthquake and the return to life of certain saints, there is less to say because the Bible itself says little about them; they are rather mysterious. The earthquake reminds us that the earth shook in Sinai when the Lord gave the people his law. It was so awesome that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear" (Heb. 12:21). If the law came with an

earthquake, then so does grace. “The earth shook and the rocks split” (Matt. 27:51) because Jesus’ death is an earth-shaking event.

When the saints arose, it suggested that the death of Jesus brings the first taste of eternal life. When he died, “the tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city” (27:52–53). It is possible to interpret this sentence to mean that the dead rose the instant Jesus died, then waited in the tombs until Easter morning. It is hard to see why the Lord would subject them to many hours in the dark. More likely, Matthew is working thematically and theologically here, as he often does. Thematically, the death of Jesus leads to the resurrection of the saints. Chronologically, the only direct claim is that they “came out of the tombs ... after Jesus’ resurrection.” So the resurrection of the saints follows Jesus’ resurrection both in causation and in sequence. It is far more likely that they rose on Easter and that Matthew reports it here for thematic reasons. Matthew describes their return to life here to show that Jesus’ death defeats the powers of sin and death. His death triggers the resurrection of believers. Jesus’ death wins our resurrection. Therefore we expect Jesus to rise again, for death and resurrection go together (cf. Ezek. 37:13–14: “When I open your graves ... you will live”)...

The story invites questions: Who were these people? Great saints of the past or recent times? Did they rise to the age they had at death or were they restored to perfect youth and vigor? Did they die again, soon perhaps, or did they ascend into heaven? What, if anything, did they say to the people they met? Matthew answers no such questions. He makes one point: Jesus’ death crushes the power of death. For many generations, respectful people have honored the graves of dead saints by *visiting* them. But Jesus honors the saints by *raising* them.

THE CALL OF JESUS UNDERSTOOD BY THE WITNESSES

In our previous studies in Matthew 27, we realized that the death of Jesus meant different things to the various observers. Consider the range of witnesses: the mockers, the soldiers, the women, and Joseph of Arimathea. The *mockers* and blasphemers felt grim satisfaction. Their foe, the imposter, was dead. Most of the *soldiers* were oblivious, like cows at sunset or squirrels at the botanical garden. They perceived nothing but another day’s work.

But now they have seen great portents—darkness at noon and an earthquake. Beyond them, the Lord worked two more miracles—the resurrection of certain saints and the tearing of the temple curtain, making four wonders in all. Yet another wonder remains. After Jesus died, after all the signs, those who were guarding Jesus “were terrified, and exclaimed, ‘Surely he was the Son of God’ ” (27:54). Did Jesus’ kindness and self-control on the cross arrest their attention? Did the darkness and the earthquake make an impression? Given the superstitions of the day, the awestruck soldiers might simply have meant, “Wow, this must have been some great man” (cf. Luke 23:47 ESV: “Certainly this man was innocent”). But Mark says the centurion was the main speaker and that he grasped the identity of Jesus at last, when he died.

The faithful women “had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons” (27:55–56). Since they were women, no one would have perceived them as a political threat, so they could stay near Jesus. But if their lives were not in danger, their spirits surely were. It must have been terrible to watch Jesus suffer (Luke 23:48). Matthew names them, but we know little of their lives. We do know that they were faithful, however. They mourned and watched from a distance. People surely whispered and gossiped over their devotion to Jesus, but the women did not let questions about appearances deter their devotion. Nor should we.

Joseph of Arimathea also showed courage when he took charge of Jesus’ body. Joseph “had himself become a disciple of Jesus” (27:57), but had not revealed his faith in public, because he was a leader in the supreme Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, and feared their reaction (John 19:38; Mark 15:43). But Joseph steps forward, at great personal risk. He may lose his standing, his name, in Israel. He risks the wrath of Pilate too, because his act identifies him as the friend of Jesus, a condemned rebel.

A proper burial was immensely important in Israel and throughout the Greco-Roman world. It was the last honor the living paid to the dead and the lack of it was the final disgrace. The crucified did not get a proper burial; their bodies might be left to spoil, to be devoured by carrion, or tossed in a common grave. Joseph, and another Jewish leader, Nicodemus, could not bear that thought.

Remember that Pilate told Jesus, “I have power to release you,” but did not because he was afraid that by using his power, he might lose his power. His power was his god, but because he feared losing it, it paralyzed him. Joseph is just the opposite. He has power, but because it is not his god, he is free to risk it, to put it to use. So Joseph took the risk and approached Pilate, “asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him” (Matt. 27:58). We wonder if Pilate knew that Joseph and Nicodemus were leaders and hoped to keep peace with them. In any case, Joseph did everything well. He wrapped the body “in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock.... Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb” (Matt. 27:59–61). When Matthew tells us that Joseph used a “big stone” and that the women saw it, we understand that these details set up the resurrection. Jesus was really dead, not asleep, and the women saw where his body was. When they found an empty tomb on Easter morning, they were in the right place.

Conclusion

The burial of Jesus is sad, but Matthew gives us hope. Joseph places him “in the realm of the dead, in hewn rock,” but Jesus has already breached both death and stone by his crucifixion, when the earth shook and some of the dead came to life. This grave will not hold him. In the faces at Golgotha, we can see how people respond to Jesus even today. A few mockers hate God. Many are indifferent, like the passersby and some soldiers. Others stand in awe of Jesus but lack genuine faith.

