

18 August 2024

JESUS PREDICTS HIS DEATH

1. INTRO

- A. Last week, David gave us a really helpful look at what could be called one of the major turning points in Matthew's Gospel. You could actually argue that it's one of the major turning points in the whole Bible—Peter turns to Jesus and says 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'
 - i. It's an incredible moment. Now, *we* as readers already know this, because Matthew has been really clear with us about Jesus' divinity. We've been watching along, seeing the angels visiting Mary and Joseph, the events when John baptizes Jesus, and of course the miracles along the way. We as readers are in on the secret, but remember that the disciples are not. So this was the moment where the penny finally dropped for Peter, and he knew that Jesus wasn't just an amazing teacher and miracle worker, he was God in flesh, come to set the world right.
 - ii. Today's passage is a continuation on in this vein. Everything is different now, and Matthew wants us to know this. Last week's passage was a bit like driving your car up a big range of hills, all you can see in front of you is more road, it's only when you finally get to the top that you can begin to see everything ahead of you again.
 1. *If you forgive a slightly nerdy analogy, last week's passage was a bit like the end of The Empire Strikes Back. Some crucial information has been revealed that makes all the characters see themselves in a new light. We know that this isn't the end of the story, in fact, if anything it just whets our appetite to see how things are resolved. This week's passage, like Return of the Jedi, shows how things will be wrapped up.*
 - iii. Remember that up to this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has to an extent kept his cards close to his chest, his disciples are continually a bit clueless about who he is and what his plans are, but that's all about to change. Now they know that he is in

fact the Messiah, the promised deliverer, God and human. Let's listen as Rachel / Jennifer reads the passage for us:

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

B. Do you see what I meant? Here Jesus is laying out exactly what was going to happen to him in these last days of his life. And that's not all. We've got an infamous confrontation with Peter, and some clues as to what Jesus envisioned the lives of those who followed him would look like. All in one passage! Let's look at them in turn...

2. JESUS' REVELATION

A. Our passage this morning starts with Jesus explaining his mission to the disciples in a level of detail that we've not seen previously.

There are ultimately four things he says that he needs to do:

- i. First, he needs to **go** to Jerusalem. You might remember that the bulk of Jesus' life was spent outside Jerusalem, which was the 'big city' and bustling urban centre of the region in this time period. Jesus, however, was born in Bethlehem—not a massive city, and raised in Nazareth, which is also not a

massive place. He spent most of his time in ministry in the towns surrounding the Sea of Galilee, so the journey to Jerusalem is a big one in terms of travel, it would be a bit like going from St Andrews to Edinburgh on foot.

- ii. But what's going to happen when he gets to Jerusalem? It's interesting what he doesn't say—he doesn't say what we might expect, that he's going to go to Jerusalem and heal the sick and feed the hungry. He says he's going to go to Jerusalem to do what—to **suffer** many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law. This suffering takes all different sorts of forms—ridicule, slander, blasphemy, abandonment, profound legal injustice, and, finally, horrific and sustained physical torture. Jesus needs to **go**, he will **suffer...**
- iii. And then he must be **killed**. He must be killed. I want us to briefly step outside of our preconceptions for a moment and just acknowledge the sheer audacity on display here. Think about it...Jesus says that he is the promised deliverer, the one that Israel had been waiting for. All this language of the Kingdom of God coming must have been an amazing moment for Jesus' followers. But how can he bring this about if he's dead?
- iv. Finally, Jesus says that on the third day he will be **raised** to life. A few observations: This is the first of four times in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus will reveal to his disciples that he is going to die in Jerusalem and be raised back to life. He's given some oblique hints at it earlier on, but here he's evidently being emphatically clear.
 1. *Now, I've never seen anyone come back from death, but remember that the disciples had. They knew that Jesus had power over life and death in this way. But, notice the grammar here—Jesus will be raised. The implication here seems to be that this is an action of God the Father, perhaps to show that Jesus was really and truly dead.*

