

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

C. THE REDEEMER.

26. Mystery of the Messiah.

Matthew 22:41-46. Jesus had refused to let his disciples proclaim him as the Messiah until he had taught them exactly what that meant, but still they were slow to cotton on. Jewish ideas of the Messiah needed the most radical change and in this passage Jesus sought to correct that thinking in one last appeal to the religious leaders to accept him as the Messiah foretold in Scripture, the Messiah who came in the mighty plan of God. The most common title of the Messiah was “Son of David”, with the expectation that one day a great prince of the line of David would come to shatter Israel’s enemies and lead God’s own people to the conquest of all nations. He would be a nationalistic, political and military Messiah.

Jesus parried the answer the Pharisees gave him by quoting **Psalm 110**, accepted as Messianic, where David calls him Lord, not someone subordinate as a son, but someone more worthy than himself. Jesus’ point was that it was not adequate to call the Messiah Son of David, for he was more than that – he was the Son of God. His Messiahship was not to be thought of in terms of earthly conquest but of divine and sacrificial love. Jesus was making his greatest claim, not as a military hero but as the Son of God who would demonstrate the love of God on the Cross at Calvary.

In face of this eternal mystery the Pharisees had no answer: perhaps dimly they perceived that in Jesus’ words they had heard the voice of God. Perhaps in his face they caught a glimpse of the majesty of God. While Mark records (**Mark 12:37**) that the large crowd listened to him with delight, Matthew says that from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Revelation 22:16 confirms what Jesus was telling them. “I, Jesus am the Root and the Offspring of David,” and then adds this significant phrase, “and the bright Morning Star.” Here is his earthly lineage linked to his divine and eternal existence with grace and condescension beyond our understanding. With all the loveliness that shone from Jesus the Son of Man, we must never take him for granted: he is and always was, the Son of God.

Seven Warnings.

Matthew 23:1-39. In these days of litigation, local councils can be sued for not warning pedestrians of a slippery footpath. Jesus was never guilty of neglecting to warn people of their fate if they did not avail themselves of the grace of God. This chapter sets out 7 such warnings directed at the Pharisees and teachers of the law who “sit in Moses’ seat” – in other words, the authorised interpreters of God’s law as given to Moses. In **Verses 3-7** he denounced them graphically for not practicing what they preached, for tying heavy loads of law-keeping on men’s shoulders without lifting a finger to help them, so that religion became an intolerable burden. All their religious observances were done for self-gratification and the applause of others. Their motto was, “I love me, I love myself: I have my picture on the shelf.” Worst of all, they allowed themselves to be called “Rabbi” as if they had any wisdom of value to impart to others.

Turning to his disciples Jesus tells them, in **verses 8-12**, they must be different. They had one Master and they were all brothers, and the greatest among them would be their servant. The proud would be brought low and the humble lifted up.

More woes for the religious leaders come in **verses 13-36** with their dog-in-the-manger attitude to the unlearned masses: they shut the door to the kingdom of heaven, not going in themselves and refusing to give any honest seekers the key. They tied people up with their pernicky modifications of God’s original laws, meticulously tithing their window-box herbs but neglecting the essentials of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Their cleanliness was all for show, on the outside, while the hidden inside was filthy. Their laws for clean and unclean vessels are hardly credible. Earthen vessels could not become unclean if they were open coal-shovels, grid-irons with holes for parching grains of wheat, or flat plates without a rim. But earthen plates with a rim, or earthen spice-boxes or writing-cases,

could become unclean. Vessels of leather, bone, wood and glass could become unclean if they were deep, but not if they were flat. Any smooth and hollow metal vessel could become unclean, but a door, a bolt, a lock, a hinge, a knocker remained clean. If a vessel was made of wood and metal, the wood could become unclean, but not the metal. No matter if the food inside had been procured dishonestly, as long as the vessel was “clean”, it was all okay. Truly!

One of the commonest places for tombs was by the roadside. But if anyone accidentally touched a tomb, he would be unclean, so to guard against that the tombs were whitewashed and gleamed like jewels in the sun. Like the tombs, these leaders looked nice on the outside but were rotten inside – dead men’s bones and everything unclean. They would even build and embellish the tombs of the prophets whom their forefathers had killed: that dreadful history of rejecting God’s message by force had persisted until that very day, when they would soon try to do away with Jesus himself.

Jesus did not hold back in his description of these false teachers of religion, either. From “you hypocrites” and “blind guides” he graduated to “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell”? The loveliness of Jesus did not make him soft: as God was too holy to look on evil so His Son’s wrath was aroused by evil, not only because it was against the very nature of God, but because of the terrible judgement it would bring to those who were caught up in it. Even as he thundered out his judgement his heart was pleading with them to repent. **Verses 34 to 39** are the cry of a heart breaking because of his love for his lost children.