Joseph and the women show that true faith, motivated by love of God, perseveres, even when it is difficult. Even in the darkest hours, they remain loyal to Jesus, whom they love. So the women mourn Jesus' death and Joseph takes a great risk by taking charge of Jesus' body. Their courage echoes Jesus' courage, even as their love echoes his love...We must imagine that the women at the cross and Joseph were even more frightened and confused. But they remained faithful. Indeed, they risked everything for the Lord. Their story inspires us to do the same. To show loyalty at that hour was dangerous for the women and for Joseph, but they did not let that stop them. We take great risks for those whom we love.

Our passage is another story of Jesus' love for us. His death, in our place, spells the end of death and wins our resurrection from the dead. If we believe in him, it ends our separation from God. So let our love answer his love. Let us stay with him, as the women did, and take risks to defend his honor, as Joseph did. Let us ask how our love can answer his, all through life.

Lesson 99 (12-28-25)

The Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 27:62-28:15)

⁶²The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ ⁶⁴Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” ⁶⁶So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

28 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” ⁸So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

¹¹While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

- Matthew 27:62-28:15 ESV

Summary

The religious leaders, fearing that Jesus’ followers might claim He rose from the dead, ask Pilate to secure the tomb with guards. On Sunday, women come to the tomb, witness an earthquake, and see an angel roll away the stone, announcing that Jesus has risen as He promised. The angel sends them to tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. On their way, the women encounter the risen Jesus Himself, who reassures and commissions them. Meanwhile, the

guards report to the priests, who bribe them to spread a false story that the disciples stole Jesus' body to hide the truth of the resurrection.¹

Observation Questions

1. Who go to Pilate the day after the Preparation (27:62)?
2. What do the chief priests and Pharisees recall about Jesus' words (27:63)?
3. What request do they make to Pilate (27:64)?
4. How does Pilate respond (27:65)?
5. What do they do to secure the tomb (27:66)?
6. Who comes to the tomb early on the first day of the week (28:1)?
7. What happens suddenly (28:2)?
8. How is the angel described (28:3)?
9. What is the reaction of the guards (28:4)?
10. What does the angel say to the women (28:5–6)?
11. What invitation does the angel give them (28:6)?
12. What command does the angel give the women (28:7)?
13. How do the women respond (28:8)?
14. Who meets them on the way (28:9)?
15. How do the women respond to seeing Jesus (28:9)?
16. What does Jesus say to them (28:10)?
17. While this is happening, what do some of the guards do (28:11)?
18. How do the chief priests and elders respond to the guards' report (28:12)?
19. What instructions are the soldiers given (28:13)?
20. What do the soldiers do with the money (28:15)?

Interpretation Questions

1. Why are the chief priests and Pharisees still concerned even after Jesus' death?
2. What does their request to Pilate reveal about their fear of Jesus' resurrection?
3. Why is the sealing of the tomb significant?
4. What is the significance of the earthquake at the resurrection?
5. How does the angel's appearance emphasize the supernatural event?
6. Why do the guards react with fear, while the angel tells the women not to fear?
7. What does the angel's invitation to "see the place where He lay" mean for the truth of the resurrection?
8. Why is it important that women are the first witnesses of the resurrection?
9. What does Jesus' appearance to the women confirm about His resurrection?
10. How does the chief priests' bribery of the guards demonstrate the hardness of their hearts?

¹ David Gundersen, "Psalms," in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1343.

11. What does the spread of the false story show about opposition to the truth of the resurrection?
12. How does this passage contrast human attempts to suppress truth with God's power to reveal it?

Application Questions

1. How does the fear of the religious leaders challenge me to examine areas where I resist God's truth?
2. What does the empty tomb mean for my faith and hope in Christ?
3. How can I live with greater confidence knowing the resurrection is historically attested?
4. How do I respond when tempted to fear, like the guards, instead of trusting God's word?
5. What encouragement do I find in the angel's words, "He is not here, for He has risen"?
6. How can I be faithful in sharing the good news of the resurrection like the women were?
7. How should Jesus' greeting, "Do not be afraid," shape my response to challenges in life?
8. In what ways do I see people today trying to suppress or distort the truth of the resurrection?
9. How can I stand firm in proclaiming the truth even when it is opposed?
10. What practical step can I take this week to live more boldly in the power of the risen Christ?
11. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 355–367.]

We live in a day when religion is looked at as a matter of preference or opinion. Many people believe that all religions are fundamentally the same; the differences are only superficial. Simply go about your life and choose what works best for you, and along the way, the question of truth can be completely avoided. Living that way is a huge and costly mistake.

Belief is irresponsible and empty if it's not based in truth. People say, "What is true for you may not be true for me," but no one *really* believes that. After all, what would you think if you went to withdraw money at the bank, and the teller said, "I don't *feel* like you have money in your account"? How the teller *felt* wouldn't matter to you if you needed money. Whatever is true for you had better be true for the teller as well: either you have money in your account or you don't. The last thing we want banks to do is to give out money based on how they feel!

In most areas of everyday life we know instinctively to operate on the basis of truth instead of feelings and preferences. Yet, when it comes to the most important questions in life, questions that deal with grand, eternal realities, why would we want to disregard the question of truth?

Do we really think God governs the world based on what we prefer? Matthew 28:1–15 reports to us *the* event in all of history, and our response to it should be based on truth, not feelings. Our eternity hangs on whether the resurrection of Jesus Christ actually happened.

