

MATTHEW: THE TEACHING GOSPEL

By

Revd John M Haley

10. Matthew 13:54-15:39

The life of the kingdom community: narrative

11. Matthew 16:1-17:27

The life of the kingdom community: narrative

12. Matthew 18:1-35

The life of the kingdom community: teaching

13. Matthew 19:1-20:34

The Little Apocalypse: narrative

14. Matthew 21:1-22:46

The Little Apocalypse: narrative

15. Matthew 23:1-24:28

The Little Apocalypse: teaching

16. Matthew 24:29-25:46

The Little Apocalypse: teaching

17. Matthew 26:1-27:10

Betrayal and denial

18. Matthew 27:11-28:20

The Messiah: His death and resurrection

Acknowledgments

The main source of these notes is:

Gabelin, F E (Ed.) (1976-92), *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan

Bibliography

France, R T (1985), *Matthew (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*, Leicester, IVP

Green, M (1988), *Matthew for Today*, Sevenoaks, Hodder and Stoughton

Jackman, D and Phillip, W (2003), *Teaching Matthew*, Fearn, Christian Focus

Morris, L (1992), *The Gospel according to Matthew (Pillar Commentaries)*, Leicester, IVP

Mounce, R H (1995), *Matthew (New International Biblical Commentary)*, Exeter, Paternoster Press

Price, C (1998), *Matthew*, Fearn, Christian Focus

Wiersbe, W W (1989), *Be Loyal (Matthew), Bible Exposition Commentary*, Wheaton, Illinois, Victor Books

STUDY 10: The life of the kingdom community: narrative (Matthew 13:54-15:39)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 4: The life of the kingdom community

(a) Narrative

Jesus returns to Nazareth 13:54-58

Jesus and Herod 14:1-12

The feeding of the five thousand 14:13-21

The walk on the water 14:22-33

Jesus at Gennesaret 14:34-36

Jesus and the tradition of the elders 15:1-20

Jesus and a Canaanite woman 15:21-28

Jesus heals many more 15:29-31

The feeding of the four thousand 15:32-39

B HIS MINISTRY IN WORD AND WORKS (continued)

Matthew is a Gospel about the coming of the Messiah. The basic structure of Matthew's Gospel falls into three sections:

- A The Messiah: His genealogy and nativity (1-2)
- B The Messiah: His ministry in word and works (3-25)
- C The Messiah: His death and resurrection (26-28)

The third block of teaching 'parables of the kingdom' ends with these words, 'When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there' (Matthew 13:53). This verse indicates very clearly that a teaching block has come to an end. The first teaching block (The Sermon on the Mount), the second teaching block (The commissioning of the twelve) and the third teaching block (Parables of the kingdom) began with some narrative. Similarly, this fourth teaching block 'the life of the kingdom community' begins with a narrative section.

Part 4: The life of the kingdom community

(a) Narrative (13:54-15:39)

***Jesus returns to Nazareth* 13:54-58**

After his ministry in Galilee, Jesus returns to Nazareth, his home town, not, of course, his place of birth but the town where he grew up. Whether this event and teaching at the synagogue and his rejection after his teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-31) are one and the same is difficult to say. The question 'where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?' is more an enquiry about authority than about location. Jesus received wisdom, power and authority from his father – not Joseph, but God. It was customary for sons to follow in their father's trade. Joseph was a carpenter, though probably not a carpenter in our precise use of the term. More than likely, he worked with wood but he could have been a carpenter/builder. There is a long tradition (from Justin Martyr) that Jesus made ploughs and yokes but it is only a tradition. The definite article, '*the* carpenter's son', suggests that there was only one tradesman of this kind in the town. The irony is that they accept his wisdom and miracles and yet reject his claims, taking offence at him. Often a successful person is better received at home than anywhere else but not a prophet. Indiscriminate miracles would have made Jesus' ministry into a circus. Miracles were not about confirming his identity but about enriching worship. Jesus did not do many miracles there because of their 'lack of faith', not that absence of this faith deprived him of power but that lack of faith would mean that miracles would not result in worship.

***Jesus and Herod* 14:1-12**

'At that time' is a very vague phrase and need not tie the passage closely to the preceding account. This Herod is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas was 'tetrarch' rather than king, though 'king' was probably in popular usage. The area of his authority included Galilee and Perea, and so both Jesus and John the Baptist had preached in areas under his jurisdiction. When Herod heard about Jesus' ministry he concluded that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. John had not performed miracles (John 10:41) but Herod, possibly spurred on by his own guilty conscience, generates his theory that John the Baptist risen from the dead now performs miracles.

The complex family relationships make it difficult to unravel precisely what John the Baptist was denouncing. In short, Herod Antipas divorced his wife in order to marry his half-brother's wife. His half-brother's wife was also his niece. At Herod's Birthday feast, Herodias's daughter by her former marriage, Salome, danced before the king and his lords and Herod Antipas was proud and foolish enough to make a rash vow offering an extravagant gift. Salome, still young enough to ask her mother's advice, asked for the head of John the Baptist, whose great offence had been telling the truth. Jewish law forbade both decapitation and execution without trial. Characteristically, Matthew notes that as Herod heard reports of Jesus (14:1), so Jesus heard reports of Herod (14:12).

***The feeding of the five thousand* 14:13-21**

'When Jesus heard what had happened' refers not to the death of John the Baptist to Herod's response to his preaching and miracles (14:1-2). Jesus, therefore, decides to withdraw – though escaping the crowds was not always easy. Jesus probably headed to a remote place near Bethsaida (Luke 9:10) by boat and the crowd followed by foot. The account of the feeding of the five thousand is found in all four gospels (Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). Although there could be allusions to the Exodus, the messianic banquet or the Lord's Supper, the most obvious reading of the story is that Jesus had compassion (14:14) on the people. 'Evening' can be used with the same imprecision as we use 'teatime'. The disciples suggest that the crowds are sent away to the villages to get something to eat. It is difficult to know what Jesus meant by 'you give them something to eat'. Perhaps, they should have remembered that they could give to others what Jesus gave to them. In Galilee, bread and fish were the staple diet. Matthew, typically, condenses the story. Jesus is given five loaves and two fish and, after he has given thanks, the multiplied bread and fish are given to the people. There is clearly an abundance of provision. Less clear is whether any significance should be attached to the twelve basketfuls of broken pieces.

***The walk on the water* 14:22-33**

It is clear that Jesus wanted to be alone to pray and, therefore, sent the disciples off in a boat. It may have been necessary to do this to quell the growing enthusiasm of the crowd (John 6:15). No indication is given as to the subject matter of Jesus' prayer but a possibility is that it is to seek his Father's will – all the more so as there is an obvious temptation to become acclaimed King and Messiah by a different route from the one appointed. The Romans used four night watches and their influence prevailed. The fourth watch would be between 3.00 am and 6.00 am. Not surprisingly, the disciples thought they saw an apparition walking on the lake and were terrified. Jesus offers reassuring words ('It is I'). Peter's request ('Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.') has more the sense of 'since it's you' (your presence and leading makes it possible) than being a call for proof that it really is Jesus. At Jesus' command, Peter walked on the water but when he focused not on Jesus but on the storm around him he began to sink. His faith was strong enough to get him out of the boat but not strong enough in the face of the storm. Doubts and fears that arise from looking around can quickly be dispelled by Jesus and refocusing on him. The climax of the miraculous story is not that the wind died down but the worship of the disciples and their confession 'Truly you are the Son of God' (14:33), which contrasts with the people at the synagogue at Nazareth (13:55) and with Herod (14:2).

***Jesus at Gennesaret* 14:34-36**

Matthew draws attention to the sweeping extent of Jesus' public ministry and shows that it extended beyond the disciples. In a crowd it was possible to mix with people who were ceremonially unclean but Jesus was not defiled but cleansed and healed the people.

Jesus and the tradition of the elders 15:1-20

It is likely that the Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem were held in special esteem. They were probably a semi-official deputation (cf. John 1:19) and among Jesus' most resolute opponents. Assuming his readers are familiar with them, Matthew does not deal with any of the Jewish regulations (Mark 7:1-13). He simply addresses the one issue of eating with unwashed hands. In this context, it is not a matter of hygiene but a matter of ceremonial ritual. The 'tradition' refers to the great body of oral teaching attached to the scriptures by the Pharisees. In response, Jesus makes a fundamental distinction between the 'command of God' (in the scriptures) and 'tradition'. Quoting two scriptures (Exodus 20:12; 21:17), Jesus shows the inconsistency of their teaching. Children had a responsibility for their parents. Some children sought to get around that responsibility by saying that they had made a vow that their goods or money, that otherwise would have gone to support their parents, were *korban* (a gift devoted to God). However, such a vow could be annulled, releasing the assets for more selfish use. So 'tradition' could be used to nullify the 'word of God'. Consequently, Jesus calls the Pharisees and teachers of the law 'hypocrites'. Although Isaiah's message (Isaiah 29:13) had a direct application at the time it was originally given, this situation is the same. Isaiah warned Jews from Jerusalem who practised an external religion that went against the principles of true faith. Jesus speaks against the displacement of the religion of the heart with a religion of form. The worship of outward religion is vain and their teachings are not of God but simply their own.

If Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and teachers of the law had been private, Jesus now teaches the crowds the same thing. Jesus says it is not what goes into a man's mouth that makes him unclean but what comes out of it. The disciples call this a 'parable' and, although it does not appear particularly cryptic, the crowd and the disciples appear to find it difficult to understand. That said, the Pharisees understand enough of the parable to be offended (15:12) but the disciples' request to have the parable explained (15:15) shows that they wanted to be certain of exactly what Jesus had said that had offended the Pharisees. In explanation, Jesus uses two images. The first (15:13) predicts the rooting up of any plant the heavenly Father has not planted. As Israel often saw herself as a plant God had planted (Psalm 1:3; Isaiah 60:21), Jesus is saying that the leaders of the Jewish people are not truly part of God's planting. The second image (15:14) may depend on a title some Jewish leaders took on themselves. They had the law, they reasoned, and therefore were fit to serve as 'guides of the blind' (Romans 2:19; cf. Luke 6:39), but in Jesus' view they were 'blind guides of the blind' and the outcome would be that 'both will fall into a pit'. Though the Pharisees and teachers of the law had the scriptures and interpreted them in the synagogues, this does not mean that they really understood them. In actual fact, they did not understand the scriptures they claimed to follow, for they did not discern who Jesus is and follow him (cf. John 5:39-40). Jesus is as shocked at the disciples' failure to understand as he was at the smallness of Peter's faith (Matthew 14:31). What goes into a man's mouth is merely food but the products of the heart come out. True religion deals with the heart and not merely external matters.

Ceremonial food laws were a big issue in the early church. Matthew does not add Mark's conclusion (Mark 7:19).

Jesus and a Canaanite woman 15:21-28

As on many previous occasions, Jesus withdrew (2:12, 22; 4:12; 12:15; 14:13) this time to the region of Tyre and Sidon (cities on Mediterranean coast, about thirty and fifty miles respectively from Galilee and Gentile territory). When a woman (not just a Gentile but a

‘Canaanite’) tells Jesus that her daughter is suffering from demon-possession, Jesus makes no reply but his silence does not quieten the woman. Whether the disciples mean that Jesus should send her away with or without helping her is not clear but the implication from succeeding verses is that they are suggesting that he should help her. Jesus replies that his ministry is to the ‘lost sheep of Israel’. The dramatic intervention of the woman is consistent with the great need of her daughter. Even so, Jesus indicates that the priority in his ministry is to the children (Israel) rather than to the dogs (Gentiles). The woman’s answer is masterly. ‘For even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’ (15:27). In this she reveals both wisdom and faith. She does not plead that she is a special case and worthy of priority, she simply asks for mercy, and the faith that simply seeks mercy is rewarded.

One significant contrast to emerge from this story is the difference in the response made to Jesus by the covenant people (as represented by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law) and this woman. On the one hand, the leaders of the covenant people are offended at the conduct of Jesus’ disciples, challenge his authority, and are so defective in understanding the scriptures that they show themselves not to be plants the heavenly Father has planted. On the other hand, this woman is from pagan stock, a descendant of ancient enemies, with no claim on the God of the covenant and yet it is she who approaches the Jewish Messiah and with great faith asks only for grace which she is given.

***Jesus heals many more* 15:29-31**

Matthew provides a summary of more healings. Jesus left the region of Tyre and Sidon but it is not immediately clear if he went to the west side of the Sea of Galilee (the Jewish side) or to the east side (the predominantly Gentile Decapolis) but ‘they praised the God of Israel’ (15:31) only makes sense of those worshipping because of the miracles were Gentiles. If anyone should think that ‘crumbs’ (15:27) indicates a restricted blessing for the Gentiles then this brief summary reveals a different interpretation and leads into a miracle that shows that, though there is a priority in feeding Israel, a blessing for the Gentiles is beginning to dawn.

***The feeding of the four thousand* 15:32-39**

Sceptical readers see this as a repetition of the story of the feeding of the five thousand, serving only to make the theological point of a miracle for Gentiles as well as Jews. However, the events were within the lifetime of many of Matthew’s readers and the validity of the theological point depends here on the credibility of the historical record. Jesus referred to the two feedings as separate occasions (Matthew 16:9-11).

Jesus’ preaching and miracles so captivated the people that they refused to leave him. Jesus hesitated to dismiss them, fearing that many of them would collapse for hunger on their way home (15:32). It seems hard for us to understand why the disciples were so slow to learn the lesson from the previous feeding of the five thousand. Perhaps, we should realise our own slowness to learn. It is difficult to see any obvious symbolism in the number loaves and fish or in the number of baskets of food remaining.

After feeding the crowd, Jesus got into the boat and set out again. The site of Magadan (15:39) is unknown but as Matthew now speaks of a conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1-4), it is likely that this marked a return to Jewish territory.