Many parents have been through the agony of trying to win back rebellious children. Jesus knew that agony on earth: God knows that agony even now. Are you still a “teenager” complaining “God doesn’t understand me”? Remember that God’s discipline is one true aspect of His love, and your hurt causes Him just as much grief as it does you.

What of the Future?

Mathew 24:1-51. In all the ancient world there was nothing quite like the Temple of Jerusalem. Built of white marble, plated with gold, surrounded by great porches with pillars 11 metres high cut out of solid blocks of marble; the Beautiful Gate about 25 metres high, about 20 metres wide and covered with polished brass. Angle stones at the corners of the Temple weighed over 100 tonnes. The disciples, used to rustic Galilee, must have been a bit awe-struck as they followed Jesus away from the Temple after his long discourse and they called his attention to this wonder of engineering and design.

They were not prepared for Jesus’ reaction. “Have a good look while you can,” he told them, “for I tell you the truth that not one stone here will be left on another: every single stone will be thrown down.” His words were fulfilled literally in 70 A.D. when the Romans under Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. Gold leaf on the roof had melted when the Temple was set on fire and the Romans prised the stones apart to collect the gold that had run between them. Excavations in 1968 uncovered large numbers of the stones lying where they had been toppled from the walls.

Jesus’ words struck his disciples dumb: how could that great Temple be destroyed? Later, as they sat on the Mount of Olives and looked across to the gleaming, dazzling edifice on Mount Sion, they probed him in their puzzlement. (**verse 3**). “Tell us, when will all this happen? What will be the sign of your coming? When will be the end of the age?” They were really asking about different events and it will help in our understanding of this chapter when we realise that Jesus’ answer came in three strands. It is generally understood that **Verses 4-14** describe the end of the age: **verses 15-22** the destruction of Jerusalem; and **verses 23-31** Christ’s coming again.

Jewish tradition divided all time into 2 ages – the present age which was evil and the golden age to come: in between would be the Day of the Lord, a time of terrible and fearful judgement before God would usher in that golden age. The return coming of Christ was a new thought to the disciples and they naturally linked it with other apocalyptic ideas they had been taught. In this chapter Jesus gave them a glimpse of the future as much as they needed to know in order to make them alert without becoming panicky.

Do you wish you could see into the future? It is God's kindness that veils our eyes: if we knew what was coming we would never be able to face it. God asks that we trust Him one day at a time, and He will give us the strength and courage to face each day as it comes.

The End of the Age.

Matthew 24:4-14. Jesus gave some grim warnings here, and it is possible to see some fulfilment of this passage in our present day with natural and man-made calamities gripping our world. "Nation" in **verse 7** could imply ethnic groups and there is certainly a lot of inter-racial unrest. Persecution today is greater than it has ever been in the past, and it does seem that "the love of many will grow cold" – **verse 12**. But there is great encouragement for us in **verse 14** – in spite of all the strife, the good news about Jesus will be spread throughout the world before the end comes. It is not for us to draw up our charts and speculate on times and dates: it is for us to keep busy spreading the light of the gospel to as many as we can, as fast as we can, as best as we can, for the glory of our God.

The Destruction of Jerusalem.

Matthew 24:15-22. Jesus strikes a different note in this passage, giving a specific signpost as a warning for those who would listen to him. In **verse 15** where Jesus referred to "the abomination that causes desolation" he was harking back to **Daniel 11:31**. About 170 B.C. Antiochus Epiphanes, the king of Syria, tried to stamp out Judaism and replace it with Greek religion and practices. He captured Jerusalem, carried out many unspeakable atrocities, the worst of all being in the Temple, where he erected an altar to Zeus and sacrificed a pig on it. Fierce fighting by the outraged Jews was led by the heroic Judas Maccabaeus, who was able to re-occupy the Temple and purify it exactly 3 years after it had been profaned. The Feast of Dedication, mentioned in Study 20, was instituted in memory of this victory: it was a popular and joyous festival. But Jesus was using that reference to emphasise that history would repeat itself and that would be the signal for all to make their escape from Jerusalem. This time there would be no Judas Maccabaeus, no purification of the Temple, no deliverance – nothing but ultimate destruction.

It all came horribly true, just as Jesus had said. The siege of Jerusalem was one of the most terrible sieges in all history. As it was on a hill Titus decided the only way to capture the city was to starve the people out, and Josephus, the Jewish historian, described graphically the horrors of famine and death that resulted. Just as Jesus had said, if those days had not been shortened there would have been no survivors at all. (**verse 22**) Then he added a significant phrase, "but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened." As rebellious as they were, the Jews were still God's chosen people, but by this time (70 A.D.) there were many Christians, Jew and Gentile, just as much "God's elect" under the New Covenant. The Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem, set up their legionary standards in the sacred precincts of the Temple and offered sacrifices to them. To the Christians who believed the words Jesus had said about the "abomination of desolation", this desecration was the signal for them to make their escape, as he had advised. Many of them fled just in time to the town of Pella, on the east side of the Jordan and so were preserved from the general destruction.