The Ultimate _____

Below we'll consider some of the theories offered to explain the events narrated in Matthew 28:1–15. Matthew gives us a rather brief and straightforward account of the resurrection, though the events recorded in these verses are nothing short of supernatural and spectacular. Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (v. 1), likely the same Mary mentioned in 27:61, were the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 426). They came to the tomb after the Sabbath to anoint Jesus' body (Mark 16:1), when they unsuspectingly stumbled upon the truth that would change the course of history: the empty tomb. An angel whose appearance was “like lightning” had descended from heaven, causing a great earthquake (Matt 28:2–3). He rolled back the stone and sat on it, allowing the women to look inside. At the sight of the angel of the Lord, those guarding the tomb were “so shaken from fear of him that they became like dead men” (v. 4). The angel told the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised. Leaving with “fear and great joy” (v. 8), these unlikely witnesses to the greatest event in history ran toward Galilee.

On their way to Galilee, the women were met by the risen Christ. They took hold of Jesus and worshiped Him (v. 9), to which He responded, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see Me there” (v. 10). The women told the disciples (Luke 24:10; John 20:18), and Peter and John rushed to verify their story (John 20:3–10). Matthew also tells us that the guards reported these events to the chief priests of the Jews (v. 11). After assembling with the elders, the chief priests agreed to bribe the guards to give a different account of these events, namely, that Jesus' disciples had come and stolen the body (v. 13). This lie, Matthew tells us, continued to circulate among the Jews (v. 15).

At least two aspects of this account are worth noting before we look at alternative explanations to the resurrection. First, the women were unlikely witnesses to the resurrection because (in general) their testimonies weren't highly valued in that culture (Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 698–99). If Matthew and the other Gospel writers were trying to persuade people of a hoax, then choosing two women as the first eyewitnesses to the empty tomb was a strange choice. If you were going to make up a story about the most significant miracle the world has ever known, would you put forward questionable witnesses as evidence?

Second, notice in verses 11–15 that the guards didn't deny that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb. Their main concern was coming up with an alternative explanation. Not even the Jewish leaders could produce the body of Jesus, something that would have put an end to the disciples' supposed charade. But no one actually denied that the tomb holding the crucified Jesus was now vacant. It would have been foolish to deny the truth because it would be easy to disprove such a denial. A better explanation was and is needed for the fact of an empty tomb.

To this day, the ultimate question for the Christian faith and for our individual lives is this: **Did Jesus rise from the dead?** We're not talking about resuscitation or reincarnation, but resurrection. In other words, was Jesus dead for three days, and did He afterwards rise up and physically walk out of the tomb? That is a question of truth, not preference. Jesus either did or did not rise, and the ramifications are eternal.

If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, then we as Christians are wasting our time. Our faith is a lie, and we are simply fools playing a religious game. In 1 Corinthians 15:19 Paul says that we are to be "pitied more than anyone" if we have hoped in Jesus in this life only. But if Jesus did rise from the grave, then the situation is drastically different. Most people think that the burden of proof lies exclusively on Christians to give evidence of the resurrection, but that's not entirely true. Yes, there's a burden of proof on those who believe in Christ, but there's also a burden of proof on unbelievers. Consider below what must be explained.

There's no question, even among the most secular of scholars, that around 2,000 years ago an entirely new religious movement and community were formed—almost overnight. And immediately, hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus rose from the grave, even when it meant they could die for such a claim. A fast-growing movement of people, which now makes up one-third of the world's population by some estimates, survives as a result. So how do you explain that? If you don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, then there's a burden of proof to provide some other convincing explanation for how the church began. We need to consider several alternative explanations with the following question in mind: "Which is most *plausible*?"

Plausibility should be the criterion for "proving" the resurrection, because there's virtually nothing in history that can be established with 100-percent certainty. For instance, can we really know with 100-percent certainty that George Washington was the first president of the United States? Is it not possible that he was just a mythical figure that people wrote about and invented in order to encourage the citizens of a new country? Now we're *almost certain* this is not the case, but we can't say with 100-percent certainty that he was president. Someone once said, "We can't know with 100-percent certainty that all of us were not created five minutes ago, complete with built-in memories and food in our stomachs." You can see how much of a headache it is to establish perfect certainty for any past event! The question is "What is *most* plausible?" or "What can be established with the *most* certainty?" Several possible explanations have been given.

Possible _____

Possible explanations for Jesus' resurrection have been proposed throughout history, with some dating back to the first century. Below we'll consider five different explanations that have been put forward by various individuals and groups. First, some say that **Jesus didn't die on the cross**, a claim that comes in different forms. Muslims, for example, say that Jesus didn't go to the cross, but rather the individual who died on the cross only *looked* like Jesus. According to the Quran, this is what Mohammed taught. This is a point where the two dominant religions in the world—Christianity and Islam—diverge, and notice that this is a point of truth, not of

preference or ideology or opinion. Despite what Mohammed said six centuries after it happened, those much closer to the historical situation (Christian and non-Christian alike) reported that it was indeed Jesus who died on the cross.