STUDY 11: The life of the kingdom community: narrative (Matthew 16:1-17:27)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 4: The life of the kingdom community

(a) Narrative

<i>Another demand for a sign</i>	16:1-4
<i>Yeast of Pharisees and Sadducees</i>	16:5-12
<i>Peter's confession of Christ</i>	16:13-20
<i>The first passion prediction</i>	16:21-23
<i>The way of discipleship</i>	16:24-28
<i>The Transfiguration</i>	17:1-13
<i>The healing of a boy with a demon</i>	17:14-21
<i>A further passion prediction</i>	17:22-23
<i>The temple tax</i>	17:24-27

B HIS MINISTRY IN WORD AND WORKS (continued)

The first teaching block (The Sermon on the Mount), the second teaching block (The commissioning of the twelve) and the third teaching block (Parables of the kingdom) began with some narrative. This fourth teaching block (The life of the kingdom community) begins with a long narrative section (Matthew 13:53-17:27).

Part 4: The life of the kingdom community

(a) Narrative (16:1-17:27)

***Another demand for a sign* 16:1-4**

Jesus has only just returned to Jewish territory when he again meets opposition from the Pharisees and Sadducees (see Matthew 22:23-34). The two groups were frequently at odds both theologically (Pharisees were bound up in legalism but believed in the resurrection, Sadducees did not believe in the spirit world or in the resurrection) and politically but they are united in their opposition to Jesus (Acts 23:6-8). Jesus' point is that they can read 'signs' that predict the weather but they are unable to read 'signs of the times'. The proof that they cannot read the signs is that they are asking for one. The sign they are to be given, the sign of Jonah, is not the kind of sign they would recognise either (see 12:38-42). Opposition again prompts Jesus to withdraw.

***Yeast of Pharisees and Sadducees* 16:5-12**

This is Jesus' last and most important withdrawal from Galilee. The disciples' forgetting to take bread is an opportunity for Jesus to draw out a spiritual truth. While the disciples are thinking about food, Jesus is still thinking about the Pharisees and Sadducees. 'Yeast' was a common symbol for evil but the main point is to show how just a little of it could have a far reaching effect. Somehow, the disciples fail to understand what Jesus is saying and think that he is making reference to the fact that they have forgotten the bread. Jesus could not have been talking about a shortage of bread – he had fed the multitude on more than one occasion with precious little bread. If the Pharisees and the Sadducees are blind to signs, it seems that the disciples are not far behind them. Those with faith see the signs and their significance. Jesus is undoubtedly teaching the disciples and they learn the insidious nature of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

***Peter's confession of Christ* 16:13-20**

Jesus journeyed to Caesarea Philippi, a small town enlarged by Herod the tetrarch at the base of Mount Hermon and renamed in honour of Caesar. 'Philippi' needed to be added to the name to distinguish it from the coastal town of Caesarea. The population was largely Gentile. Jesus question, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' suggests that the identity of the 'Son of Man' (Jesus' favoured self-designation with some ambiguous messianic significance) was unclear. Opinion was divided. Some thought that he was John the Baptist risen from the dead (14:2), others thought he was the forerunner for a Messiah still to come in the mode of Elijah (3:1-3; 11:9-10; 17:10-13). The mixture of authority and suffering was also reminiscent of Jeremiah who, like Jesus, prophesied doom for Israel. Some people thought the Messiah would have a long series of prophetic forerunners and 'one of the prophets' might refer to one of these. What is certain is that no one was confessing that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ.

The question ‘who do you say I am?’ is addressed to the disciples, for the ‘you’ is emphatic and plural. As is often the case, Peter serves as spokesman for the twelve replying, ‘you are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (16:16). Jesus’ commendation indicates the contrast. Simon (Peter) is Son of Jonah but Jesus is the ‘Son of the living God’. To recognise this, Peter has been given a special, divine insight (‘revelation’). It was not that the disciples had never hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah (John 1:41, 45, 49) but this marks a crucial stage in their understanding and growth. Peter’s firm grasp that Jesus is the Messiah set him apart from the crowd. The new name given to Simon is ‘Cephas’ (Aramaic meaning massive rock) or ‘Peter’ (Greek translation of the Aramaic meaning ‘stone’).

The Greek at this point is interesting and critical to a correct interpretation. Jesus says ‘you are *petros* (masculine) and on this *petra* (feminine) I will build my church’. Of course, even the Greek text is a translation of Aramaic and the obvious conclusion is that the same word was used in both places in Aramaic but that it would have been senseless to translate it in such a way as to give Peter a feminine name but that in the second usage the sense is maintained by using the ordinary word for ‘rock’. Historic tensions between Roman Catholic and Protestant interpretations of such passages must not cloud the issue. Although, Jesus is the rock on which the new temple is built, it seems unlikely that Jesus gives Peter the name ‘rock’ but then says that he, himself, is the rock on which the church is built. Some have suggested that the ‘rock’ is Peter’s confession of Christ (an attractive theory to Protestants) but not obvious from the text. Metaphors in scripture are not always consistent and that needs to be remembered here. On the other hand, this passage does not say anything about Peter’s successors or any exclusive authority. Peter is simply the first to make this formal confession of Christ and building starts with him.

‘Church’ (Gk *ekklesia*) means a people called out or an assembly (gathering, congregation). Building a people was not a new idea and the Jews expected the Messiah to build a Messianic community. The kingdom has been inaugurated, the people are being gathered and nothing (even the gates of Hades) will stop its relentless progress. The metaphor changes and Peter is the one who holds the keys of the kingdom. The person with the keys has power to exclude or permit entrance but this is clearly linked with binding and loosing. The grammar and interpretation of this passage is notoriously difficult. The same gospel both binds and looses. Peter accomplishes this binding and loosing by proclaiming the gospel that Jesus is the Christ, a truth that has been revealed to him. However, the time of open proclamation cannot precede the death and resurrection of Jesus, hence, Jesus warns his disciples ‘not to tell anyone that he was the Christ’ (16:20).

***The first passion prediction* 16:21-23**

The three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) follow a similar pattern with this narrative. Peter recognises that Jesus is the Christ by divine revelation. This confession is followed by Jesus’ prediction of his sufferings. ‘From that time’ marks a clear turning point, as Jesus heads for Jerusalem for the last time. This is the first open discussion about his death that Jesus has with his disciples. Now they have recognised him as the Messiah the time for symbols and veiled language is largely over. The fulfilment of the detailed prediction (he must suffer many things, be killed and on the third day be raised to life) is in accordance with his Father’s will. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus shows that he understood what Jesus was saying and yet could not harmonise his view of the Messiah with the Suffering Servant. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ but then speaks as if he knows more of God’s will than the Messiah himself. In return, Jesus must strongly rebuke Peter. From being a worshipper, Peter, in his doubting of Jesus’ words, is articulating deceit from the

father of lies, Satan. Satan had previously offered Jesus kingship without suffering (4:8-9). Peter is not now a rock but a 'stumbling block' (Gk *skandalon*).

The way of discipleship

16:24-28

A man condemned to crucifixion was often forced to carry part of his own cross - a burden and a sign of death. Saving one's life (Gk *psyche*) *now* will result in losing it *at the end*, and losing it *now* will result in finding it *at the end*. The folly is clear. 'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul (Gk *psyche*)?' (16:26). The poorness of the deal, the example of Jesus and the judgement he will exercise are incentives to take up one's cross and follow him.

The Son of Man coming 'in his Father's glory' is another claim to divine status. In the Old Testament it was God who rewarded people according to what they had done (Psalm 62:12). Here, the one with this authority is Jesus. Of course, this verse, far from being 'a do-gooder's charter' shows that it is discipleship (taking up the cross) that is rewarded and not 'good works' as such. Taking up the cross and following is a mark of obedient faith. There are 'some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' (16:28) is difficult to interpret. The two critical issues are what the expressions 'taste death' and 'see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' mean. 'Taste death' does not seem capable of any but the most obvious interpretation. 'See the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' could, most obviously refer to the Lord's future coming in glory ('the Parousia'), but could also refer to the rapid multiplication of disciples after the day of Pentecost, which suits the understanding of 'kingdom'. This short passage would then begin with the challenge to take up the cross and follow Christ in the immediate future and end with the promise of witness the kingdom power of Jesus in the immediate future.

The Transfiguration

17:1-13

It is difficult to know whether the 'six days' mentioned here is just a statement of fact, showing proximity to the previous incident, or also contains an allusion to the six days that the cloud covered the mountain before God called to Moses from within the cloud (Exodus 24:16). The traditional 'high mountain' is Mount Tabor, but it is not that high and is not really on the route from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum. Mount Hermon is much higher but is not only likely to be extremely cold at night but it is also in Gentile territory, so meeting teachers of the law at the bottom (Mark 9:14) makes it an unlikely location. Mount Miron, the highest mountain within Israel and on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum is a possibility. Peter, James and John are the inner circle of disciples. When Jesus was 'transfigured' (Gk *metamorphoo*) it seems that the disciples were privileged to see something of his pre-incarnate glory (Philippians 2:6-7) and anticipate his coming exaltation (2 Peter 1:16-18; Rev 1:16). Together Moses and Elijah may well summarise the Law and Prophets. Peter was undoubtedly trying to say the right thing and yet missed the essential point which was the uniqueness of Jesus. The cloud is reminiscent of the *shekinah* glory and also associated with the Exodus. The voice from heaven (consistent with 3:17) stresses that the disciples should listen to Jesus. The revelation of the divine glory caused them to fall face down and when they arose they saw no one but Jesus. The uniqueness of Jesus is again disclosed and confirmed the disciples' conviction that Jesus was the Messiah.

Again, Jesus reminds them that they are not to tell others of this until he had risen from the dead. Jesus could not have attached this permission to earlier warnings to keep silent as he had not yet spoken clearly about his sufferings and death. If the disciples began to proclaim Jesus as the Christ it could provoke a misunderstanding about the nature of his messiahship.

The strongest evidence of his messiahship would be his resurrection (Romans 1:4), which would follow his sufferings and death. The disciples want to clear up the point about Elijah coming as forerunner. Jesus explains that ‘an Elijah’, John the Baptist has already come.

The healing of a boy with a demon 17:14-21

Again, Matthew, Mark and Luke follow the same pattern as this story follows the descent from the Mount of Transfiguration. In this case the seizures are linked with demon possession. The ‘disciples’ unable to heal him are presumably the nine left behind while Peter, James and John were on the mountain with Jesus. Jesus is undoubtedly exasperated by their unbelief and so it is likely that the ‘perverse generation’ are unbelievers. Jesus will not have to put up with that forever. After Jesus had cast out the demon immediately, the disciples seek an explanation. It was not so much to do with their little faith (in terms of size) but the poverty of their faith. In short, it has more to do with true faith than with giant faith. The answer complements the reply in Mark (9:29) about prayer. Removal of mountains was proverbial for overcoming great difficulties. The promise does not mean that a disciple can do anything but that a disciple under divine authority can accomplish works for the kingdom that seemed impossible (Philippians 4:13).

A further passion prediction 17:22-23

‘When they came together’ suggests that the three disciples and the nine disciples are reunited. The theme of Jesus’ inevitable death is reiterated. It is important for disciples to realise that the death of Jesus was part of God’s plan (Matthew 26:39). The fact that the disciples are filled with grief suggests that they comprehended the reality of his betrayal and death but had yet to comprehend the hope of his resurrection.

The temple tax 17:24-27

It is probable that the *didrachma* tax was a Jewish tax levied on every male Jew between the aged 20-50 years to support the temple and its services. Simon Peter is very clear that the Lord Jesus pays this temple tax but Jesus shows that even though he pays it he ought to be exempt for just as royal sons are exempt from the taxes imposed by their fathers, so Jesus is exempt from the temple tax, because it is his Father’s house. The plural so as *we* may not could suggest that Jesus had both himself and Peter in mind. The interpretation being that, by faith, Peter is now also a son and need not pay the temple tax. Another possibility is that the disciples would be expected to follow their teacher and so Jesus sets a good example to them. In actual fact, the temple tax did not cost Jesus and Peter anything for it is provided for them by God through the agency of the fish. Here is a lesson in humility. In common with the other miracles that do not involve healing, the miracle is for the sake of the disciples. Jesus will take much longer to explain humility to the disciples (18:1-35).

Study 12: The life of the kingdom community: teaching (Matthew 18:1-35)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 4: The life of the kingdom community

(b) Teaching

Who is the greatest? 18:1-9

The parable of the lost sheep 18:10-14

A brother who sins against you 18:15-20

Repeated forgiveness 18:21-22

Parable of the unmerciful servant 18:23-35

Part 4: The life of the kingdom community

(b) Teaching (18:1-35)

Who is the greatest?

18:1-9

The verses before and after this discourse suggest that it was given on one occasion. It is Jesus' last discourse of his Galilean ministry before he goes to Judea. The disciples need to learn about the life of the kingdom community and their question gives the Lord Jesus opportunity to teach them. Not so long before (17:23) the disciples had been filled with grief because Jesus had spoken again of his sufferings and death. Their grief was short-lived for their attention soon turns to the issue of who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In short, who will be number two to Jesus? 'The very fact that they asked the question showed that they had no idea at all what the kingdom of heaven was' (Barclay). It is a preoccupation that will continue in the ambitions of James, John and their mother (20:20-23).

The obvious interpretation is that the 'disciples' here are the twelve disciples though it is just possible that more disciples are included. Jesus uses the solemn introductory formula, "I tell you the truth," to indicate that what follows is important and says that the disciples must "change (in the sense of being turned around) and become like little children," or "they will never enter the kingdom of heaven". This 'change' will affect their attitudes – in terms of their self-importance, their attitudes to others, to sin and to service (Price).

In the ancient world children were regarded as insignificant and unimportant (the very opposite of that to which the questioners aspired). Jesus is not referring to childishness but childlikeness – humility and trust. The natural position of the little child is one of entire reliance on the parents. The truly humble person is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven – to such a person the question of personal status does not arise. The kingdom is not gained by personal merit (5:3) or by force (11:12). It is to "little children" that truth is revealed (11:25). Humility was a quality that Jesus himself displayed (Philippians 2:8). The kingdom of heaven is not like other kingdoms.

The children that are welcomed (18:5) are clearly not literal children but those who humble themselves to become like children and who are, therefore, true disciples of Jesus. People who might be rejected in other parts of society are welcome in the kingdom of heaven (Ye poor and maimed and halt and blind/In Christ a hearty welcome find – C. Wesley). Such disciples are welcomed because they come in Jesus' name (v. 5) and believe in him (v. 6). The person that welcomes these disciples of Jesus ('little ones'), because they are his, welcomes Jesus himself. It is also possible to reject these disciples because they follow Jesus, which is also an indirect reaction to Jesus himself. It is possible for these disciples to stumble but whoever causes them stumble ('sin') is liable to the gravest judgement.