3. JESUS' RESPONSE

- A. Remember that we're in one of the major turning points of Matthew's Gospel. Peter, who had been so bold as to declare in the verses we heard last week that Jesus was the promised Messiah,

the deliverer who was going to bring about the Kingdom of God...but look what he does here: 'Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"'

- i. What do we make of this? Some commentators and preachers are, if I'm honest, a bit mean. Maybe you've heard Christians take shots at Peter's brashness, his ignorance, his overzealousness, and that is probably not the most helpful way to approach him.
- ii. But then again look at this verse. It starts with Peter taking Jesus aside, he's not voicing this in front of the rest of the disciples, though in reality he's probably saying what the rest of them are thinking! But what should we do with Peter? John Chrysostom, who was a bishop in the 4th century, has a helpful observation here, 'The larger picture had not yet been revealed to Peter, and he was confused and overwhelmed. Peter had learned that Christ is the Son of God. But he had not learned of the mystery of the cross and the resurrection.'¹ Do you see what Chrysostom says there? Peter hadn't yet learned the implications of the cross and the resurrection. He's not seeing Jesus' death as the means by which humanity can be brought into a relationship with God, he's seeing it as an interruption of Jesus' earthly mission. **Peter's mind is, if you will, focused on the here and now.** And because Peter is focused on the here and now, he is missing the bigger picture.

1. And we could pause at this point...in what ways are we focusing on the here and now? Are we the ones trying to set God's agenda?2

B. Jesus' response is one of those misunderstood and sometimes misquoted statements...'Get behind me, Santa!...er, Satan' Seriously though, what do we do with this? It sounds a bit harsh, and it gets harsher the more we read through Jesus' reply to Peter. Look at what he says in verse 23: 'You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

- i. How is what Peter said a stumbling block? I think we need to consider this passage in light of something that happened

¹ John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 54.5-6.

earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Matt taught on it in January of 2023, but that was a long time ago, so let's have a quick look. The context is that Jesus, before his ministry formally begins, goes out to the wilderness and fasts for 40 days. While he's out there, Satan actively tempts him. Let's look at Matthew 4:5-10:

ii. ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." ⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

iii. Did you catch the way that Jesus was tempted? Satan was trying to get Jesus to jump off the highest point of the temple, so that he could summon angels to rescue him. Then he follows this up by showing Jesus the extent of the visible Kingdom in front of him, saying that he could receive all this if he were to simply bow down to him.

1. *I think we need to keep in mind that these were **real** temptations. We might be inclined toward a view of Jesus that makes him so elevated, so other than us, that we don't think he can **actually** be tempted. But I don't think that's what the Bible is trying to get across to us. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus 'was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.'*

2. *So, I think we need to read this situation as Peter, unintentionally, tempting Jesus in the same way that Satan did in the wilderness. Jesus clearly knows that his life will end in a torturous way in the coming days, and when we eventually see him praying in the Garden of Gethsemane it is clear that the prospect of what he's about to undertake has shaken him to his core—he says that his soul is overwhelmed to the point of death.*

- iv. Tom Wright has a helpful observation on this: ‘Peter, speaking for them all, has just told Jesus that as far as they’re concerned he’s not just a prophet, he’s God’s anointed king, the Messiah. Their natural next move would be to sit down and plan their strategy: if he’s the king, and if his people are going to be like the house built on the rock, then they must figure out how to get rid of the present kings and priests who are ruling Israel (or, more accurately, misruling it). The obvious solution would be this: march on Jerusalem, pick up supporters on the way, choose your moment, say your prayers, fight a surprise battle, take over the Temple, and install Jesus as king. That’s how God’s kingdom will come! That’s how the “son of man” will be exalted in his kingdom. That, we may be sure, was something like what they had in mind.’²
- v. And it’s with all of this in mind that I think we need to pause and recognize fully that for Peter, Jesus’ mission was going to be realized in a political revolution that would change the shape of Palestine in the short term. What he’s missing, and would only find out in the days to come, was that Jesus’ mission was actually going to be realized in a spiritual revolution that would change the shape of the whole world forever.
- vi. But, given Peter’s misunderstanding, Jesus clearly sees the need to spell this out more fully. He outlines the cost of being a disciple.

4. THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

- A. Our passage this morning ends with three sets of illustrations from Jesus about what is involved in following Jesus. And they make much more sense if we see them as fundamentally opposed to what Peter and the other disciples were expecting.
 - i. They aren’t going to march on Jerusalem on horseback and chase away the Romans, Jesus is going to ride in on the back of a donkey.

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone* Vol. 2 (SPCK 2004).

- ii. They aren't going to win over the Jewish leaders to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, those same leaders will be the ones leading the charge for Jesus' execution.
 - iii. And they aren't going to watch as Jesus is crowned with a golden crown, like his ancestor David, as he assumes the throne that was rightfully his. Instead, they're going to watch helplessly as the soldiers use clubs to beat a crown of thorns deeper and deeper into his head.
- B. It's with this in mind that Jesus first says, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.'**
- i. This actually isn't the first time Jesus has told his disciples that they'll need to pick up their cross and follow him. Back in Chapter 10, it's sandwiched into a number of initial instructions that Jesus gives to the disciples.
 - 1. *The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas says that while the first time left some room for ambiguity, this time 'he makes clear that his reference to the cross [at least with regard to Jesus' listeners at the time] is no metaphor. Jesus plainly says that no one can know what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah unless that one is willing to accompany him to Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there. Jesus does not ask us to believe in him; rather he asks his disciples to follow him—even unto death.'*³
 - ii. So, what should we make of this? I think that we can unpack some helpful guiding principles that will keep us from straying too far from the context.
 - 1. *Crucifixion was a common method of capital punishment in the Roman world, particularly in the colonial frontier. It was a cruel, painful, and shamefully public way of striking fear into the local people. It was meant to be a powerful deterrent—this is what happens if you mess with us. Given the location and time period, it is entirely plausible that Jesus and his followers had walked by the crosses bearing living or recently deceased people.*

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Brazos, 2015), 151.

2. *Remember as well that Matthew's Gospel was written decades after the events had happened. By the time of its writing, the church was already being actively persecuted by Jewish and Roman leaders. I suspect that in this verse, and those that follow, Matthew wants us to know that Jesus was actively bracing his disciples for the persecution that would eventually come.*

C. He builds on this in the next statement, he says 'whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.'

- i. Now, what's this about? Last time I checked, we only get one life...it's not like the video games of my generation where you could find a green mushroom and get another shot at rescuing princesses from dinosaurs!
- ii. Does this mean that Christians shouldn't value human life? Absolutely not! I value my life, it is woven into decisions I make on a daily basis—I buckle my seatbelt before I move off in the car; I don't gravitate toward dangerous hobbies like deep sea diving or ski jumping; and I *definitely* don't make jokes when I'm talking to the American Department of Homeland Security officers!
- iii. Now, here in Scotland I don't think that any of us will be thinking actively about avoiding being killed on the basis of our faith. But this is definitely true for many of our brothers and sisters around the world.
- iv. I think that what Jesus is doing here is taking that which we would value, treasure, and protect perhaps most fiercely—our own lives—and saying that we need to value him above that.
 1. *This is, understandably, a tall order. But it's also something that only the Son of God could ask of us. Hauerwas again says 'Jesus is not telling his disciples that if they learn to live unselfishly they will live more satisfying lives. Rather, he says that any sacrifices they make must be done for his sake. The crosses they bear must be ones determined by his cross. What Jesus asks of his disciples makes no sense if Jesus is not who he says he is. You do not ask those who follow you to follow you to a cross unless you are the Son of God. You do not ask your brothers and sisters to contemplate the death of those they*

