

Overview of Matthew's Gospel

Chapters 1-4; 8-12; 14-17

David Gooding

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PART ONE

1

The Way of the Lord

Chapters 1–4

Introduction

The church here is currently studying the Gospel by Matthew. At great risk to themselves, they have invited me to give a kind of overview of the Gospel, so that when they proceed again to consider the detail they shall have some kind of framework into which to place it meaningfully. My aim is not to preach a sermon on any particular verse, nor to attempt to expound it verse by verse, but rather to give some kind of a general prospectus of the book.

If I were about to expound the Gospel by John and I asked you to cite from it one verse that to your mind sums up its most important message, I hazard a guess that many of you would choose the time honoured and long-loved John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world,' and your choice would be a very wise one. Tonight I have the privilege of choosing from the Gospel by Matthew what, to my mind, sums up one of his greatest concerns in the writing of this record of our Lord's life and teaching. It is our Lord speaking, and graciously he says,

Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (11:28–30)

These are key verses in Matthew, as we know from the fact that only Matthew records this invitation from our blessed Lord. It must have meant a great deal to Matthew and we shall presently see why. In it, our Lord offers us first to *rest* and then to *learn*. That is a good order to remember when we come to learn the lovely things and the profound doctrines that our Lord teaches, lest our learning should itself become an excessive burden. First of all, our Lord invites us to come and receive rest from him. Twice over he mentions it. 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and *I will give you rest*. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . and *you will find rest* for your souls.'

What is meant here by 'yoke'?

The practical question that arises therefore, is what our Lord means by inviting us to come and take his *yoke*. I know there are various views held about what he meant, and one of them that appeals to many people is to recall that in the ancient world, as in ours not so long ago, farmers ploughed with horses. It is said that there would be two horses and the farmer would put a younger horse beside an older one, because the older horse 'knew the ropes', so to speak—knew the furrows, and had the strength and the sense to persevere; whereas the younger one would need a lot of help in calming down and doing things properly. So they say that the Lord Jesus is offering us a 'rope' like that. He is the equivalent of the old, experienced horse and he will bear the heavy end of the yoke. We come alongside as the learners who stumble around, get up to our antics and have to be calmed every now and again by the Lord. If that is your preferred interpretation and you have found comfort in it, far be it from me to destroy your comfort; but I don't think it's what our Lord meant.

To suggest what our Lord meant, I ask you to turn to 1 Kings 12. When Solomon's son Rehoboam came to the throne, a rebellion took place; ten of the twelve tribes deserted him and set up the alternative kingdom of the ten tribes of Israel. But the revolt was provoked in part by Rehoboam's response to the people's appeal when they came along with Jeroboam, their leader. "'Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you.' He said to them, "Go away for three days, then come again to me." So the people went away' (vv. 4–5).

I think that's already enough to show us what the people meant by the yoke, 'the yoke your father put upon us.' They're not talking about Solomon in all his glory stepping off his throne, taking off his jacket, rolling up his sleeves and working alongside the other Israelites. Not at all. He sent them to work. As a king, he put his *yoke* on them, his government, his control, and it was exceedingly heavy. Now Solomon is dead, and the people come to Rehoboam. 'Your Majesty, make your father's yoke lighter and we will serve you'; implying, 'if you make it the same or worse, we shall depart.'

Rehoboam took counsel from the older men, and they said, 'The people's request is reasonable, you know. Make it lighter and they'll serve you forever.' Then Rehoboam consulted the younger men, and you'll scarcely believe this. They said, 'Make it lighter, by no means; make it ten times harder. Say to them, "My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs"' (v. 10). So when the people came again to Rehoboam, he said, 'My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions' (v. 14). He was for making the kingly yoke harder and more difficult, and the people said, 'Goodbye.' That initiated a split in Israel from which Israel never recovered.

It is against that kind of background that our Lord issues his invitation. The theologians tell us that Matthew is the Gospel of the King and it is the King who is saying to us, 'Come, take my yoke, accept my kingly government and learn from me.' First, he gives us rest, but when we have rest then he asks us to come and learn. Of course, the key to learning is being willing to do what the king says: 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

The word 'yoke' is also used in a slightly different sense. Let's look at one instance of it in Acts 15. This is the record of the dispute that arose among some of the early churches as to whether the Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the food laws in Israel in order to be saved. So the apostles got together in Jerusalem to make sure that they all held the same doctrine. 'But some *believers* who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses"' (v. 5). It would be interesting to find out what they believed, but it says they were believers.

When they had debated in the Council for a long time, Peter stood up. He was the man who had been chosen by God to open the door of faith to the Gentiles, and he said to them, 'Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a *yoke* upon the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?' And then he added, 'But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (vv. 10–11).

That was a *conviction* of Peter and all the other apostles, who were glad to have it as a fundamental statement of Christian teaching on the matter of salvation. But note, when he uses the term 'yoke', he's talking of doctrine, teaching, commandments. To those who were teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved, Peter said, 'You're putting a yoke on their necks.'