Jesus continues to proclaim judgement upon the world. Here the 'world' is not the battle ground on which the struggle between good and evil takes place; rather the 'world' is that which is set against the kingdom of heaven. Such opposition to the kingdom of heaven is not to be considered unusual for Jesus himself has said that it will occur. Nevertheless, the disciples are assured of victory over evil. The expression, 'If your hand or your foot causes you to sin' (v. 8) is similar to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:29-30). Again, it is reasonable from the context to conclude that Jesus used such dramatic figures of speech to show the seriousness of sin. To enter the kingdom of heaven, the disciples of Jesus must become like children in their humility (cf. the Beatitudes). The disciples must not succumb

to pride but deal with sin in their own lives. Jesus treats the sin of pride as seriously as he early treated lust. We are not to mutilate the body but we are to bring it under control. Decisive action is necessary to deal with sin – not least because of the awful consequences

***The parable of the lost sheep* 18:10-14**

Angels are sent to minister to those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14) but scripture does not teach that each person has a guardian angel. If that were the case it would be an important doctrine that was readily apparent throughout scripture. The fact that some scriptures speak of the work of angels as guarding (Psalm 91:11) is no justification for the idea that each individual has a guardian angel. In scripture, one angel may be given the charge of ministering to churches (Revelation 1:20) or nations (Daniel 10:13). Warfield suggested that the ‘angels in heaven’ of the ‘little ones’ are those who have died and now see the Father’s face in glory. Jesus teaches that, at the general resurrection, God’s people ‘will be like the angels in heaven’ (Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:36). However, probably a better conclusion is that the whole expression simply teaches that the angelic servants of God with general responsibility for the community of faith bring the situation of the lowliest people on earth to the highest point of heaven.

A similar parable appears in Luke 15:3-7 but there the audience is not disciples but Pharisees and teachers of the law. However, the parables are also different enough in form to suggest that Jesus used the same basic idea but applied it differently on more than one occasion. Here, the context suggests that the point of the parable is that those in the kingdom of heaven must share the Father’s concern that none is lost. When one sheep has gone astray, he does not reason that he still has ninety-nine left. His concern for the one wandering sheep is so great that he rejoices more over its restoration than over the ninety-nine that do not stray. That said, God’s love for the individual is not at the expense of the whole flock but that the flock may be preserved complete.

***A brother who sins against you* 18:15-20**

Not only does sin attack the kingdom community from the outside but also from the inside. Here Jesus deals with the disciple who sins against a fellow-disciple. In such circumstances, the proper thing to do is to talk to the offending fellow-disciple privately (see also Leviticus 19:17). The aim must be to win him (or her) over, because the aim of all church discipline is to secure the salvation of fellow-disciples, not to lose them. An individual who needs to speak to an offending fellow-disciple must do so with true humility. If this private approach does not work then it is necessary to involve two or three others (see also Deuteronomy 19:15). It is possible that a fellow-disciple might take more notice of two or three respected people rather than just one person with whom there has been some kind of disagreement or grievance. Part of the essence of being a disciple is following together. The people of God in the Greek Old Testament are often called the ‘assembly’, ‘community’ or ‘church’ (Gk *ekklesia*). When the erring disciple realises that the whole church disapproves then that should cause that disciple to come back into line. Even here, it is more a personal matter than a matter of excommunication. To treat someone as a pagan and a tax-collector is not the same as having nothing more to do with them. It is treating that person as being outside of the Christian community so that they might be challenged and ready to be restored to it. In this instance, the grievance was between individuals and the outcome is between individuals. However, there are also circumstances where someone steps out of line with the church leadership.

Today, the whole issue of church discipline is difficult. Most of us will have, at some time, been on the wrong end of the tongue of a less-than-humble church member who has decided 'to speak the truth in love', in such a way that has contained little truth and no love. On the other hand, today's church can incline to a situation where anything goes. Churches that operate a 'closed table' at communion, where receiving communion depends on fulfilling particular requirements (e.g. Roman Catholic Church; Brethren and some independent churches) are inclined to exercise church discipline in terms of excommunication. Churches where membership is important are inclined to exercise church discipline in terms of expulsion (but as in very few churches is membership now a requirement of receiving communion, even those expelled are unlikely to be refused communion). Historically, the Methodist movement expelled 'disorderly walkers' and those who no longer attended the society meetings, saying that they had 'ceased to meet'. The expression 'ceased to meet' lives on in the Methodist Church to express those who have lost any living contact with the church. Very little is achieved by expelling a person from membership (though members do retain the right to vote at the General Church Meeting). Today, many Methodists try to follow the biblical principles by requiring those who hold church office or particular leadership roles to show a living commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the kingdom of heaven and to come voluntarily under the discipline of the church. This might not be an ultimately satisfactory solution but seems preferable to the 'legalism' of some Christians.

A further solemn introduction precedes another solemn and significant saying. The passage has similarities with the binding and loosing that Jesus spoke about before (16:19). If the earlier interpretation that binding and loosing means what is forbidden and what is permitted is accepted then the church in this context is the last resort and must have the final say on what conduct is forbidden to the believer and what conduct is accepted. In other words, it is not the rabbinical teaching that is now authoritative but the decision of the Christian assembly. This cannot mean that the decisions of the Christian assembly are binding on God. Rather, if the church is open to the guidance of God it will, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, be responsive to his guidance and therefore the decisions it arrives at will be those that have already been made in heaven.

This is followed by more teaching with another emphatic introduction. The promise about two agreeing is often misunderstood to mean that any prayer in which two believers agree will be answered affirmatively. It is more likely that this statement relates to offender and the offended from the earlier passage. The promise is that if two individuals in the church come to agreement concerning any claim they are pursuing it will be ratified by God (Derrett). That is not to say that there is no value in believers coming together to pray. Jesus does not say everything that there is to say about faithful prayer but he clearly commends that value of disciples praying together. Jesus easily moves from the work of the Father in heaven to his presence with his people. He will be spiritually present with the 'two or three' (the smallest possible group) and with all his followers (Matthew 28:20).

Repeated forgiveness

18:21-22

Peter's question about personal forgiveness quite naturally follows the preceding discussion. The rabbinic tradition was that a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times but not on the fourth time. Big-hearted Peter has clearly learned something from Jesus and offers 'seven times' (a larger number rather like we would use ten or a dozen). Jesus' response is not saying that seventy-seven times (transforming Lamech's revenge into a principle of forgiveness, Genesis 4:24) is the upper limit of forgiveness. Disciples have been received far greater forgiveness than they could ever give and Jesus underlines this with a parable.

Parable of the unmerciful servant 18:23-35

‘Servants’ may include some quite high-ranking officials. It is difficult to know the value of ten thousand talents. The monetary value of a ‘talent’ is unknown and inflation makes comparisons more or less meaningless (cf. the cost of for constructing the temple, 1 Chronicles 29:4, 7), so the simple expression ‘millions’ (NEB) will have to suffice. It was a familiar practice to imprison debtors for two reasons; firstly, the debtor could not default on the debt by disappearing and, secondly, the debtor’s family and friends would have the incentive of raising the money. However, in this case, such a great debt would not be covered by selling the family into slavery. In effect, everything was lost. A slave would not be worth even one talent. Although the servant begs for time, extra time is not really going to help. In response to the servant’s plea, the master took pity upon him and cancelled the debt.

The servant, however, is owed a relatively small amount (about 100 days’ wages for a labourer), next to nothing compared with the debt he owed that has been recently cancelled. His demand for repayment from his fellow-servant is extremely harsh. Unmoved by his fellow-servant’s plea, even though it was so similar to his own, he has his fellow-servant thrown into prison. This, of itself, was a harsh action for it was illegal to sell a man for a sum greater than his debt and even an inexpensive slave was worth about 500 denarii and the debt was only 100 denarii. The other servants, distressed by what had happened, told (the word has the sense of ‘explained in detail’) the master.

When the servant owed ten thousand talents, the king forgave him; but when the servant shows himself unforgiving toward a fellow servant, the king calls him ‘wicked’ (v. 32). Instead of selling him, which had been his original plan, he turns him over to the ‘torturers’. The servant is to be tortured until he pays back all he owes which, it was clear from the beginning, he would never be able to do.

The parable paints a picture of a king who forgives mercifully and punishes ruthlessly. Jesus does not always make an application of the truth taught in his parables but here it is quite clear that the picture portrays his heavenly Father. Jesus does not see anything inconsistent in the Father’s nature. It is precisely because he is a God of such compassion and mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy. This is not to say that the king’s compassion can be earned. The servant did not have any hope of earning his forgiveness. He is granted freedom only by virtue of the greatness of the king’s forgiveness. It is in recognition of the great forgiveness that they have received that those who are forgiven must forgive (6:12, 14-15), lest they show themselves incapable of receiving forgiveness. ‘To refuse forgiveness of others is to close off the forgiveness of God towards us’ (Price).

If greatness in the kingdom derives from my sense of humility and dependence as a child on God (18:1-14), growth in the kingdom derives from my sense of humility and utter gratitude for his cleansing, which permeates my dealings with other equally fallen people (18:15-35).

(Price)

Study 13: The Little Apocalypse: narrative (Matthew 19:1-20:34)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 5: The Little Apocalypse

(a) Narrative

<i>Marriage and divorce</i>	19:1-12
<i>Blessing little children</i>	19:13-15
<i>The rich young man</i>	19:16-30
<i>Workers in the vineyard</i>	20:1-16
<i>Jesus predicts his death</i>	20:17-19
<i>A mother's request</i>	20:20-28
<i>Two blind men receive sight</i>	20:29-34

B HIS MINISTRY IN WORD AND WORKS (continued)

Matthew is a Gospel about the coming of the Messiah. The basic structure of Matthew's Gospel falls into three sections:

- A The Messiah: His genealogy and nativity (1-2)
- B The Messiah: His ministry in word and works (3-25)
- C The Messiah: His death and resurrection (26-28)

The fourth block of teaching 'the life of the kingdom community' ends with these words, 'When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan' (Matthew 19:1). This verse indicates very clearly that the fourth teaching block has come to an end. The first teaching block (The Sermon on the Mount), the second teaching block (The commissioning of the twelve), the third teaching block (Parables of the kingdom) and the fourth teaching block (The life of the kingdom community) began with some narrative. Similarly, this fifth and final teaching block 'the Little Apocalypse' begins with a narrative section.

(a) Narrative (19:1-20:34)

***Marriage and divorce* 19:1-12**

It is difficult to know exactly which route Jesus took because of a textual uncertainty in the parallel passage (Mark 10:1) but that need not concern us here. The important point to note is that 'large crowds' continued to follow Jesus as he continued to heal in Judea as he had done in Galilee.

The passage is clearly about both marriage and divorce, for although the question is about divorce the first part of Jesus' answer is about marriage. Matthew often reports that Jesus encountered opposition from the Pharisees. Their 'test' here could be designed to get Jesus either to appear to contradict Moses or get Jesus embroiled in the matter of Herod's relationship with Herodias, which had brought about the death of John the Baptist. The question, whether it is right for a man to divorce his wife 'for any and every reason' reflects a wide diversity of Jewish opinion, which was roughly divided between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. Both schools considered only the grounds for a man divorcing his wife and were agreed that it might be possible for 'something indecent' (Deuteronomy 24:1). However, they disagreed over the definition of 'something indecent'. The school of Shammai more or less limited 'something indecent' to adultery. The school of Hillel extended the definition to such matters as providing an improperly cooked meal. Jesus had already spoken of the sanctity of marriage and the problem of divorce in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:31-32). As he often does, Jesus speaks about God's ideal before human sin. God himself created humanity to be male and female (Genesis 1:27), the implication, 'for this reason', being that it is man and woman that should be joined in marriage (Genesis 2:24) and become one flesh (Ephesians 5:28-31). God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Divorce is not what he intended. It is God who unites.

There are very few families that are not touched by the awful tragedy and pain of broken marriages. Such sadness is not to be dealt with lightly. The two competing rabbinic schools had their own regulations about permissible divorces but Jesus does not go down the road of rules and regulations. Instead, Jesus summarises the scriptural teaching on marriage.

Moving on to the question of divorce, Jesus notes that Moses did not command it (19:7) but permitted it (19:8). Divorce is not part of the Creator's perfect design.

In the Law of Moses, adultery was a capital offence (Deuteronomy 22:22) rather than a ground for divorce. Jesus says that no divorce is permissible 'except for marital unfaithfulness' (Gk *porneia*, which in other parts of the New Testament is used to describe 'prostitution', 1 Corinthians 6:13, 16). It is almost impossible to say whether 'marital unfaithfulness' means adultery or sexual sin. The whole subject is further complicated because Mark and Luke do not include the clause 'except for marital unfaithfulness'. In Jewish thought marriage was considered a duty, the disciples appear to be concluding that, taking all things into account, marriage is a rather unattractive proposition, which seems to misunderstand completely what Jesus is saying. In response, Jesus concedes that there are some for whom 'it is better not to marry' but this is because of impotency or castration (as some court officials or religious sects) or because of a special calling.

The dangers are either to interpret the scriptures too liberally (or ignore them all together) and undermine the sanctity of marriage or to interpret the scriptures too legalistically and fall back into the trap of the rabbinical schools. It is difficult to sum this sensitive issue up briefly, especially as nearly everyone has a family member affected by it. Is it an option simply to divorce a spouse and marry someone else and not sin? No, divorce is not an option to 'legalise' adultery. Is divorce always sinful? The answer must be 'yes'. Is it sometimes the best available option? Sadly, the answer must also be 'yes'. How are we to interpret 'marital unfaithfulness'? It is difficult - it is clearly meant to be something serious and not trivial. Is divorce an unforgivable sin? The scriptures do not say that it is. Is a divorce on 'unscriptural grounds' still a divorce? The answer must be 'yes'. Are all divorcees free to remarry? Yes. Should divorcees be free to remarry in church? This is an extremely difficult question that ministers face regularly. Now that there are few, if any, pressures on couples to be married, an important consideration is their sense of responsibility and state of heart now rather than a detailed examination of all that has happened in the past but this can only be a provisional response to an extremely difficult subject.