*love if you are not the Messiah. You do not make Peter the rock on whom the church is built if you are not the one who has inaugurated the new age. But Jesus is all this and more, requiring his disciples to live lives not determined by death.'*⁴

2. *If this is the benchmark for what life as a disciple of Jesus looked like for the disciples, what should this say to me here today? Well, to be honest, it's pretty convicting. It means that how I spend my time, how I spend my money, how I support my family and friends, how intentional I am about sharing the hope that I've found in Jesus...if 'take up your cross and follow me' is the benchmark, I suspect that all of us could take a moment to reconsider ways in which we might step up to Jesus' call.*

- D. There's one last illustration, and it's picking up on the financial element I mentioned. Jesus says 'What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?'
- i. Remember Jesus' audience. He's not exactly speaking to the House of Lords, or the Royal Society of Edinburgh...these are fishermen, labourers, tradesmen, tax collectors. Not exactly people who were in a position to gain the whole world.
 - ii. But maybe that's it. I think it may refer back to when Jesus was tempted by Satan in Chapter 4. Satan dangles the prospect of being in charge of all the territories he could see in front of him, in order to try and tempt him to abandon his mission.
 1. *I suspect that Jesus is essentially saying that all the stuff people usually try to accomplish in life: live longer, make more money, gain more influence...those things aren't as important as following him.*
 2. *There's nothing inherently wrong, incidentally, with being health-conscious, or independently wealthy, or in a position of power in society—but the point we need to consider here is what are we pursuing with our lives: Jesus, or stuff?*

⁴ Hauerwas, 153.

5. JESUS' RETURN

A. Look how the passage ends. Jesus says that he is going 'to come in the Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.'

- i. What does this mean? For starters, I think it means that true justice will prevail. All those times where it seems like the perpetrators of heinous offences get off completely free, they will face judgement. No one can hide from Jesus' just judgement.
- ii. The eagle-eyed among you may have noticed the little verse at the end of this passage, that some who were standing with Jesus would not 'taste death' before he returned. Now, this is one of those verses that people like to use as a bit of a brain teaser.

1. I found a little passage by the church father Cyril of Alexandria, who points out that in the very next passage (which Matt will unpack for us next month), we see the Transfiguration, which Cyril calls a 'prelude' to Jesus' return. So, what's most likely here is that Jesus is not referring to his final return, but to this moment where some of his disciples got a glimpse of just how incredible the Son of God returning in his glory might be.

6. CONCLUSIONS

A. So, what do we make of all this? I'm first going to speak to people in the room who are followers of Jesus: Are you perhaps tempted to see your faith in temporal ways like Peter? Are you waiting for him to move the political chess pieces so that your preferred party comes into power? Are you expecting change to come from the top down?

- i. The revolution Jesus proclaimed was not fulfilled in the corridors of power, it came about in the transformation of individual hearts. And it's no different for us.
- ii. And seeing hearts transformed is why we're here at Hope City. It's why it says 'Share Your Hope' above the door as you walk out of the building. It's why we're here today without some of our best friends and, in some cases, family. Because we want to

see men and women, boys and girls, beginning and growing in a journey of following Jesus.

- B. And if you're not a follower of Jesus today, I wonder what you make of all this. Jesus is essentially saying that this world, this existence, it's not everything. He's saying that there is something greater that awaits us.
- i. Human sin and selfishness has done a number on our world, physically and emotionally; politically and ecologically.
 - ii. The great writer C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, has a really important and thought-provoking line. He says, 'If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.'
 - iii. I think that is exactly what Jesus was getting at in this passage. If this world is all there is, and this mode of existence is the only one we get, then it *is* crazy to follow his teaching.
 - iv. But what if it *is* all true, and this world isn't all there is, and there is something far greater in store? If you want to explore this more, there are plenty of options for you. Feel free to come chat to one of us after the gathering, drop us an email, come along to one of our classes. Whatever you do, dig deep into these questions. They could change your life forever.