Another version of this first explanation holds that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross. It was, in fact, Jesus of Nazareth who went to the cross, but instead of dying, He was only hurt (really, really badly). As the theory goes, Jesus fainted and became unconscious, at which time the soldiers thought He was dead. However, due to the time constraints with the Passover feast, they took Him down before He actually died and they quickly buried Him. Later, Jesus regained consciousness and escaped from the tomb. This explanation certainly explains away the supernatural element of overcoming death, but consider what it requires. It assumes that Jesus went through six trials, no sleep, a brutal scourging, thorns thrust into His head, nails thrust into His hands and feet, and after hours on a cross, He had a spear thrust into His side. Then, as if that weren't enough, He was wrapped in grave clothes and put in a tomb with a large stone rolled over the entrance. This tomb was guarded by armed Roman soldiers. In that situation and in that physical condition, are we really expected to believe that Jesus regained consciousness, stealthily nudged the stone out of the way, quietly hopped out of the tomb, tiptoed past the guards standing nearby, and coolly went about His way? This scenario seems highly unlikely, if not ridiculous. Needless to say, we can safely label this explanation as implausible.

A second explanation for the resurrection is the idea **Jesus' tomb was not empty**, often described as the "Wrong Tomb Theory." This theory states that the women went to a tomb that first Easter morning, but in their grief and shock over Jesus' death, they went to the wrong tomb and mistakenly thought Jesus had risen. Presumably, everyone else began going to the wrong tomb as well, leading them to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. And since that time, everybody's been going to the wrong tomb. If they had only checked next door!

The idea that Jesus' tomb was not empty fails on multiple levels. The last thing Roman or Jewish authorities wanted was for a group of people to claim that their leader had risen from the dead, which is why guards were posted at the tomb according to Matthew 27:62–66. Is it really plausible that they guarded the wrong tomb? In reality, no one would have believed in Jesus' resurrection if the tomb was not actually empty. Someone could have identified the correct tomb, and the entire Christian movement would have been shut down from the start. We stand on pretty firm historical ground that the tomb was empty, though that in and of itself doesn't "prove" the resurrection of Jesus.

The third explanation is that **the disciples stole the body of Jesus**. That's exactly the conspiracy theory that the Jewish authorities (with the help of the guards) propagated from the very beginning according to Matthew 28:11–15. This explanation is unlikely, though, for at least two reasons. First, it is unlikely that these timid, scared Galilean disciples outmaneuvered a guard of highly skilled Roman soldiers in order to do that which all the Jewish and Roman authorities were trying to make sure would not happen. Second, the very idea of a resurrection was preposterous to many, so why would the disciples concoct such a risky plan in order to proclaim

an event that no one had categories for? Many would-be Messiahs were executed in the first century, yet in no case do we find any of their followers claiming that their leader had risen from the dead. A resurrection like the one the disciples were proclaiming was not a part of the religious environment of Jesus' day. In much Greco-Roman thought, the goal in life was to be free, liberated from the body, so the last thing you would want was to come back into the body. For many Jews, the idea of individual resurrection back into a world of sickness, decay, and death was inconceivable. The kind of resurrection that Jesus experienced was not even an option. So why would the disciples steal Jesus' body and then tell people that His body had been resurrected?

When the facts of the empty tomb and the sightings of Jesus are taken together, the alternative theories for the resurrection become more implausible. If you only have an empty tomb but no sightings of Jesus, then you have something strange going on, but not a resurrection. It might be assumed that the body was stolen. On the other hand, if the disciples stole the body and then claimed that Jesus was alive, and yet nobody saw Him, then it would have been concluded that these men were fabricating a story. But if people actually saw Jesus after He had died on a cross, and if the tomb was demonstrably empty, then we have deeper questions that must be answered.

This leads to the next possible explanation for Jesus' resurrection. Some scholars have argued that **the disciples were delusional when they claimed to see Jesus**. The people of Jesus' day didn't have the scientific knowledge we have today, the theory goes, so they were more prone to believe in the supernatural. In their pain and grief over Jesus' death, the disciples still believed that Jesus was somehow guiding them and leading them. They even had visions in their minds of Jesus speaking to them. They may or may not have believed that Jesus was still physically alive, but they believed He was alive spiritually. This myth supposedly grew over the years, and it eventually morphed into the idea that Jesus rose from the grave physically. Some scholars have even argued that the disciples were hallucinating when they claimed to have seen these events. However, these and other theories concerning the mental state of the disciples don't account well for the shift in the disciples' worldview that occurred overnight. Think about it: there was no process, no development, no debate or discussion, yet in a relatively short time, thousands upon thousands of people believed that Jesus rose from the grave. It's one thing to claim that the disciples were delusional, but how do you explain their influence and the dramatic change in their behavior in the days after the resurrection?

In addition to the 12 disciples, hundreds of other people claimed to have seen the risen Christ. Unlike the reported miracles today, this was more than one individual who claimed to have seen a Christ-like image in the clouds. Jesus ate with people, drank with people, and talked with people. Hallucinations don't eat or drink! This was not just spiritual imagination, it was physical presence. Maybe a few people could have been deluded into thinking they had seen Jesus, but Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to "over 500 brothers at one time" (1 Cor 15:6). In other words, Paul says, "Go ask them what they saw. You can verify this!"...