***Blessing little children* 19:13-15**

It was quite usual for children to be brought to a rabbi for a blessing and the scriptures speak of the laying on of hands in such blessings (Genesis 48:14; Numbers 27:18). It is difficult to know why the disciples rebuked those who brought the children to Jesus. However, it is probably not a coincidence that Matthew records this incident immediately after a discussion of marriage. Children are patterns of humility, rather in contrast to the disciples at this point. The kingdom of heaven does not belong to children but to those who are 'like children' (in humility and faith).

***The rich young man* 19:16-30**

Jesus has just finished saying that childlike humility and faith characterise those who belong to the kingdom when a rich young man approaches him. Like Luke (Luke 18:15), Matthew does not record that the young man addressed Jesus as 'good teacher' (Mark 10:17) but Jesus still clearly addresses that point in his answer, 'there is only One who is good' (Matthew 19:17). Many Jews believed that a specific act of goodness could win eternal life and this young man might have been influenced by such thinking. In order to prick the man's pride, Jesus tells him to obey the commandments but to this the young man replies, 'which ones?' In reply, Jesus lists the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and fifth commandments (Exodus 20) and adds 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:34-40). The young

man's response feels as if it could be an interruption, fuelled by pride. Pursuing his question, the young man continues, 'what do I still lack?' Jesus replies with a statement about 'perfection'. Perfection here is synonymous with completeness, which is the loyalty and obedience that comes from following Jesus and relying totally on him. Worldly wealth is, of itself, not sinful and yet it is very easy for a wealthy person to trust in wealth (and in a sense serve it) rather than trusting in Jesus. Formal compliance with the law is not enough. It is clear that the young man's money was competing with God when what Jesus demands is faithful discipleship, in which doing God's will means following him.

It cannot be the case that there will be no wealthy people in the kingdom of heaven (the Patriarchs, and many of the kings were wealthy and faithful). However, most Jews expected the rich to inherit eternal life because their wealth testified to the Lord's blessing on their lives. The camel was the biggest animal in Palestine (metaphorically equivalent to our elephant) and the eye of a needle is clearly a challenging gap even for a fine thread. The disciples query the whole issue. If rich men cannot be saved (the equivalent of entering the kingdom of God) then who can be? Peter is not sure that such teaching is fair and emphatically points out, 'we have left everything to follow you'. Jesus gently rebukes him by pointing out that such sacrifice is small compared to the blessings of the kingdom, not least that the twelve disciples will sit on twelve thrones and share judgement with the Son of Man. Jesus encourages the disciples with the blessings that are to come. They are not meant to be taken literally (for one can only have one father and one mother). The main point is that God is not a debtor to anyone. Jesus uses a proverbial saying, 'many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first' (19:30) and illustrates it by use of a parable.

Workers in the vineyard 20:1-16

There were reckoned to be twelve hours from dawn to sunset. The landowner (see Isaiah 5) starts hiring men 'early in the morning' (literally 'at dawn') and agrees to pay each worker a denarius (the normal daily wage for a foot soldier or labourer). The third hour was 9.00 am, the sixth hour was noon and the ninth hour was 3.00 pm. The eleventh hour was 5.00 pm. The market-place was a normal venue for the hiring of casual labour. The third-hour men are promised 'whatever is right' and, throughout the day, further men are hired on a similar basis. Even at the eleventh hour there are other men with nothing to do and so they are hired also. Labourers were paid at the end of each day and so the foreman is told to pay each man. The landowner instructs the foreman to begin, according to usual practice, with those who were hired at the eleventh hour. They received a day's wage and so those who started at dawn expected to get more than that. Consequently, they 'grumble against the landowner' because he has been generous to others and merely just to them. They have 'borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day'. Although fairly paid, they feel unfairly treated because others who worked much less received what they did. The landowner gently points out that he can be generous if he wants to be.

The parable is not about normal working arrangements but about grace. God's gifts are not earned as such but given because God is gracious. God's grace makes some who are last first. The point of the parable is not that all in the kingdom will receive the same reward but that kingdom rewards depend on God's sovereign grace. The parable begins with a topical scene but ends with a surprise to make a powerful point. 'Jesus deliberately and cleverly led the listeners along by degrees until they understood that if God's generosity was to be represented by a man; such a man would be different from any man ever encountered' (Huffmann).

***Jesus predicts his death* 20:17-19**

Matthew focuses attention on the journey to Jerusalem. Only the twelve disciples are ready to hear this passion prediction. They are going there, Jesus says, because there the Son of Man will be betrayed and killed. He will be condemned to death (as a result of legal proceedings), and handed over to the Gentiles (i.e. the Romans) to be mocked and flogged and crucified. The resurrection is mentioned briefly but not understood (Luke 18:34). The narrative looks back to the grace of God in the previous parable and forward to the squabbling of the disciples that follows.

***A mother's request* 20:20-28**

Luke's similar account (Luke 22:24-30) is probably a different occasion. Despite Jesus' repeated predictions of his passion, two disciples and their mother are still thinking about privilege, status, and power. 'Right and left hand' suggest closeness to the King's person and sharing in his prestige and power. Jesus' answer is not severe but shows that they are seeking these things through ignorance. The 'cup' in Old Testament imagery relates to judgement or retribution (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17-18; Jeremiah 25:15-28). In any event, these positions have already been assigned by the Father. The ten are indignant more because of jealousy than humility. Jesus contrasts Gentile greatness with greatness in the kingdom. Gentile rulers operate on a different structure. Greatness among Jesus' disciples is based on service. Anyone who wants to be great must become the 'servant'. In the pagan world humility was regarded, not so much as a virtue, but as a vice. In the kingdom a 'slave' is given leadership – revolutionary teaching indeed. Though the Son of Man had every right to be served he came as a servant. He came to give his life as a ransom for many (see 1 Peter 1:18). There is never any mention in the New Testament as to whom the price for deliverance is paid but the inevitable conclusion is that 'the life of Jesus, surrendered in a sacrificial death, brought about the release of forfeited lives. He acted on behalf of the many by taking their place' (Harris). 'The many' could well be a reference to Isaiah 53.

***Two blind men receive sight* 20:29-34**

Mark (10:44-52) and Luke (18:35-43) mention only one blind man (Bartimaeus) but Matthew often gives more details. There is also a problem to harmonise the gospel accounts that say that Jesus was entering Jericho. At this time there were two Jerichos, an older town on the hill and a newer Herodian town. Matthew and Mark mention the old Jewish town and Luke mentions the newer town is possibly the simplest explanation of the confusion. In any event, Matthew shows that as Jesus leaves Jericho he continues his merciful and compassionate ministry, for the good of others, and not to save himself. Jericho produced large quantities of balsam which was believed to be beneficial for the eyes and it might be that the men had gone to Jericho for that reason and had been reduced to begging. Matthew stresses that Jesus mercifully healed the men despite the opposition of the crowds, which, like the disciples, wanted to share his glory but not practice his compassion.

Study 14: The Little Apocalypse: narrative (Matthew 21:1-22:46)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 5: The Little Apocalypse

(a) Narrative

<i>The triumphal entry</i>	21:1-11
<i>Jesus at the temple</i>	21:12-17
<i>The withering of the fig tree</i>	21:18-22
<i>The authority of Jesus questioned</i>	21:23-27
<i>The parable of the two sons</i>	21:28-32
<i>The parable of the tenants</i>	21:33-46
<i>The parable of the wedding banquet</i>	22:1-14
<i>Paying taxes to Caesar</i>	22:15-22
<i>Marriage at the resurrection</i>	22:23-33
<i>The greatest commandment</i>	22:34-40
<i>Whose son is the Christ?</i>	22:41-46

The triumphal entry

21:1-11

There was a Roman military road from Jericho to Jerusalem and this passed through Bethany and nearby Bethphage ('house of figs'). The ride on the colt, that Jesus arranged, appears to be an acted parable. The words from the prophet come from Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. A donkey (Gk 'beast of burden') was sometimes ridden by rulers in times of peace (Judges 5:10, 1 Kings 1:33). Mark and Luke say that the animal was so young that it had never been ridden. Matthew points out that the colt had previously been with its mother and that both were brought to Jesus. The unbroken animal remains calm in the hands of the Messiah despite the journey through 'a very large' and noisy crowd. The words of praise come primarily from Psalm 118:25-26. 'Hosanna' is a Hebrew word that originally was a cry for help (save!) but had come to mean an invocation of blessing or an acclamation. 'Son of David' is a title of the Messiah but it is clear that Jesus is coming in peace. Jesus probably entered the city through what is now St Stephen's gate near the north entrance to the outer court of the temple. The question asked by the citizens of Jerusalem 'Who is this?' does not imply that Jesus was unknown in Jerusalem but is a straightforward enquiry as to who it could be whose arrival has created such a commotion. Many of his contemporaries believed that Jesus was a prophet but it was surprise that he was from Nazareth in Galilee.

Jesus at the temple

21:12-17

John (2:12-25) records a cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, while Matthew, along with the other synoptists, records a cleansing at the end of Jesus' ministry. It is fair to say that the majority of commentators think that there was one cleansing of the temple but Leon Morris points out that there are still numerous differences between the two accounts making the conclusion that there were two separate occasions quite reasonable.

Temple service required that everything necessary for sacrifices was provided. The money-changers changed Greek and Roman currency into temple currency (shekels) so that they half-shekel temple tax could be paid. This money-changing encroached into the temple itself and was also open to corruption. Just as Jesus used scripture when confronting the devil his first words here are from Isaiah 56:7 and then from Jeremiah 7:11. 'Robbers' can also be translated 'nationalist rebels' and if that is the right understanding the 'house of prayer for all nations' had become a focal point for superstitious belief that God would protect his people irrespective of their obedience to his will.

Jesus' last healing takes place at the temple. The chief priests and teachers of the law ask Jesus if he hears what the children are shouting ('Hosanna, to the Son of David')? Jesus supports the children with a quotation from Psalm 8:2. In this Jesus applies a scripture to himself that is applicable only to God. The humble, child-like acclamation of his messiahship is to be found on the lips of children rather than on the lips of the learned and the wise, who do not even seem to know their scriptures. To escape the crowds, Jesus retires to the village of Bethany.

The withering of the fig tree 21:18-22

Matthew is not so precise about the timing of this event as Mark, who splits it into two parts. Like the cleansing of the temple, the withering of the fig tree appears to be an acted parable. Leaves on the fig tree would promise fruit and though the figs did not normally ripen until later in the year (Mark) there could sometimes be green, and edible if not palatable, figs on the tree. A common interpretation is that the fig tree represents Israel, cursed for not bearing fruit. A better interpretation is that Jesus is cursing those who make a show of bearing much fruit but are spiritually barren.

The figure of the mountain cast into the sea was common in Jesus' teaching. The meaning is that the smallest amount of pure faith can throw a mountain into the sea, though the mountain is nothing more than a hyperbolic example of a miracle. Belief is not a matter of forcing ourselves to 'believe' what we cannot believe. It is related to genuine trust in God, discerning and obeying his will.

***The authority of Jesus questioned* 21:23-27**

The 'narrative' dimension continues as Jesus makes the final journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. It was customary to stop well-known teachers and ask them questions and this section opens a long series of such questions and controversies the answers to which include several parables. Jesus is challenged about his authority while teaching in the temple courts. The chief priests were members of the Sanhedrin while the elders of the people were probably non-priestly members of the Sanhedrin. The obvious reason for the questions was an attempt to trap Jesus. His reply is masterful. Responding to a question with a question was common enough in rabbinic debate and should not be seen as a 'politician's answer'. 'John's baptism' was a phrase referring to John the Baptist's entire ministry. If they respond, 'From heaven,' then they must believe John who pointed to Jesus. They are afraid to answer 'From men' because the people revered John the Baptist as a prophet. Consequently, Jesus has not really dodged the question at all. Rather he has shown their hypocrisy.

***The parable of the two sons* 21:28-32**

The way to interpret 'first' and 'other' (Gk 'second') son is 'older' and 'younger'. The sons reply differently to the father's command to go and work in the vineyard. The parable is slightly obscured by a textual difficulty but we simply follow the NIV translation. The first son says he will not go to the vineyard to work but changes his mind and goes. The second son says that he will go but then did not go. The obvious answer is that the first son does his father's will. For the first time Jesus openly makes a personal application of one of his parables to the Jewish leaders, with the solemn preface 'I tell you the truth'. It is more likely that the word translated here 'ahead of you' should be rendered 'and you do not'. The direct association with prostitutes shows the low esteem in which tax collectors were held. Jesus is saying that those the Jewish leaders look down upon will enter the kingdom of heaven if they change their minds and do the father's will, whereas however loudly the religious leaders tell of their 'yes to the father' their righteousness can never be enough. This is not a distinction between Jew and Gentile but between religious leader and repentant sinner. John came preaching God's will about what was right, pointing to Jesus and the righteousness of his kingdom.

***The parable of the tenants* 21:33-46**

For quite some time, Jesus has been telling his disciples that the rulers at Jerusalem would be responsible for his death (16:21; 17:23; 20:18). Bearing in mind that there is a fine line between parable and allegory, the obvious interpretation is that the landowner is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the leaders of the nations, the servants are the prophets, and the son is Jesus, the Messiah. The father's hope that the tenants will respect the son is not as implausible as it might seem. It shows the landowner's forbearance with the wicked tenants and finally motivates his relentless wrath. Jesus again asks if they have never read the scriptures. The quotation is from Psalm 118:22-23 (LXX). The 'capstone' is most probably the top stone of roof parapets and city walls. The reversal of what humanity holds dear, the elevation of what they rejects, can only be the Lord's doing; 'and it is marvellous in our eyes.'

The Jewish leaders had failed so badly in their stewardship of God's vineyard that God gave the responsibility to other people. The religious leaders clearly understood a lot of what Jesus was saying for 'they knew he was talking about them' (21:45). A 'capstone', if too low, could be tripped over by an unwary person who might fall over the parapet, or, if too light could be dislodged and sent crashing down onto the head of someone passing by. Instead of taking the warning, the Jewish leaders look for a way to arrest him but, as with their answer about John the Baptist, are fearful of the crowd.