We rightly fear the judgement of God, but by faith in Him we can look forward to the "New Jerusalem" John talks about in Revelation chapter 21. The dwelling of God is with men; they will be His people and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. The city will be of gold and precious jewels and will need no light for the glory of God will give it light. No night there, or anything impure, nothing but glory. Make your choice!

He's Coming Back!

Matthew 24:23-31. This is the climax of Jesus' teaching and indeed the climax of history. After the explosion of wickedness, the horror of wars and the cataclysmic upheaval of the elements, there will come to earth like a bolt of lightning in all its light and power, the Son of God himself. He will come on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory, announced with a loud trumpet call and

attended by a host of angels who will gather the elect from the four winds to be with him and share the glory he graciously gives them.

Verses 32-35 can be interpreted in 2 ways. Jesus may have been referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, which indeed did happen while that present generation was alive. But the word “generation” could be translated “race”, in which case Jesus was talking about his second coming and it is an amazing fact that the Jewish people, in spite of hardship, persecution and threatened extermination, have survived to this day and are flourishing, one tiny nation surviving in the heart of the seething cauldron that is the Middle East.

Divisions have arisen and churches have split over differing interpretations of this chapter of Matthew. It is enough for us to know that one day Jesus Christ will be Lord of all creation: we don't need to know when. He will come again, the Messiah conqueror not just for the Jews but for the whole world, and every knee will bow in acknowledgement of his supremacy. We must keep in mind what he says in verse 35, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

Driving the Point Home.

Matthew 24:36-51. All this was mind-boggling for the disciples and Jesus knew they had to take it to heart if they were to really act on it. Theirs was not to worry about a foreboding future: all God would ask is that they remain faithful through it. A thief can rob a house because the owner is unprepared for the invasion. A servant can be punished if he is found neglecting his duty when the absent master unexpectedly returns. Like wise and faithful servants his disciples must keep watch because no one knows when Jesus will return.

Matthew 25:1-46. Jesus then proceeded to tell a story familiar to anyone who lived in Palestine. It was a common custom to start the wedding feast at midnight: it would then last for several days. The bridegroom and his friends often began the feast at the groom's house, while the bride and her attendants (the 10 virgins in this story) waited at her house, sometimes for days, not knowing when her groom would appear. It was an impish custom for the bridegroom to try and catch his bride out when he came to claim her, so they all had to keep themselves ready, and the whole company would form a joyful procession, winding in and out through as many streets as possible in order to collect many good wishes, ending up at the groom's house to celebrate. The bridesmaids' lamps were actually torches – long sticks wrapped with rags soaked in olive oil and set alight and trimmed occasionally as the rags burnt to cinders. Jesus had a message for Israel here: as a nation she lacked the “oil” of a true relationship with God and so would miss out on the blessings intended for her by God. But for us today, we can learn two things from this parable: we do not know when our Lord will return, and therefore we must keep ourselves ready if we do not want to be shut out from His kingdom. Secondly, our spiritual life cannot be obtained secondhand: the wise virgins only had enough oil for themselves, so there was no way they could share it with the foolish ones. No-one can borrow a relationship with God: it must be obtained directly by each individual. The joy of the “wedding feast” is only for those who are prepared to meet their “bridegroom” and have come to know him personally.

Jesus' next story (**verses 14-30**) deals, in addition to preparedness, to our responsibility as stewards of what God has entrusted to us. We are not all given the same talents, and we do not rank with God according to how many we have. We shall be judged on what we did with what we were given. The first two servants used both initiative and care with their master's money, and as a reward, were successful. The third servant did not even try to please his master, and in fear of losing the little he was given, made absolutely no effort to make any gain for his master. Like the master, Jesus has gone on a journey from which He will one day return to judge His people for what they have done for Him in His absence. The reward for the service of the trustworthy servants, was more service! Beyond the immediate blessings that come with obedience to God, the Christian is granted heaven, where God honours their service by granting them more service. We will not be inactive in heaven – such

boredom is reserved for hell – but we will be actively sharing in our Master’s joy. The tragedy of the unfaithful servant is that he is denied such service and such fellowship with his Master.

The third parable Jesus told them (**verses 31-46**) continues the theme of judgement. Palestinian shepherds often herded sheep and goats together, but at the day’s end they would separate them, as sheep with their heavy wool need less shelter than goats. Jesus has compassion for the materially and physically needy, and when we help them we are truly serving him. In **Matthew 10:42** he says, “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones *because he is my disciple*, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” (Water in those days was brought from the well in the cool of the morning and stored in large earthenware pitchers during the day where it would soon be tepid. *Cold* water involved going to the well to draw it fresh – a bit of time and effort!) Whatever we do, we should do in the Name of Jesus. We can bring him honour by our worship, by the offering of our own possessions, by the helping hand given to a stranger in need, by our obedience, in every detail of our lives, to his great commandments as set down in **Matthew 22:37-39** –

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.”