Individuals in the first century were able to investigate the claims of the resurrection by speaking with the apostles and the hundreds of eyewitnesses who had physically seen Jesus. In fact, these eyewitnesses to the risen Christ were openly telling people about what they'd seen, and some were even losing their lives for it. Proclaiming the resurrection was not in their best interest. As Pascal said, "I believe the witnesses that get their throats cut" (Keller, *The Reason for God*, 210). It is, therefore, highly unlikely that the early Christians fabricated the idea of the resurrection. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has said, "The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the 'meetings' or 'sightings' of the risen Jesus.... Nobody was expecting this kind of thing ... nobody would have invented it.... To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own." (Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 707)

Given the implausibility of the explanations that we've seen so far, there's one explanation that remains: **Jesus died on the cross and actually rose from the grave.** If you claim that the physical resurrection of Christ did not necessarily cause this radical shift in history, then what did? The burden of proof is on you. There's evidence for this view outside of the Bible as well, evidence that is granted by virtually all historical scholars, even those skeptical of religion. For instance, few people would actually dispute the following facts:

- Jesus died by crucifixion.
- His followers believed that He rose from the grave and appeared to them.
- The lives of Christ's followers were radically changed as a result of seeing and following the risen Christ.

Concerning this last point, it is significant that even the most hardened advocates *against* Christianity (like Paul) became the strongest advocates *for* Christianity after seeing the resurrected Christ. Gary Habermas is probably the most renowned scholar on the resurrection of Jesus. He notes, "In particular, when the early and eyewitness experience of the disciples, James, and Paul are considered, along with their corresponding transformations and their central message, the historical Resurrection [of Jesus] becomes the best explanation for the facts, especially because the alternative theories have failed." (As cited in Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 196)

From the earliest days of the church, the Bible tells us that people have worked to cover up Jesus' resurrection. Yet, every proposed explanation has fallen short. If, on the other hand, the resurrection is true, if Jesus did indeed die on the cross and actually rise from the grave, then the implications of these truths are startling. We'll consider some of these implications below.

Startling _____

Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That doesn't minimize anything else Jesus did, especially the cross; however, we can only see the significance of the cross and the rest of Christ's perfect work through the lens of the resurrection. When Matthew records for us the events of chapter 28, he is, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, making claims

that change the world. We'll begin by looking at three implications concerning the authority of Christ based on the resurrection.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then we don't have to worry about a thing He said, because it was a lie. But **if Jesus rose from the dead**, then we must accept everything He said, for His authority is absolute. Jesus closes this chapter and the Gospel as a whole by claiming, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (v. 18). Jesus' absolute authority based on the resurrection means that **He has authority over life and death**. ...

If Jesus rose from the dead, then we must also admit that **He has authority over sin and Satan**. All men die because they sin, for death is the payment for sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23). However, Jesus is one man in all of history who died without sinning; so why did He die? Jesus died for our sins, in our place (1 Pet 2:24). After His death, Jesus rose from the grave, not only in victory over death, but in victory over sin...

Sometimes it's easy to think of Jesus' authority in an abstract sense without making a personal application. However, the fact that Jesus has authority over life and death, as well as over sin and Satan, leads to one unavoidable conclusion: **He has authority over you and me**. That is, He is our rightful Lord and Master...

So what does it mean for Jesus to have absolute authority over you and me? First, it means **He reigns over us supremely**. Jesus is the sovereign Ruler over our lives. This is the case whether we believe it or not. Just as the grass is green, regardless of whether or not you believe it, so also Jesus is Lord over you regardless of your approval. Many times Christians say, "I've decided to make Jesus the Lord of my life." I hate to break it to you, but you didn't have a choice in the matter. Jesus *is* Lord over your life. Scripture says that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10–11). The question is not whether or not Jesus is Lord; the question is, "Will you submit to Him as Lord now or when it is too late?"

Second, not only does Jesus' authority mean that He reigns over us supremely, but also that **He loves us deeply**. Remember that the purpose of the resurrection is grounded in Christ's love for us. God sent His Son to pay the price for our sin, and the resurrection lets us know that our hope of salvation is not some made-up story, some fanciful myth. The resurrection of Jesus validates everything He said, taught, and told us He came to do. In Galatians 2:20 Paul speaks of the Son of God who "loved me and gave Himself for me." Believers should rejoice in Jesus' love demonstrated in both His cross *and* His resurrection.

Third, Christ's authority over us means that **He will judge us eternally**. Jesus speaks of His role as judge in John 5:21–23: *And just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son also gives life to anyone He wants to. The Father, in fact, judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all people will honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.*

For all who believe in Christ, the truth of Christ's judgment is good news. It's good news because you can be saved from eternal judgment if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is

Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead (Rom 10:9). Christ's role as judge is also good news because the resurrection reminds us that this world is not all there is. If our only expectations are for this life, then we have no hope in the face of tragedy in this world. Furthermore, Christ's judgment means our efforts for justice in this world become meaningful... All of us have built-in longings and desires for meaning and purpose, and this tells us that this world is not the entire picture. Neither disease nor natural disasters have the last word in this world; because of the resurrection, Jesus does. And He will have the last word in the lives of each of us for all of eternity.

Conclusion

Based on everything we've seen about Jesus' authority, the ultimate question in the universe—Did Jesus rise from the dead?—becomes a very personal question. We can think of this personal application in two parts based on the truth we saw above in Romans 10:9. First, **do you believe in the historical resurrection of Jesus?** Romans 10:9 says that you must "believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead" in order to be saved. This is a point where the message of Christianity is radically different from every other religion. Scripture doesn't give us a list of things to do, boxes to check off, or rituals to follow. There is only truth to be believed. If you don't believe the truth of the gospel, then the burden of proof is on you to disprove the resurrection.