***The parable of the wedding banquet* 22:1-14**

As the kingdom is dawning invitations to the banquet have gone out and are being refused. The king's son is clearly Messiah, often represented as a bridegroom (9:15; 25:1). The custom of the day was to invite guests to a major feast in advance and then notify them when all was ready. The king not only graciously repeats his invitation but also describes the feast's greatness as a further incentive to attend. In the ancient world, wedding feasts often went on for days which might explain the use of 'dinner' (22:4), a preliminary meal, and 'banquet' (22:8), the main feast.

When some of those invited treat the king's messengers outrageously, the king sends his army, destroys the murderers, and burns their city. Then the king sends his servants to 'street corners' (probably the forks of the roads), where they would find many people. The invitation is extended to all, 'both good and bad' (22:10). The exact symbolism of the wedding clothes is difficult. As it was possible to enter the banquet without the right clothes but impossible to remain there, it is hard to see how the wedding clothes represent righteousness. It seems that though the invitation is to all it is still necessary to prepare properly. The man is tied (presumably so he cannot get back in) and thrown outside into the darkness, where final judgement awaits. Many are invited; but some refuse to come, and others who do come refuse to submit to the norms of the kingdom and are therefore rejected.

***Paying taxes to Caesar* 22:15-22**

The Pharisees went out from the temple courts where Jesus was preaching (21:23) and 'laid plans to trap him in his words' (22:15). The extended flattery is intended to put pressure on Jesus to speak. Once a family name, 'Caesar' had become a title. The question is phrased in such a way as to require a precise answer. It is a theological question and not a political one. Jesus chooses to answer them on his own terms and asks for the coin used for paying this tax (22:19). In his answer, Jesus does not side with the Zealots or with any who expect his messiahship to bring instant political independence from Rome, but he does not accept any compromise on a person's obligations to God.

***Marriage at the resurrection* 22:23-33**

Jesus is again called upon to demonstrate wisdom and authority in dealing with a malicious question. While the Pharisees believed in a resurrection from the dead, the Sadducees believed that both body and soul perished at death. The Sadducees' case could have happened but it is an extreme example and very unlikely. The Sadducees' conclusion was that the whole notion of resurrection was absurd. Jesus insists that the Sadducees betray their ignorance of the Scriptures, which teach resurrection, and the power of God, who is capable of raising the dead to an existence quite unlike this present one. At the resurrection there will be a change in sexual relationships, making us 'like the angels in heaven' (Sadducees did not believe in them either, Acts 23:8), and marriage as we know it will be no more. The greatness of the changes at the Resurrection (cf. 1Corinthians 15:44; Philippians 3:21; 1 John

3:1-2) will doubtless make even the wife of seven brothers capable of loving all and the object of the love of all, as parents today can love all their children and be loved by them.

‘Have you not read?’ (22:31) is a rebuke. If God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even when addressing Moses, hundreds of years after the first three patriarchs died, then they must be alive to him. It is fair to say that this text proves immortality but not resurrection but as the Sadducees denied both it serves the purpose. Furthermore, though we can make the subtle difference (based on neoplatonism, the division of body and spirit) between immortality and resurrection such thinking would be foreign to the Sadducees.

***The greatest commandment* 22:34-40**

Rabbis of Jesus’ day were much exercised to find summary statements of the Old Testament laws and establish their relative importance. The expert’s question was probably a hotly debated one. In his answer, Jesus first quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and then Leviticus 19:18. This command (‘love the Lord your God’) is primary because it is the greatest. The second also concerns love, this time toward one’s ‘neighbour’. These two commandments are the greatest because all scripture ‘hangs’ on them, meaning that nothing in scripture can be truly obeyed unless these two are observed. Love is the greatest commandment but not, as some have implied, the only one.

***Whose son is the Christ?* 22:41-46**

It is now Jesus’ turn to ask the Pharisees a question. Jesus’ question focuses not on paying taxes or hypothetical questions about marriage and the resurrection but on the real issue, ‘what do you think about the Christ?’ Specifically, ‘whose son is he?’ Identifying a person by their parents, particularly by their father, is a well-established tradition, continuing down to the present day in legal matters such as registration where at birth and at marriage a person’s father is recorded. To this question the Pharisees gave the accepted reply, ‘the Son of David’ (2 Samuel 7:13-14; Isaiah 11:1, 10; Jeremiah 23:5). Jesus then goes on to show how that answer, though not wrong, is too simple. David calls the Messiah his Lord (22:43). How then could the Messiah be David’s Son?

The force of Jesus’ argument depends on his use of Psalm 110, the most frequently quoted Old Testament chapter in the New Testament. The Davidic authorship of the psalm, affirmed by the psalm’s superscription, is not only assumed by Jesus but is essential to his argument. If the psalm were written by anyone else, then David did not call Messiah his Lord. The phrase ‘speaking by the Spirit’ not only assumes that all scripture is Spirit-inspired (cf. Acts 4:25; Hebrews 3:7; 9:8; 10:15; 2 Peter 1:21) but here reinforces the truth of what David said so it may be integrated into the beliefs of the hearers. The ‘right hand’ is the position of highest honour and authority.

If the Messiah is not simply David’s son, in the way that the Pharisees read the scriptures, whose son is he? The solution given by the prologue to Matthew (the Messiah: his genealogy and nativity, chapters 1 and 2) and by the voice of God himself (3:17; 17:5) is that Jesus is the Son of God. In saying this Matthew is not denying that the Messiah is David’s son but that Jesus is Son of David by title (1:1; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; cf. 12:23) and by the genealogy (1:2-16) and as King of the Jews (2:2; 21:5; 27:11, 29, 37, 42). Jesus is both the human Messiah in David’s line and the divine Messiah who transcends human limitations (Psalm 45:6-7; Isaiah 9:6; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15-16; Zechariah 12:10; 13:7). He is both the root and the offshoot of David (Isaiah 11:1, 10), the glorious king and the suffering servant.

Study 15: The Little Apocalypse: teaching (Matthew 23:1-24:28)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 5: The Little Apocalypse

(b) Teaching

Warnings about outward show 23:1-12

Seven woes 23:13-36

The disciples ask two questions 24:1-3

The beginning of the birth pains 24:4-14

Sharp pain: the fall of Jerusalem 24:15-21

Warnings against false messiahs 24:22-28

Part 5: The Little Apocalypse

(b) Teaching (23:1-25:46)

Although Chapter 23 is teaching, it does not really form part of the major discourse of ‘The Little Apocalypse’. Instead, it seems to be a record of some of the things that Jesus taught more or less as a preliminary to the greater discourse. This section marks the climax of the controversies with the Jewish religious authorities (22:42) and the powerful language that Jesus uses indicates divine warning against the ‘fools’, ‘hypocrites’ and ‘blind guides’.

***Warnings about outward show* 23:1-12**

Jesus had previously denounced the Pharisees (15:5), warned his disciples about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5-12). The ‘teachers of the law’, most of them Pharisees in Matthew’s time, were primarily responsible for teaching. Many synagogues had a stone seat at the front where the authoritative teacher sat yet even the teachers who sat there did not live up to what they preached. There is a biting irony in what Jesus says for these teachers who claim authority and burden the people are hypocrites. Not lifting a finger to help those burdened with ‘heavy loads’ does not mean that they did not keep their rules themselves but that they did not do anything to help those who collapsed under their rules. This is in direct contrast to the invitation of Jesus (11:28-30) whose burden is light and who promises rest.

The very essence of the religion of the Pharisees is outward show. ‘Phylacteries’ (23:5) were boxes made of leather or parchment and worn on the arm or tied on the forehead. These contained a piece of vellum inscribed with four texts (Exodus 13:2-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21). As a public demonstration of their piety, the Pharisees wore large, ostentatious phylacteries and long tassels (worn by all Jews - Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12). They sought the most important seats at banquets and in the synagogues (where the place of honour would be as close as possible to the scrolls). ‘Rabbi’ is a transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning ‘my master’ or ‘my teacher’. Unlike the religious authorities, Jesus says, his disciples are not to be called ‘Rabbi’ (23:8) for they have one Master (or Teacher) and are all brothers. Similarly the disciples are not to call anyone on earth ‘father’. This is a contrast with the ‘Father in heaven’. Jesus is the only one qualified to sit in Moses’ seat, for the one Teacher is ‘Christ’. In the church it is never right for one individual to expect unquestioning submission. Nor is it right to confuse outward show with inward surrender. Matthew repeatedly emphasises humility of which the Messiah is the supreme example. Having done the greatest service, he has been most highly exalted.

***Seven woes* 23:13-36**

Luke records a set of woes (Luke 11:37-54) which have similarities and considerable differences. The pronouncement of woes was a familiar prophetic utterance (Isaiah 5:8-23, Habakkuk 2:6-20) and it is quite possible that Jesus pronounced woes on more than one occasion, accounting for the differences between Matthew and Luke at this point.

The first woe (23:13) denounces the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. They claim to teach God’s way but refuse to enter the kingdom and hinder those who try to do so. They do not enter the kingdom because they refuse to recognise the true identity of Jesus. When the crowds wonder if Jesus is the Messiah the authorities do all they can to dissuade them (cf. 9:33-34, 11:19; 12:23-24; 21:15). The sheep of Israel are “lost” (10:6; 15:24) because the shepherds have led them astray. (The most reliable manuscripts omit v. 14.)

The second woe (23:15) refers to Pharisees winning over converts not to Judaism but to their own position (Pharisaism). Jesus did not criticise the Pharisees' extensive missionary efforts but the results. The converts became even more zealous Pharisees, locked into a theological framework that had no room for Jesus.

The third woe (23:16-22) concerns oaths (see Matthew 5:33-37). Jesus has used the striking designation 'blind guides' before (Matthew 15:14). The complex variations as to what made an oath binding encouraged evasive oaths; whereas Jesus had simply taught that it was important to tell the truth. It is no good, having made an oath, to attempt to say that Jesus abolished oaths – an oath is binding so it is better simply to be truthful rather than to make an oath and then be caught out.

The fourth woe (23:23-24) concerns the Old Testament law on tithing (Deuteronomy 14:22-29, Leviticus 27:30). Jesus is not condemning the scrupulous observance of tithing, even to herbs, but insists that justice, mercy and faithfulness are more important. A gnat is clearly a very small insect while the camel was a proverbially large animal (19:24) so that the sense is like our 'ant' and 'elephant'.

The fifth woe (23:25-26) concerns the cleaning of cups and dishes. The Pharisees were scrupulous in their cleaning of their cups and dishes. Jesus uses this as a metaphor for the hypocrisy of their religion. It would clearly be foolish to clean only the outside of the cups and dishes but to neglect the inside. If that is how it is with cups and dishes how much more so with people. The Pharisees are concerned about external religion but remain 'full of greed and self-indulgence'. Such practices demonstrate a complete misunderstanding even of the Old Testament law – no wonder Jesus calls such Pharisees 'blind' (23:26).

The sixth woe (23:27-28) refers to the custom of whitewashing with lime graves or grave sites just before Passover, so that pilgrims would see the graves and avoid ritual uncleanness which would prevent participation in the feast. The monuments themselves may have been very splendid but even so the whitewash reminded people of the death and decay that they marked. Likewise the scrupulous regulations of the Pharisees appeared virtuous but were really contaminating people.

The seventh woe (23:29-32) exposes the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and Pharisees who by erecting monuments to the religious leaders thought themselves morally and spiritually above their forebears who had persecuted the prophets whose monuments they were building. They believed that they would not have joined their forebears in murdering the prophets, rather as we think that we would have been more faithful to Jesus than the disciples or the crowds. However, by speaking of their forefathers the teachers of the law and Pharisees admit that they are the sons or descendants of those who persecuted the prophets. They show themselves to be 'like-father, like-son' because, though they claim to be different, they now plot to kill Jesus. The idea behind 'the measure of the sin' is that God can only tolerate so much sin; and then, when the measure is 'full', he will respond in wrath.

If the teachers of the law and Pharisees are filling up the measure of the sin of their forefathers, how can they possibly escape the condemnation of hell (see on 5:22; 23:15)? Because of their wicked reception of God's messengers more messengers are sent but they will be treated in the same way. Although the Jews had no authority to execute people by crucifixion, they could hand people over to be crucified just as they handed Jesus over. The servant is not above his master. If Jesus is to be crucified, his servants may expect the same.

Abel was the first victim of murder in the Scriptures (Genesis 4:8) but the identity of 'Zechariah son of Berekiah' is problematic. Among several possibilities is the suggestion that this Zechariah is the one mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. This was probably the last book in the Hebrew canon and his murder took place in the courtyard of the temple. More difficult is the designation 'son of Berekiah' as this Zechariah is called 'son of Jehoiada'. On occasions 'son of' can be used to mean 'a descendant of'.

***The lament over Jerusalem* 23:37-39**

This lament tinges all the preceding woes with compassion. Jerusalem, the city of David and the city where God revealed himself in his temple, has become known as a city that killed the prophets. Stoning was the penalty for idolatry (Deuteronomy 17:5, 7), sorcery (Leviticus 20:27) and several other crimes. 'How often' may look back over Israel's history, suggesting that Jesus identifies himself with God's historical perspective. Jesus claims to be the one who has longed to gather and protect a rebellious nation, like a mother hen gathers and protects her chicks (Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 91:4; Jeremiah 48:40). Jesus longs to be her Saviour and not just one of her prophets. 'Your house' probably refers to the temple. The quotation is from Psalm 118:26. The words may have been used by the priests in greeting the worshippers at the temple. Jesus will not be seen there again until he comes as King and Judge.

***The disciples ask two questions* 24:1-3**

Jesus' departure from the temple marks the end of the preliminary teaching that prefaces the much greater fifth discourse. Jesus' forecast of the destruction of the temple complex is unambiguous and repeated variously elsewhere (23:38; 26:61; Luke 23:28-31). The Mount of Olives is an appropriate site for a discourse dealing with the Parousia (cf. Zechariah 14:4). 'The end of the age' is used six times in the New Testament (Matthew 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Heb 9:26). *Parousia* ('coming') is found in the New Testament 24 times and four of which are in Matthew 24 (3, 27, 37 and 39).