The second part of this personal application also has to do with Romans 10:9, as there is more involved in salvation than believing in the resurrection. To be clear, there's no work involved on our part, but there is a confession to be made. In the area where I pastor, the overwhelming majority of people would say they believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but there are undoubtedly many of them who are *not* saved from their sins. We know that mere intellectual assent doesn't save, for even the Devil himself believes in the resurrection of Jesus, and he is not saved from his sin...

In our day we urge people to assent intellectually to Jesus, pray a certain prayer, get involved in a particular church, live a relatively good life, etc., all with the promise (either explicitly or implicitly) that they will be saved. That's a lie. Scores of professing Christians have believed half of Romans 10:9, and they think they are saved from their sins, when in fact they are not. They give lip-service to Jesus, but their lives are not surrendered to His absolute authority. That's why we must ask the question, **"Do you surrender to the universal authority of Jesus?"** This is what it means to "confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' " (Rom 10:9). To confess with your mouth is not about saying some magic words; rather, it's about a heart condition that says, "Yes, I believe Jesus died on the cross for *my* sin and rose from the grave as *my* Savior, and my *life* belongs to Him as *Lord*." Eternity depends on our answer to that question.

Lesson 100 (1-4-26)

Commissioned by the King (Matthew 28:16-20)

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- Matthew 28:16-20 ESV

Summary

After hearing the women’s news, the eleven disciples (now minus Judas) arrive in Galilee to meet with Jesus as instructed. Upon seeing Jesus, they have a mixed reaction of worship and doubt. The risen Jesus comes close to them and addresses their fears with his declaration of absolute authority throughout all heaven and earth. His authority assures the disciples’ personal security but also forms the foundation for the commission to follow. As the one given all authority, Jesus gives his disciples the “Great Commission,” the mandate to make disciples of all nations. Disciples of Jesus are to call other individuals into a commitment to Jesus as their sole Master and Lord. Jesus’ ministry in Israel was the beginning of what would be a universal invitation into the kingdom for all the peoples of the earth, including the Jews. Individuals who become disciples are to be baptized in the name of the three persons of the Trinitarian Godhead. Baptism is a new disciple’s public identification with God’s covenant family of faith. Teaching and obeying is the process by which disciples of Jesus are continually transformed, and the process of discipleship applies to everyone who responds to the gospel message. Everything that Jesus communicated in his words and conduct is to be taught and obeyed. Jesus concludes the commission—and Matthew concludes his Gospel—by promising the abiding presence of Jesus, who is with us (cf. 1:23).¹

Observation Questions

1. Where do the eleven disciples go after Jesus’ resurrection (v. 16)?
2. Who had directed them to go there (v. 16)?
3. How do the disciples respond when they see Jesus (v. 17)?
4. What mixed reaction is noted among the disciples (v. 17)?
5. What does Jesus say has been given to Him (v. 18)?
6. What command does Jesus give His disciples in verse 19?
7. Into whose name are they to baptize new disciples (v. 19)?

¹ David Gundersen, “Psalms,” in *The NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible*, ed. R. Albert Mohler Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 1344.

8. What are they to teach the disciples to do (v. 20)?
9. What promise does Jesus give at the end of this passage (v. 20)?

Interpretation Questions

1. Why is it significant that Jesus meets His disciples in Galilee?
2. What does the disciples' mixture of worship and doubt reveal about them?
3. What does Jesus' claim of "all authority in heaven and on earth" mean?
4. How does this authority relate to the mission He gives His disciples?
5. What does it mean to "make disciples" rather than just converts?
6. Why is baptism commanded in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
7. What does teaching others to obey Jesus' commands involve?
8. How does Jesus' promise of His presence shape the disciples' mission?
9. What does this passage reveal about the ongoing mission of the church?

Application Questions

1. How do I respond to Jesus with worship even when I struggle with doubt?
2. What areas of my life show that I recognize Jesus' full authority?
3. How am I actively participating in making disciples?
4. Who in my life can I begin to disciple more intentionally?
5. How does baptism remind me of my identity in the triune God?
6. In what ways can I grow in teaching others to obey Christ's commands?
7. How can I take comfort in Jesus' promise to always be with His followers?
8. What practical step can I take this week to live on mission for Christ?
9. How can I support the global mission of the church through prayer, giving, or going?
10. Was there anything from last week's sermon that was especially challenging? Convicting? Encouraging?

Lesson Outline [This lesson was adapted from *Daniel M. Doriani, Matthew 1 & 2, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 527–535.*]

The resurrection sheds light on many of life's issues. Is there meaning in the suffering and hardship of this life? Is there hope in hours of darkness? The resurrection says "Yes" to both questions. The resurrection also informs end-of-life issues. We now have the technology to extend life so long that we preserve a shell of the person we love, not the real person. We keep the heart beating while the mind fades and the pain grows. Loving relatives agonize. The resurrection reminds us that there is more than this life. Since we all die, there is a time to let our loved ones go. We are free to do so, in part because we know that there is life, resurrection life, to come for those who know the risen Christ.

The resurrection is also a creation-affirming event. It teaches us that God cares for his physical creation—for human bodies and the human environment—and so should we. We should love this world and serve its people, yet we must not love it too much, for the resurrection is the first taste of the life to come.

IT LEADS TO A GREAT COMMISSION

But the most important implication of the resurrection remains. The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus meeting his disciples and giving them a charge, which Christians call the Great Commission. The phrase is apt, for Jesus does commission his disciples to do something great: He charges and empowers them to disciple the nations.