The fifth main discourse of Matthew's Gospel, the Little Apocalypse, begins with Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives and the disciples asking about the destruction of the temple and signs of the end of the age (24:3-4). Matthew treats this discourse as one unit rather than a collection of Jesus' sayings. The discourse is full of Old Testament quotations and allusions and is very complex and although sceptics doubt its originality and suggest it is a late interpolation in the Gospel inserted after the fall of Jerusalem and the temple there is no reason from the text itself to conclude this. The Little Apocalypse is notoriously difficult to understand. Wenham and Gaebelien take the view that the disciples think of Jerusalem's destruction and the eschatological end as a single complex web of events. Jesus warns that there will be delay before the end and that this will include persecution and tribulation for his followers. The exact time of Jesus' return is known only to the Father.

***The beginning of the birth pains* 24:4-14**

Jesus speaks about various things that are signs that he is coming back but although they show that the end is near they do not say how near. Because there is a delay before his return the temptation to follow a false Christ is very real. The idea of birth pains is rooted in the Old Testament (Isaiah 13:8; 26:17; Jeremiah 4:31; 6:24; Micah 4:9-10). Jesus' followers are not to be alarmed by wars and rumours of war, famines or earthquakes. Some disciples will be persecuted and killed. Some will turn away from the faith and hate each other. Many false prophets will deceive many people, but those who stand firm will be saved (24:13).

Despite persecution, before the end, the gospel will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.

Sharp pain: the fall of Jerusalem 24:15-21

The whole age in which the gospel is preached is one of distress for the followers of Jesus but in that age there are times of great distress. The ‘abomination that causes desolation’ is an expression from Daniel (8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Daniel 11:31 clearly refers to the desecration under Antiochus Epiphanes (168 BC) who erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of burned offering, sacrificed a pig on it, and made the practice of Judaism a capital offence. Jesus identifies Daniel 9:27 and 12:11 with certain events about to take place. The comment ‘let the reader understand’ refers to the reader of Daniel. The event to which Jesus refers is the destruction of the temple (AD 70) and there is a reasonably good tradition that Christians fled from the city about two years earlier when it was still under siege.

A flat roof on a house was a pleasant place to spend the cooler parts of the day. The evacuation of the city would have to be done as quickly as possible and there would be not time to pick things up from downstairs. Similarly, people in fields would not have opportunity to go home and get anything, even their cloaks. Such circumstances would obviously be difficult for pregnant women and nursing mothers. Flight would be harder in the winter and on the Sabbath because many would try to prevent anyone travelling farther than a Sabbath day’s journey. The unprecedented suffering at the fall of Jerusalem would never be equalled again, suggesting that this tribulation does not refer to the end of the age. The great suffering of 20th century death camps may have been numerically larger but even that was no as intense as the destruction of Jerusalem.

Warnings against false messiahs 24:22-28

‘Those days’ could mean either the period of tribulation associated with the fall of Jerusalem or the whole period of distress from the Ascension to the Parousia. After a century including two world wars and more Christians martyred than all the previous nineteen centuries put together, the world moves into the twenty-first century overshadowed by threats of environmental disaster and nuclear catastrophe. Jesus’ teaching, that without the restraining hand of God cutting short the days of distress for the sake of true believers so that not everyone is destroyed, does not seem unreasonable. This promise enables believers to look for God’s sovereign, climactic intervention without predicting dates.

The Christian is neither to believe lies nor trust impostors. False Christs and false prophets and preachers will increase but the disciples are not to be deceived even by spectacular signs and miracles. These deceptions are so impressive that they could deceive even God’s chosen people, but for the fact that such deception is impossible. It is pointless to look for the Messiah in the desert (cf. 4:1) or in some other hiding place. Importantly, the coming of the Messiah (or the Christ) is the coming of the Son of Man (Jesus) and like lightning (Psalm 97:4; Zechariah 9:14) flashing across the sky his coming will be visible everywhere (24:27). Jesus quotes a proverb (cf. Job 39:30) but it is a difficult one. One possible interpretation is that things come to pass at just the right time. In this view the proverb appears to the coming of the Son of Man in glory. The warning would then be not to be too eager for Christ’s coming because the temptation to believe false claims would be strong. His coming will be unmistakable, in God’s own time when the world will be ripe for judgement. More simply it might just mean that it will be as impossible for humanity to miss the coming of the Son of Man as for a vulture to miss seeing a carcass.

Study 16: The Little Apocalypse: teaching (Matthew 24:29-25:46)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His ministry in word and works

Part 5: The Little Apocalypse

(b) Teaching

The coming of the Son of Man 24:29-31

The lesson from the fig tree 24:32-35

The need to be prepared 24:36-51

The parable of the ten virgins 25:1-13

The parable of the talents 25:14-30

The sheep and the goats 25:31-46

Part 5: The Little Apocalypse

(b) Teaching (23:1-25:46)

Matthew is very interested in recording the teaching of Jesus and has arranged the gospel into five main teaching blocks each ending with a phrase similar to, 'when Jesus had finished saying all these things' (26:1). The first teaching block (The Sermon on the Mount), the second teaching block (The commissioning of the twelve), the third teaching block (Parables of the kingdom) and the fourth teaching block (The life of the kingdom community) are followed by this fifth and final teaching block 'the Little Apocalypse'. As the escalation of controversies with the Jewish religious authorities (22:42) increases Jesus responds with encouragements and warnings.

***The coming of the Son of Man* 24:29-31**

One of the important issues for interpretation of 'the Little Apocalypse' is whether Jesus is speaking of his future coming in glory at the end of time (the Parousia) or whether he is speaking about the catastrophic events of AD 70 or whether he speaks about both in different places. If we are right in understanding Jesus' teaching about the destruction of Jerusalem and the eschatological end as a 'single complex web of events' (Wenham and Gabelein) then it is no surprise that the meaning of Jesus' discourse is difficult to unravel.

A new stage of Jesus' teaching begins with the expression 'immediately after the distress of those days' (a reference to verses 9 and 22, rather than the 'great distress' of 24:15-21). The heavenly portents (Isaiah 13:9-10; 34:4; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Rev 6:12) do not immediately follow the 'abomination that causes desolation' (24:15) but the 'distress of those days'. These heavenly portents continue with the appearing of the 'sign of the Son of Man' in the sky, which relates to the Lord's coming in glory. The mourning of the nations is an allusion to Zechariah 12:10-12 and the coming on the clouds of the sky a reference to Daniel 7:13-14. The clouds symbolise God's presence (17:5). The Lord will come with 'power and great glory' (Isaiah 11:10). The sound of a loud trumpet (Isaiah 27:13; 1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16) is a familiar description of the end of the age. The 'elect' are the people of God gathered from the four points of the compass and from every place under the sky, which is how far the kingdom will have been preached by that time. Though all nations of the earth will mourn the people of God are drawn from them.

***The lesson from the fig tree* 24:32-35**

The story of the fig tree appeared earlier (21:18-22). The word translated lesson is literally 'parable', which is the way in which it was interpreted. The leaves on the fig tree are a sign that summer is near. The most natural way of understanding 'all these things' is to take them as referring to the distress that comes upon believers between the ascension of Jesus and the Parousia (24:4-28). After 'all these things' have happened, the Parousia will be 'right at the door', that is 'imminent'. The Parousia is therefore the next major step in God's plan of salvation.

'I tell you the truth' emphasises the importance of what follows. The most obvious meaning of 'this generation' is the people who were living when Jesus spoke. If it is right to understand some of Jesus' teaching to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70 and other parts of his teaching to refer to the Parousia then the things that must happen, the distress and fall of Jerusalem (24:4-28) are the events that must take place during the lifetime of this generation. The authority and eternal validity of Jesus' words are nothing less than the authority and eternal validity of God's words (Ps 119:89-90; Isaiah 40:6-8).

The need to be prepared**24:36-51**

People need to be prepared for the Lord's future coming in glory (Parousia) for no one knows when that day will be except the Father. The fact that Jesus says that he does not know the day or the hour is consistent with the New Testament pattern of his state of humiliation in the incarnation. The deity of Jesus and his dependence upon and obedience to his Father are both important.

Jesus teaching that the coming of the Son of Man will be at an unknown and unexpected time means that life will seem to be going on pretty much as usual, just as in the days of Noah, before the great flood (24:37). People continue in their ordinary lives and, despite distress and persecution, eat, drink and marry. Jesus expects his followers to be watchful, for the final climax of human history will come suddenly (see also 1 Peter 3:20-21). The unexpectedness of the event is demonstrated by the things that people are doing when the time comes. Men working in a field and women working at their hand mill were extremely commonplace activities. At the time of the Lord's coming people will be doing ordinary things.

The theme of the need to be prepared is explored through a series of parables. The first parable teaches the unexpectedness of the Lord's return, like a thief in the night. The disciples know the owner of a house would watch if he knew when the thief was coming, so constant vigilance is required. The second parable teaches that the good servant (Gk 'doulos', head of domestic staff) is prepared for his Lord at any time. The good servant remains faithful through his master's delay and at the end is highly rewarded. In contrast, the wicked servant is faithless in his responsibilities, abusive to fellow servants and not mindful of his master's return. At the end, the wicked servant is given a most severe and awful punishment and joins the hypocrites in weeping and gnashing of teeth (cf. 8:12).

The parable of the ten virgins**25:1-13**

This is the third parable in the series and it is much longer than the previous two parables. The great theme of the parables is the need to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man. The first parable (24:42-44) warns that the coming of the Son of Man will be unexpected. The second parable (24:45-51) shows that it is necessary to be prepared by being faithful. This third parable (25:1-13) stresses the need to be ready, even if there is an unexpectedly lengthy delay.

According to the custom of the time, it was normal for the bridegroom and some of his friends to go to the bride's home, where there were various ceremonies, followed by a procession through the streets, after nightfall, to his home. Everyone in the procession would need a lamp. Those without lamps would be thought of as gatecrashers or even as thieves. At the bridegroom's house the festivities might last several days.

The idea of the Messiah as bridegroom is found in the Old Testament (Isaiah 54:46; 62:45; Ezekiel 16:7-34; Hosea 2:19). John the Baptist (John 3:27-30) and Jesus himself (Matt 9:15; Mark 2:19-20) make the connection between Jesus, the Messiah and the bridegroom. Central to the story is the bridegroom's delay. It is because he is delayed that the foolish virgins had not brought enough oil. Ten is a convenient round number which naturally divides into two groups of five maidens. The 'lamps' are either small oil-lamps or torches that need replenishing with oil. The wise virgins are prepared for the bridegroom's delayed coming but the foolish are unprepared. At 'midnight' (an undoubted symbol of eschatological climax)

the cry rang out and all the virgins awoke to trim their lamps. When the foolish virgins realised that their lamps were going out they attempted to borrow oil from the wise virgins but could not, for the wise were prudent enough to realise that there may not be enough for them all. The wise virgins went into the house with the bridegroom after which the door was shut. The refusal to admit the foolish virgins does not amount to a callous rejection of their lifelong desire to enter the kingdom but shows that, despite appearances, they were neither watchful nor prepared for the coming of the kingdom. It is simply foolishness to leave such important preparation to the last minute. The parable is a solemn warning to be ready because the Lord's return will be sudden at will also be possible to be excluded from the wedding banquet.

***The parable of the talents* 25:14-30**

This fourth parable expects not only watchfulness but also an improvement of the 'talents' until the day the master returns. Although the parable has some similarities to the parable of the ten minas (Luke 19:11-27) the emphasis of the parables is different and points to two separate original parables. Like the parable of the ten virgins and those that precede it, this parable is about the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

The man going on a journey entrusts his wealth to three of his servants. It is likely that these are more senior servants who might have been almost partners in his affairs and could have expected to share some of his profits. The traditional word 'talent' (Gk 'talanton') means monetary coin but its value is not known, though it was possibly as much as 20 years wages for a labourer (6,000 denarii). The two good servants put the money to work immediately but the other servant, unwilling to work or to take risks, merely dug a hole and buried the money, which is presumably a course of action that the master could have taken himself had that been his intention.

Again, it is noteworthy that the day of reckoning comes after a long time (25:19). During this time, the first servant has doubled his five talents and, having ten talents, is praised for his faithfulness. He is given increased responsibility and shares in his master's happiness. The second servant has doubled his two talents and receives a similar reward. The third servant accuses his master of being a 'hard man' who has a reputation for exploiting others ('harvesting where you have not sown', 25:24). He decides to return to his master what belongs to him, neither more nor less. Overlooking any responsibility on his part, the wicked servant blames his master but excuses himself. The master uses the servant's own words to condemn him – he could have at least invested the money with bankers and gained interest but instead he just buried it. Consequently, the one talent is taken from him and is given to the man with ten (13:12). Because of his failure to be ready for the day of reckoning the servant is banished from his master's presence and, like the five foolish virgins, is excluded, outside, in darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Entry into the kingdom is not a matter of good works but it is a matter of being faithful and being ready for the day of reckoning that is surely coming.

***The sheep and the goats* 25:31-46**

Although it is tempting to call it a parable, strictly speaking, this passage is not a parable, though it has some similarities to the parables. Jesus does not say that he is the 'Son of Man' in this passage but the whole discourse is a response to the disciples' question, 'what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' (Matthew 24:3). It is clear that Jesus intends the listeners to understand his role as eschatological judge (i.e. judge at the end of time). The Son of Man will come 'in his heavenly glory' (cf. Matthew 16:27; 24:30; 1

Thessalonians 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8) is a simple way of expressing what would otherwise be difficult to express. Power that is usually reserved for God alone is applied to Jesus, who sits on his throne as King and Judge and exercises divine authority (Matthew 28:18; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 12:2). 'All the nations' means all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles for, as the gospel of the kingdom of heaven is preached to Gentiles as well as Jews, everyone must stand before the king.

The image of a shepherd separating sheep from goats would have been a familiar one. In the daytime it would be possible for sheep and goats to mingle in the grazing areas. However, though sheep tolerate the cool night-time air, goats have to be herded together for warmth, which explains the need for separating them at the end of the day. Symbolically, the right hand is the place of power and honour.