On the first Easter morning, Jesus ordered his disciples to meet him on a particular mountain in Galilee (28:7). Minus Judas, the disciples obeyed: “the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.” Jesus arrived first and awaited them. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted” (28:16–17). The Greek term used here is not the ordinary term for doubt. It does not mean they were unsure whether they believed or not; rather, they believed but hesitated. The eleven disciples—probably with others who came with them—have some faith in Jesus. But not all are ready to worship him. They believe but have not digested all the implications of Jesus’ death and resurrection, which surprised them. Perhaps some of them are not yet sure who Jesus is, that he deserves worship and total obedience.

Their hesitation reminds us that the journey toward mature faith is difficult. Even believers hesitate at times. No one understands everything right away, not even the original disciples. We all must grow into maturity. Still, Jesus did commission them and he does commission us.

THE _____ OF THE COMMISSION

The commission has a sandwich structure. At the top and at the bottom, Jesus gives reasons for accepting the commission. To start the commission, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (28:18). Jesus, as the Son of God, always had authority, but he exercised only a fraction of it during his ministry. He taught with authority and healed people with a word, but now the Father has bestowed full authority on him. He exercises it in a wider sphere: in heaven and on earth, over men and angels, over his disciples and over all mankind. His reign over the nations now begins (Dan. 7:27). Jesus came to serve, but he will now be served.

At the end of the commission he says, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). At the beginning of Matthew, we learn that Jesus is God *with us to redeem his people* (1:23). At the midpoint, we learn that he is God *with us to purify his people* (18:20). At the end, we learn that he is God *with us to disciple the nations* (28:20). We have his strength, his Spirit, his presence, and his comfort for our mission; we are not alone.

Jesus supplies two sweeping motives to fulfill a charge that is as large as the world itself. We have all the authorization we need for the task. We never need to hesitate, never need to apologize. Whenever we speak of Christ, we are within our rights. We also have all the power we need, for we have the very presence of God.

THE _____ OF THE COMMISSION

The commission itself reads: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (28:19–20). The central command, the only imperative (and only finite verb), is “Make disciples.”

The essential commission is not “Tell people about Jesus.” It is not “Preach the gospel.” It is not “Grow your church.” It is not “Make converts.” Jesus’ commission assumes all these, but goes deeper, commanding that we make disciples. To make disciples is to lead new believers to maturity, so they understand and follow Jesus and eventually become leaders too. By making disciples, the church stays strong over the generations.

Jesus commands his followers to disciple “all nations.” Jesus came for Israel first, but also for the world, for every people and nation. At first, the disciples went to Israel, but soon they would appear before Gentiles and kings (10:5, 18). Matthew often says that the kingdom of Christ belongs to everyone who believes and bears fruit (21:43; cf. 2:1–12; 4:15–16; 8:5–13; 13:38; 24:14).

The early church had difficulty grasping this. Jesus said, “Make disciples of the nations” and “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), but in the beginning the apostles hardly budged from Jerusalem. Indeed, they generally stayed close to the temple, in the center of Jerusalem. To be sure, they preached with power, healed many, and conducted themselves with great courage whenever the authorities threatened them. But the Lord had to raise up men like Stephen, Philip, and Paul to thrust the church out to the Gentiles (Acts 7–9). We are much the same—if not worse. We know about the Great Commission, but sometimes hesitate to share our faith even with close friends, let alone venturing more radical paths.

THE _____ OF THE COMMISSION

The commission to “make disciples” is amplified by three participial phrases that tell us how to fulfill the task: by going, by baptizing, and by teaching. We make disciples first by *going* out into the world, not by simply waiting for the world to come to us. We are not pushy, but we have plans, individually and corporately, to reach the world for Christ. We take the initiative. We have a right and a duty to pray for the lost in our own circles and to look beyond that circle. This hardly means that everyone should be a missionary—although many should consider the option of a short mission trip. But collectively, every church should have a missional thrust,

both locally and internationally. It may be true that indigenous people (rather than Americans or other Western people) should carry out the remaining pioneering work in most parts of the world, but Western churches should still be robust partners in training leaders and in translating of our theological literature into languages with few biblical and theological resources.

We make disciples, second, by “*baptizing* them in [literally ‘into’] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (28:19). When we baptize into the name of Jesus, we confess Jesus is equal with the Father God. With that point, Matthew harvests his many hints that Jesus is more than a man, more than a prophet. Further, the sacrament of baptism asks that Jesus’ messengers disciple people by calling them to identify with Jesus in public, by the act of baptism.

We make disciples, third, by “*teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:20). The Greek expression that is translated “everything” is actually two terms. One means “all things” and the other means “as much as.” The effect is to intensify the command. We must teach potential disciples to obey every last thing Jesus says. Where can we find every last thing Jesus commanded? In the Gospel of Matthew (and the other Gospels)! In the Gospel’s pages we read Jesus’ commands and learn how to heed them.

Above all, we obey Jesus from the heart, with inward love. The Bible says “you shall not kill.” Jesus added that we shall not hate, despise, or mock either. Next, we obey all his commands, not just our favorites or the easy ones. The disciples teach and we strive to obey whatever Jesus says. Jesus would have us obey the commands that we tend to ignore or explain away, the commands we least want to obey. Which are these? Perhaps the call to love our neighbor as ourself, to serve others, to control our desires, our anger, our pride, or our love of money. In general, he wants us to attend to the parts of his teaching that we have neither memorized nor underlined. If there is a command that we do not want to obey, it is probably also one we struggle to obey. That leads us back to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus knows we will never fully obey his commands. That is why, great teacher as he is, Jesus did not come to enlighten us so we can save ourselves. He came, above all, to deliver us.