Suddenly, the 'Son of Man' appears to be referred to as 'King' (25:34). This is consistent with the reference to the Son of Man in Daniel (7:13-14) where the Son of Man approaches that 'Ancient of Days' to receive a kingdom. Jesus still associates his work with his Father and addresses the sheep saying, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father'. The blessing is different from the blessing of the Beatitudes for this is a different word in the Greek. This is the blessing of inheritance, which is based on a relationship with the Father. The blessing is the kingdom that has been prepared for them 'since the creation of the world' (John 17:24; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20). This inheritance, the consummated kingdom, was the Father's plan for them from the beginning.

The reason the 'sheep' are welcomed and invited to take their inheritance is that they have served the King's brothers for the King says that doing the deeds to the least of his brothers is the equivalent of doing it to him. More problematic is the exact identity of the 'brothers'. Probably, the most satisfactory solution is that Jesus is the King and the 'brothers' are the disciples (12:48-49; 28:10). Deeds done to the followers of Jesus, because they are his followers, reflect where people stand in relation to Jesus and his kingdom.

As with the preceding parables, this discourse ends with judgement and condemnation. The 'goats' are cursed, banished from the King's presence and sent to the eternal fire. Hell is here described in ways that are familiar to Jewish readers, a place prepared for the Devil, his demonic angels and those guilty of the sins of omission about which Jesus now speaks. Both 'sheep' and 'goats' are admitted or excluded from the kingdom on the basis of how they treated the King and his brothers. Yet, how the sheep and goats treated Jesus and his brothers was not a matter of seeking to enter the kingdom by good works. Those who identify with Jesus align themselves with his people and their distress and afflictions. Those who have little sympathy for the gospel of the kingdom will remain indifferent and, in so doing, reject King Messiah. The Bible has much to say about caring for the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, sick and imprisoned but the main issue here is not charitable works for the poor but how people respond to the kingdom.

The final separation of 'sheep' and 'goats' is a recurring theme in the New Testament. The same word 'eternal' (Gk *aionion*) is used to describe both punishment and life.

Study 17: Betrayal and denial (Matthew 26:1-27:10)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His death and resurrection

Betrayal and denial	
<i>The plot against Jesus</i>	26:1-5
<i>Jesus anointed at Bethany</i>	26:6-13
<i>Judas agrees to betray Jesus</i>	26:14-16
<i>The Lord's Supper</i>	26:17-30
<i>Jesus predicts Peter's denial</i>	26:31-35
<i>Gethsemane</i>	26:36-46
<i>Jesus arrested</i>	26:47-56
<i>Before the Sanhedrin</i>	26:57-68
<i>Peter denies Jesus</i>	26:69-75
<i>Judas hangs himself</i>	27:1-10

C THE MESSIAH: HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Matthew uses his characteristic phrase, 'When Jesus had finished saying all these things,' (26:1), to show that the fifth and final block of his summary of the teachings of Jesus has come to an end. The gospel opened with an account of the genealogy and nativity of Jesus (chapters 1 and 2). It proceeded with five teaching blocks (chapters 3-25):

- The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 3-7)
- The commissioning of the twelve (chapters 8-10)
- Parables of the kingdom (11-13)
- The life of the kingdom community (chapters 14-18)
- The Little Apocalypse (chapters 19-25)

These teaching blocks each began with a narrative section (what happened) which served as an introduction to the teaching section (what Jesus said). After the fifth and final teaching block, Matthew moves into the final part of his work, the Messiah: His death and resurrection (chapters 26-28).

The plot against Jesus **26:1-5**

The timing of the crucial events of the passion narrative is extremely difficult to unravel. For the first time, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. The very fact that Jesus predicts this shows that everything is under God's control. The issue of who is high priest needs some clarification for in Matthew and John (11:49) Caiaphas is named as high priest whereas Luke (3:2) says it is Annas. Annas had been deposed by the secular authorities in 15 AD and was replaced by his son-in-law, Caiaphas (who died in 36 AD). As the high priest should have continued in office until he died, there were effectively two high priests. The city of Jerusalem would be crowded at the time of the feast and so, to avoid a riot, the religious leaders plotted against Jesus, in order to arrest him secretly.

Jesus anointed at Bethany **26:6-13**

An anointing of Jesus is mentioned in several places (Mark 14:39; John 12:28; cf. Luke 7:36-50). Were there one, two or three anointings? Some of the oldest commentators think there were three. Most modern commentators think that there was just one and that the details became muddled, though the only similarities in the story are the actual anointing and the name 'Simon', a common name at the time. Probably the best solution is that there were two anointings, one in Galilee (Luke 7:36-50) and one at Bethany.

The perfume in the alabaster jar was possibly nard, which was kept in a flask with a thin neck which was then broken for use. John (12:3) notes the cost of the perfume, about a year's wages for a labourer. No doubt, there were many poor people in the area and yet what the disciples call 'waste' Jesus calls a 'beautiful thing'. Jesus points out that his followers will always have the poor with them but they will not always have him, to receive a gift which he entirely merits as the incarnate Son of God (see also Psalm 41). This action would be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

Judas agrees to betray Jesus **26:14-16**

All the gospels speak of the role of Judas in the betrayal of the Lord Jesus but none gives a reason. Jealousy and greed are familiar motives for treachery but perhaps Judas was simply disappointed that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that he thought that he should be. In

Zechariah (11:12), thirty pieces of silver is not considered a great sum, the value of a slave accidentally killed by an ox (Exodus 12:32).

The Lord's Supper

26:17-30

Harmonising the gospel accounts of the Lord's Supper is an extremely difficult exercise and not one even attempted here. The main difficulties centre upon what sort of meal Jesus and the disciples shared and when the meal took place. The meal certainly appears to be the Passover. At Passover, lambs were sacrificed on the Thursday afternoon, blood was poured out on the altar and fat was burned on the altar. The singing of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-18) accompanied these steps. The lamb was roasted and eaten with bitter herbs, after sunset.

The disciples enquire of Jesus about making extensive preparations for the Passover, particularly for the venue. The whereabouts of the house where Jesus and his disciples share their meal is unknown. While 'appointed time' could have a straightforward interpretation it is charged with meaning as Jesus takes the last steps towards the fulfilment of his mission.

'When evening came' (the start of the new day beginning at sunset), they were 'in the city' because the Passover had to be eaten in Jerusalem (26:18). When Jesus predicts his betrayal they are all shocked. A person who has 'dipped his hand into the bowl' is clearly a close friend. The bowl was probably the bowl of bitter herbs that would be scooped out with bread. Jesus is the Son of Man, who is both suffering servant and Messiah. The fact that Jesus is the divinely appointed sacrifice does not in any sense lessen the seriousness of the betrayal. The height of Judas' insincerity is indicated by his question. Jesus confirms that Judas is the betrayer but Matthew gives no account as to the reaction of others. 'You have said it not I,' which is the literal meaning of the words, might have preserved enough ambiguity at this stage. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are both involved in Judas' treason, the one effecting salvation and bringing redemption history to its fulfilment, the other answering the promptings of an evil heart (Carson).

The 'words of institution' have been the subject of immensely detailed study. It would have been quite natural for the host to take bread and give thanks (e.g. 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth'). To break the bread and pass it around is also quite natural but the words, 'Take and eat; this is my body,' are new. In what sense is the bread Jesus' body? The disciples understood that their feast with the Passover lamb looked back to the first Passover and Exodus from Egypt. The bread anticipated the sacrificial death of Jesus. There were several cups of wine in the meal. This is probably the third cup and would be shared with a thanksgiving (e.g. 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine'). 'Blood' and 'covenant' are found together in only two Old Testament passages (Exodus 24:8; Zechariah 9:11). If Jesus had the former reference in mind, which seems likely, he understands the violent and sacrificial nature of his death. Although textual evidence in Matthew is divided, the parallel passages in Luke and 1 Corinthians 11 describe the covenant as 'new' alluding to Jeremiah 31:31-34, consistent with the phrase, 'for the forgiveness of sins'. Jesus understands this new covenant as the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecies. Prophecy and 'redemption history' (in this case the Exodus) are fulfilled in a greater deliverance to the coming kingdom. Jesus is probably alluding to the suffering servant passages in Isaiah (Isaiah 42:6; 49:8, 52:13-53:12).

Just as the first Passover looks forward not only to deliverance but also to settlement in the land, so the Lord's Supper looks forward to deliverance and life in the kingdom. Jesus says he will not drink this again 'until that day when he drinks it anew'. This is a discreet farewell

and implies a lengthy absence. The Lord's Supper therefore points both to the past and to the future, both to Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary and to the messianic banquet. The disciples will keep this celebration till Jesus comes (cf. 1Cor 11:26); but Jesus will not participate in it until the great banquet in his Father's kingdom. The 'hymn' normally sung was the last part of the *Hallel* (Psalms 114-18 or 115-18). The simplest chronology places this on Thursday evening.

***Jesus predicts Peter's denial* 26:31-35**

Matthew has given a summary of all that happened at the Lord's Supper. He probably backtracks to give some information about the prediction of Peter's denial (cf. John 13:36-38). This is in such stark contrast to the Lord's Supper. The quotation from Zechariah (13:7) makes it clear that their falling away is related to the 'striking of the Shepherd'. This prediction is tempered with hope that Jesus will rise again and go before them into Galilee. In some senses, Peter, who followed at a distance (26:58), even though that ultimately led to denial, does better than the other disciples who fled (26:56). It would appear that Peter is ready for conflict and suffering. He does not like his loyalty to be called into question. Yet despite Peter's claims of loyalty he is within hours of disowning Jesus three times.

***Gethsemane* 26:36-46**

'Gethsemane' means 'oil press'. Here, eight disciples remain at some distance but the inner three, Peter, James and John, join Jesus. We should not pass over the anguish of Gethsemane, a sorrow that almost kills, too easily. Jesus is committed to the Father's will but, in his full humanity, naturally shrinks from the way of death. Jesus' sacrificial death inaugurates the new covenant (26:26-30) and redeems his people from their sins (Romans 3:21-26; 4:25; 5:6, 9; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 2:18; 4:15; 5:79; 1 Peter 2:24). Jesus was not a martyr but went to his death knowing that it was his Father's will that he face death completely alone (27:46) as the sacrificial, wrath-averting Passover Lamb.

***Jesus arrested* 26:47-56**

In the dark, it was important to point out the right man, not least because before mass media even famous people would not be easily recognised. Judas chose an especially treacherous way of identifying Jesus to those who would arrest him. After his prayerful preparation, Jesus shows poise in the face of betrayal and arrest. Peter's response is not unexpected. In some senses, this is the test he has been expecting. His courage only evaporates when Jesus does not encourage others to take up the fight to resist arrest. This is not the time for a struggle. A simple request would bring twelve legions of angels (a Roman legion was 6,000 men), perhaps one legion each for Jesus and the eleven faithful disciples but the scriptures must be fulfilled, not in a fatalistic sense but by obedience.

***Before the Sanhedrin* 26:57-68**

The common criticism that such accounts are anti-Semitic seems to ignore the fact that Jesus, the apostles, Joseph of Arimathea (27:57-60) and the New Testament writers were Jews. In any event, the blame upon the 'Jews' is theological and not racial. The spiritual descendants of the 'Jews' in this account (cf. 27:25) are unbelievers. Houses of wealthy or important citizens were often built with a courtyard. Peter followed Jesus (at a distance) into the courtyard and joined the household servants (including the temple police, 'guards') around the courtyard fire.

The Sanhedrin was composed of three groups: leading priests, teachers of the law, and elders. Already convinced of Jesus' guilt, the Sanhedrin went through the motions of securing

evidence against him. At least two witnesses were required in a capital case. What they said had an element of truth and these misquoted words of Jesus might be taken as a threat to desecrate the temple, one of the pillars of Judaism, in itself a capital offence. Jesus kept silent (Isaiah 53:7).

In frustration, the high priest boldly charges Jesus ‘under oath by the living God’ (26:63), to say if he is the Christ the Son of God. The legally imposed oath requires Jesus to answer. Jesus is the Messiah but he answers in a cautious way, alluding to two scripture passages (Psalm 110:1, Daniel 7:13). Tearing clothes was an expression of anger and grief. As one they adjudge to be a blasphemer, Jesus is worthy of the death penalty (Leviticus 24:16). The spitting, punching and slapping fulfil the scriptures (Isaiah 50:6), and the question, ‘who hit you?’, is interpreted by the note that Jesus was blindfolded (Mark 14:65).

Peter denies Jesus

26:69-75

The variations in the gospel accounts are difficult to harmonise. The thrust of Peter’s denials are, ‘I was not with him’, ‘I do not know him’, ‘I do not talk like him’. Immediately the cock crows, a bitter reminder (26:75) of Jesus’ words (26:34).

Judas hangs himself

27:1-10

The religious authorities, having decided that Jesus should be put to death, needed to take the case to Pilate, the Roman governor. Meanwhile, Judas recognises that he is not only guilty of betrayal but that Jesus whom he has betrayed is ‘innocent’. In remorse, Judas attempted to return the blood money but the chief priests refused it (Deuteronomy 23:18). There are some problems harmonising this account with Luke’s account (Acts 1:18-20). Matthew says that the chief priests bought the field but Luke says that Judas acquired it. The priests bought the field with Judas’ money which may well still have been regarded as his. While Matthew records that Judas hanged himself, Luke records that he ‘fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.’ Whether this refers to the decomposition of Judas’ body or the falling of Judas’ hanged body over the side of a ravine, the two accounts allow both the hanging and the messy end. Matthew suggests that the name ‘Field of Blood’ is a reference to it being purchased with blood money and while it is possible that Luke suggests that the name is related to the shedding of Judas’ blood, it is also possible that Luke is referring to the use of Judas’ ill-gotten gains in the purchase of the field.

On the face of it, the quotation is a rough rendering of Zechariah (11:12-13) but why then does Matthew mention Jeremiah? Jeremiah did visit a potter and buy a field (18:26; 32:6) but another passage seems offers a better understanding. Jeremiah is told to purchase a potter’s jar and take some elders and priests to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, where he is to warn of the destruction of Jerusalem for her sin, illustrated by smashing the jar (Jeremiah 19:1-13). This passage mentions ‘innocent blood’ (Jeremiah 19:4), the renaming of a locality associated with potters (19:1) with a name (‘Valley of Slaughter’) denoting violence (19:6) and use of this ground for burial (19:11) as a token of God’s judgement. The ‘quotation’ could involve a fusing of sources from Jeremiah 19:1-13 with phraseology drawn mostly from Zechariah 11:12-13. Jeremiah alone is mentioned, perhaps because he is the more important of the two prophets, and perhaps also because, though Jeremiah 19 is the less obvious reference, it is the more important as to prophecy and fulfilment, which is one of Matthew’s major interests. Matthew sees in Jeremiah 19 and Zechariah 11 a pattern of apostasy and rejection that must find its ultimate fulfilment in the rejection of Jesus, cheaply valued and rejected.

Study 18: The Messiah: His death and resurrection (27:11-28:20)

PREPARATORY READING

The Messiah: His death and resurrection

<i>Jesus before Pilate</i>	27:11-26
<i>The soldiers mock Jesus</i>	27:27-31
<i>The crucifixion</i>	27:32-44
<i>The death of Jesus</i>	27:45-50
<i>The impact of Jesus' death</i>	27:51-56
<i>The burial of Jesus</i>	27:57-61
<i>The guard at the tomb</i>	27:62-66
<i>The Resurrection</i>	28:1-10
<i>The guards' report</i>	28:11-15
<i>The great commission</i>	28:16-20

Jesus before Pilate

27:11-26

Matthew and Mark's account of this event are similar while Luke and John supplement the record given here. If Jesus appeared before Pilate in Herod's old palace it would explain how Jesus was near to Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee (Luke 23:8-12). Pilate obviously has the impression that the charge being levelled against Jesus is a claim to be 'king of the Jews'. The Roman governor was likely to be more interested in this charge with its Zealot overtones than one of blasphemy which had been the issue before the Sanhedrin. The nature of Jesus' kingship is defined in the more detailed exchange John reports (18:34-37). Although the accusations of the chief priests and elders continued, Jesus gave no response (Isaiah 53:7). This amazed the governor because, in the Roman system, the defence depended heavily on the defendant's response. An imperial magistrate could acquit or pardon a prisoner but Pilate also has the opportunity of using some kind of regular paschal amnesty. 'Barabbas' literally means 'son of the father', perhaps the son of a famous rabbi. Matthew simply says he was a 'notorious' (NIV, 27:16) prisoner, though 'notable' is probably an adequate translation of the word. Certainly, Barabbas was no ordinary criminal but an insurrectionist (Gk *lestes*). Insurrection was a capital offence, whereas theft and robbery were not capital offences. Consequently, Barabbas might have been viewed as an imprisoned freedom fighter and hero. Similarly, the two criminals crucified with Jesus could have been insurrectionists (Gk *lestai*). The Jewish leaders, no friends of the occupying power, were accusing Jesus of being a traitor to Rome. No wonder Pilate knew they had other motives (27:18).

If Roman troops were involved in Jesus' arrest, Pilate and perhaps his wife would have been informed. Pilate's wife is prompted by a dream to send a message to Pilate that Jesus is 'innocent'. This message comes at a critical time when Pilate is sitting on the judge's seat. It was customary to confront authority with as large and noisy a crowd as possible. When the crowd come to demand that Barabbas be released, they are given the choice of Barabbas or Jesus, who were both popular. When they hesitate, the matter is resolved by their leaders. Not expecting this response, Pilate delays by asking more questions and giving the option for an alternative sentence (27:22). Mob psychology and their demand for crucifixion also assured that the executed person would be declared accursed. Having repeatedly tried to release Jesus by sending him to Herod, by suggesting the paschal amnesty, by proposing a lesser punishment (scourging), by sending the case back to the Jewish authorities, Pilate now (perhaps using a Jewish custom), observing the rising tension, washes his hands of the whole matter. The phrase, 'It is your responsibility' (27:24), is much the same expression as that used by the chief priests and elders to Judas (27:4). They cry of the people, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' is a familiar Hebrew idiom (2 Samuel 1:16; 3:28; Acts 18:6; 20:26). In this context it probably applies to the whole crowd rather than the whole Jewish nation, for clearly the first disciples were Jews and so a faithful remnant remains. Pilate had Jesus flogged, which, under the Romans, was a particularly severe punishment. He later handed him over to be crucified.

The soldiers mock Jesus

27:27-31

The 'Praetorium' is probably the old palace of Herod and the soldiers take Jesus into the palace courtyard. The vicious mockery depicts human nature at its worst. The robe could have been the short red cloak worn by Roman officials. Matthew describes it as 'scarlet' whereas Mark and John describe it as 'purple' (perhaps evoking royal connotations) but such fine distinctions were of little concern to ancient people.

The plaited wreath of thorns imitated the circlet on the coins of Tiberius Caesar. The staff stood for the royal sceptre and the mocking 'Hail, King of the Jews!' corresponded to the Roman 'Ave, Caesar!' normally accompanied by kneeling.

The crucifixion

27:32-44

Crucifixion was an unspeakably painful and shameful method of execution. The scourging, the loss of blood, the shock from the pain, all produced agony that could go on for days, ending at last by suffocation, cardiac arrest, or loss of blood. When there was reason to hasten death the execution squad would smash the victim's legs. Death followed almost immediately, either from shock or from collapse that cut off breathing. Even in ancient sources, crucifixion was universally viewed with horror. In Roman law it was reserved only for the worst criminals and lowest classes. No Roman citizen could be crucified without a direct edict from Caesar. Among Jews the horror of the cross was greater still because of the scripture, 'Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse' (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Although all four Gospels record the crucifixion, no Gospel goes into much detail. Perhaps these were all too well known. Executions normally took place outside the city walls (Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 15:35-36; 1 Kings 21:13; Acts 7:58) symbolising still further rejection (cf. Hebrews 13:13). At the city gates, the soldiers forced Simon, a man from Cyrene, an old Greek settlement on the coast of North Africa, to carry the cross. The site of Golgotha (an Aramaic word meaning 'skull') is uncertain. The English name 'Calvary' comes from the Latin word for skull (*calva*). Here they offered Jesus a drink. While Matthew says it was wine mixed with gall, Mark says it was wine mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23). It has popularly been assumed that this was a gesture of compassion. More recently, it has been suggested that it was in fact a further torment (Moo). Myrrh does not offer any relief to pain but tastes so bitter that it is undrinkable. Mark keeps the word 'myrrh' to describe the content, and Matthew uses 'gall' to describe the taste (Psalm 69:21). Any clothes that the victim had would have been divided among the soldiers (Psalm 22:18). Rescue from a cross was not unknown but Matthew points out that the cross of Jesus was guarded (27:36). The statement of the crime was often displayed on the cross as a warning to others. The charge against Jesus, written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (John 19:20), is highly ironic. Pilate, though desiring to offend the Jews (John 19:19-22), wrote more of the truth than he knew. To a Jew, 'king of the Jews' meant 'Messiah'. The reaction of those who passed (Psalms 22:7, 109:25; Lamentations 2:15) included taunts about the rebuilding of the temple and mocking reminiscent of the temptations (Matthew 4:3, 6).

The 'chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders' (27:41) represent the principal groups of the Sanhedrin. Their overheard conversation points to a much greater 'salvation'. Jesus could have saved himself (26:53) but he could not have saved himself if he was to save others. 'King of Israel' is the normal Palestinian form of 'king of the Jews'. Those who mock Jesus conclude that his apparently hopeless condition is proof that he is not the Messiah. Those crucified with him join in the abuse (cf. Luke 23:39-43).

The death of Jesus

27:45-50

The period of darkness from the sixth to the ninth hour is from noon to 3.00 pm (Amos 8:9-10) and is a sign of judgement. Part of the difficulty (Eloi or Eli) concerning the cry of dereliction is identifying the original language in which Jesus spoke these words. Jesus uses words from the scriptures (Psalm 22:1). Whether he used the Hebrew name for God or whether the name is translated from Aramaic is impossible to say. This possibly explains the reaction of the listeners who thought Jesus was calling for Elijah. Elijah did not die but was

taken alive to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-12) and some ancient Jewish traditions held that he would come and rescue the righteous in their distress. Whether the offer of the drink is mercy or mockery is not clear (Psalm 69:21). The loud cry reminds us once more of the terrible agony of the cross. Matthew records that Jesus 'gave up his spirit' (that is 'life').

***The impact of Jesus' death* 27:51-56**

Temple curtains divided the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place and the Holy Place from the outer court. Scripture writers interpret this as the inner curtain (Hebrews 4:16; 6:19-20; 9:11-28; 10:19-22) symbolising open access to God, making the Old Testament sacrificial system with its priests obsolete. The meeting place of God and humankind is no longer the temple but in person in Jesus. The raising of many 'holy people' prompts a number of questions (what kind of bodies did they have? Did they die again?). These are questions that scripture does not answer. The darkness, the earthquake, and the cry of dereliction convinced the soldiers that this was no ordinary execution. The portents terrified them and probably led them to believe that these things testified to heaven's wrath at the perpetration of such a crime, in which the soldiers had participated. More than that, Jesus, the promised Messiah and unique Son of God, is seen most clearly in his passion and death. Certain women, not highly regarded in Jewish society, kept watch until the very end so as to be last at the cross and first at the tomb.

***The burial of Jesus* 27:57-61**

Although Romans would allow a body to remain on a cross until it rotted away, Jewish customs did not allow the body to remain on the cross overnight (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Permission to bury a crucified body had to be obtained and that was never given in cases of treason. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who had not consented to their action, was rich enough to own a new tomb (Isaiah 53:9-12) and applied to Pilate for permission to bury Jesus' body. Pilate perhaps because he knew that Jesus was not really guilty of treason, granted his request. An expensive tomb consisted of an antechamber hewn out of the rock face, with a low passage leading into the burial chamber that was sealed with a stone that rolled in a slot cut into the rock. The slot was on an incline, making the grave easy to seal but difficult to open: several men might be needed to roll the stone back up the incline. Mourning was not permitted for those executed under Roman law. The women followed to the tomb with broken but silent grief and watched the burial.

***The guard at the tomb* 27:62-66**

The account of the guard at the tomb provides a background to the stolen body story. Matthew takes special care to say that the next day was the one after Preparation Day and therefore the Holy Sabbath, not to a 'feast-Sabbath' which could fall on a weekday. Fearful of some fraud or deception, the chief priests and Pharisees, unable to take military action without Roman sanction, asked Pilate for a guard to be posted at the tomb. Jesus 'first deception' was, according to them, his claim to be the Messiah. As far as they were concerned, his 'last deception' was that he would rise from the dead. From their perspective, the Jewish leaders are protecting themselves and the people from deception but from Matthew's perspective they were deceiving themselves. It is possible that what Pilate says means that they should use their own temple guard for this purpose. The stone could have been held in place by ropes that had an official seal fixed to prevent anyone tampering with it.

***The Resurrection* 28:1-10**

By the Jewish way of counting the day after the Sabbath was the third day. The women would not have walked far on the Sabbath so dawn on the first day of the new week

represented their first opportunity to go to the tomb. The violent earthquake (is this the same earthquake as 27:51, which solves some problems about those who rose and makes sense chronologically?) accompanying the arrival of the angel and the mighty angel's appearance caused the guards to collapse. This was not to do with the resurrection of Jesus who had already been raised. The stone was rolled back, the seal broken, and the soldiers made helpless, not to let the risen Messiah escape, but to let the first witnesses in. The reassuring words of the angel are consistent with other angelic appearances. The empty tomb is capable of many interpretations but the correct one is given by the angel. The women are invited to see the place where Jesus lay and commanded to go 'quickly' to give his disciples the joyous message. Jesus had promised to go ahead of his disciples into Galilee (26:32); and the angel now reminds them of this. As he promised, Jesus will arrive in Galilee before they do and meet them there. As the women were running to tell their news to the disciples, 'suddenly' Jesus met them. 'Greetings' is a normal Greek salutation. The women clasp his feet, in humility, kneeling before him, a posture associated with worship. Like the angel, Jesus tells the women not to be afraid and then gives them a similar commission. Jesus had used the expression 'my brothers' before (12:49-50; 25:40) and from that we can conclude that Jesus meant the wider circle of disciples and not just the eleven men who became apostles.

The guards' report

28:11-15

The stolen corpse story, introduced earlier (27:62-66), is now refuted. The fact that the guards reported to the chief priests, rather than to Pilate, suggests that they were temple police. Tampering with graves was a serious offence in the ancient world, subject at times to the death penalty. The temple police would be more likely than a Roman guard to admit to having fallen asleep, to be bribed and to be protected from Pilate's anger. The Jewish leaders are certainly more concerned to put out their own story than to discover the truth. The story that the body of Jesus was stolen is, in any event, unlikely. The Jewish authorities were clearly intent on making sure that Jesus' grave was secure. The timid and fearful disciples were unlikely to open Jesus' tomb and run the risk of being executed. The friends of Jesus were more concerned with securing a proper burial for his body. Matthew simply explains the origin of the 'stolen body story' which was common for at least the first century.

The great commission

28:16-20

Despite the widely circulating story of the stolen body, purchased with a large bribe, the eleven disciples obeyed Jesus and received a commission based on his authority and the truth rather than self-interest and money. The location of 'the mountain' is not clear. The expression could simply be translated 'into the hills'. Perhaps it represents a return to the venue of the great Sermon on the Mount. Whether the 'some' who doubted means some of the eleven or some of the wider group of disciples, it is clear that the followers of Jesus were still were hesitant, not merely gullible and ready to believe anything. *All* authority, *all* nations, *all* things ('everything', NIV) are the key themes of the closing verses. Although the imperative is not the word 'go' but 'make disciples' the sense of the phrase makes both 'go' and 'make disciples' the essence of the great commission. Disciples hear, understand and obey Jesus. As promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) they come from all nations. The New Testament does not know of disciples who are not baptised and instructed. The triple formula containing Father (or God), Son (or Christ), and Spirit occurs frequently in the NT (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:46; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2; Revelation 1:4-6). The disciples are reminded to obey 'everything I have commanded you' showing that discipleship includes obedience and not just abstract theorising. In time, 'eye-witnesses' will be succeeded by 'ear-witnesses'. It is a monumental task and so the gospel ends, not with command, but with the promise of Jesus' comforting presence.