Still, he does give a great commission that we should try to fulfill. The sweep of the commission is evident in the fourfold use of the word “all”: Jesus has *all* authority. His followers make disciples of *all* nations, by teaching *all* that Jesus commands, fortified by the knowledge that he is with us, literally, *all* days. Since Jesus loves us, he closes not with a command but with comfort. When God gave Abraham, Moses, or the prophets a task to perform, he also assured them of his aid. Jesus does the same for us. The disciples hesitated at the Great Commission, but Jesus assured them of his power and presence, so they can go.

Conclusion

Be encouraged, follower of Christ, for **this mission is not based on who we are or what we can do**. This mission is assured based on Christ’s presence through His Spirit. When I first came to

the church I now pastor, I recall thinking that the church had such potential with all of its gifts and resources. But that's not a biblical mind-set. It doesn't matter how gifted a church is or how blessed it is materially, for the people of God can do nothing apart from power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). However, when the Spirit works among a people, that church can shake the nations for God's glory.

Rather than being based on what we can do, **this mission is based on who Jesus is and what He is able to do in and through our lives.** Christ is able to do "beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us" (Eph 3:20). Oh, how we need to put aside small dreams and worldly ambitions. We need to give Christ a blank check with our lives and then see where He leads. **Together, let's experience the power of His presence with us.** We want to be a part of something that is beyond us, something that requires supernatural strength. We don't want to be preoccupied with programs and practices that we can manage on our own. We should be desperate for the power of Jesus.

We know that obedience to the Great Commission will not be easy, and we know it will be costly. But we also know that it will be worth it. Jesus will return and His reward will be infinitely greater than any cost we have paid. So **together, let's hope in the promise of His return for us.** The kingdom of our Lord Jesus will one day be fully and finally established, and we will see His face (Rev 22:4). We are living—and longing—for that day. Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!²

² David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2013), 378.

Appendix: Answer Guide

Lesson 89 (10-19-25)

The End of the World As We Know It? (Matthew 24:1-28)

EVENTS PRECEDING THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM, A TYPE OF THE LAST DAY

SIGNS OF THE END TIMES

Lesson 90 (10-26-25)

The Coming of the Son of Man / The Lesson of the Fig Tree (Matthew 24:29-35)

GREAT TROUBLES

“GREAT TRIBULATION”

A GREAT DAY

Lesson 91 (11-2-25)

No One Knows That Day and Hour (Matthew 24:36-51)

A GREAT CALLING

A NOTE ON JESUS’ KNOWLEDGE

THE DAYS OF NOAH AND LIFE ON THE FARM

Lesson 92 (11-9-25)

The Parable of the Ten Virgins and the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:1-30)

THE MASTER ENTRUSTS AFFAIRS TO HIS SERVANTS

THE HEART AND THE REWARD OF A FAITHFUL SERVANT

THE HEART AND REWARD OF A LAZY SERVANT

SERVING THE MASTER IN OUR GOD-GIVEN PLACE

Lesson 93 (11-16-25)

Judgment Day (Matthew 25:31-46)

WE STAND BEFORE THE THRONE OF JUDGMENT

THE JUDGE REMEMBERS SIX ACTS OF SERVICE

THE KING APPRAISES OUR DEEDS

JESUS SEPARATES MANKIND

Lesson 94 (11-23-25)

What Is Jesus Worth? (Matthew 26:1-16)

A COSTLY GIFT FOR JESUS

AN OBJECTION TO THE GIFT

THE GIFT AND THE POOR

AN ACT OF TREACHERY

Lesson 95 (11-30-25)

Tested in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:31-56)

JESUS IS TESTED IN GETHSEMANE

THE DISCIPLES ARE TESTED IN GETHSEMANE

JESUS AND OUR TESTING

Lesson 96 (12-7-25)

Jesus on Trial / Peter Denies Jesus (Matthew 26:57-75)

JESUS ON TRIAL

JESUS TESTIFIES

JESUS CONDEMNED

JESUS STANDS FIRM AND SO SHALL WE

JESUS RESTORES PETER

Lesson 97 (12-14-25)

Courage and Cowardice (Matthew 27:1-26)

JUDAS FAILS BY BETRAYING JESUS

THE HEARING BEFORE PILATE

THE RELEASE OF BARABBAS

THE FATE OF JESUS AND THE COWARDICE OF PILATE

Lesson 98 (12-21-25)

The Crucifixion, Death, and Burial of Jesus (Matthew 27:27-61)

THE SOLDIERS MOCK JESUS AS THE KING OF THE JEWS

THE SOLDIERS CRUCIFY THE KING

THE CROWDS AND PRIESTS MOCK JESUS, KING OF THE JEWS

Lesson 99 (12-28-25)

The Resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 27:62-28:15)

The Ultimate Question

Possible Explanations

Startling Implications

Lesson 100 (1-4-26)

Commissioned by the King (Matthew 28:16-20)

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COMMISSION

THE CONTENT OF THE COMMISSION

THE MEANS OF THE COMMISSION

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