Matthew's emphasis on discipleship

Our Lord is saying, 'Come, take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.' How do we accept his yoke, and how does he *impose* it on us? So let us turn now to other famous verses in the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel. This is our Lord's farewell message to his apostles and disciples.

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them* to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (28:18–20)

We notice at once the particular emphasis that Matthew is inspired to bring us. Not now like John, saying, 'Go and preach, and tell them that they must be born again, and if only they put their faith in Christ, they will have *eternal life*.' Matthew believed that with all his heart, but he was commissioned to put another side of our gospel: 'Go and make *disciples*.' As we know, the word 'disciple' in Greek means a learner. It's a thing to be remembered, particularly by any who preach, that what we're supposed to be doing is not just to create believers, we are to make learners.

I once was at a Bible study. A man who had not long been converted was going to talk on discipleship, and he was getting just a little bit lost. He was saying all sorts of wonderful things about discipleship and some of them were true. So I gingerly suggested that in Greek, perhaps a disciple could be a learner. 'No, no,' he said, 'certainly not.' But it is so, isn't it?

In that context we mustn't say that you can have too much learning. 'Go and make learners'; and how do you do that? 'Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son

and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (see vv. 19–20).

This is Matthew and I quote these two verses to put us in the right mood, so to speak, for when we come to our detailed study. I think Matthew will have his eye on us as we study. 'What are they doing with my Gospel? Are they really taking it in? Are they taking the yoke of Christ? Are they enthusiastic about *learning* from the Lord and becoming true disciples?'

You say, 'What right has Matthew to talk to us like that?'

Matthew's background

Well, I think you believe that he was inspired. He had taken the yoke, hadn't he? He got converted. Does anybody admit to knowing where Matthew gives the story of his conversion? Don't all speak at once, it's rude! Unlike some other conversions, it's very short. He wouldn't be in much demand, I think, for giving his testimony. 'As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him' (9:9). We should need to know something about what his occupation was to see the effect this call from Christ had upon him.

Matthew was a tax collector and tax collectors were not liked by the rest of the Jewish populous. To start with, they worked for the hated Romans and were felt to be a kind of *quisling*. That is, if you know what a quisling is, and I haven't got the time to tell you.¹ But anyway, Matthew was working for the hated Romans and they laid down how much the tax collectors must pay them. So long as they paid that amount, they were free to raise as much more from the people as they could. They were hated and excommunicated from the synagogue. In spite of all that social hatred and pressure, the love of money and profit and power had the better of Matthew, until one day our blessed Lord came by and said, 'Follow me.' In that moment it broke his love of money and he got up and followed the Lord. He had taken the yoke, and, as I say, I think he'll have his eye on us as we read his Gospel. 'Are these folks going to do what I did?'

In his humility, Matthew doesn't tell us that he put on and paid for the dinner that is then described in verses 10–13. It's the other Gospel writers who tell us that bit. The Pharisees criticized him, but by the end of the meal everyone knew why Matthew had invited them. It was so they could meet Christ. Matthew was hoping that they would hear the word of Christ like he had done; that it would break their bondage and they would take his yoke.

As a tax collector, Matthew could write, and, as you know, he wrote the Gospel. In those days, lots of people could write and they had little books, little *codexes* as we call them. If they had nothing more, these could be pieces of wood, hollow in the middle. They were smeared with wax and you could write on them, and when you'd finished with that, you could smooth it out and write on it again. People would have had several of these with a leather thong going through them. It was a little book, a *libellus*, as the Romans called them. Being in the habit of this, it would be extraordinary if Matthew didn't jot down in his little book some of the things that Christ said when he was with him. When he came to write the Gospel, you can see the

¹ Vidkun Quisling (1887-1945) . . . Norwegian army officer whose collaboration with the Germans in their occupation of Norway during World War II established his name as a synonym for 'traitor.' (Britannica.com)

orderliness of an accountant in the way he has organized it. So let me call your attention to the feature that most of the commentators point out.

Narrative and teaching

Chapters 1–2: Starting with our Lord's genealogy (1:1–17); then the story of the actual conception and birth of our Lord Jesus (vv. 18–25). This is followed in chapter 2 by the coming of the wise men to Herod (2:1–12). Then the story of how, when the wise men were gone, an angel told Joseph to take the young child to Egypt for protection. When Herod was dead, the angel gave Joseph permission to bring the child back and eventually they settled in Nazareth (vv. 13–23).

Chapters 3–4: In chapter 3 we go on with a narrative of John the Baptist's ministry: what he preached, and people who got converted and baptized (vv. 1–12). We have the brief story of our Lord's baptism and what happened on that occasion (vv. 13–17). In chapter 4, there's the narrative of our Lord's temptation in the wilderness (vv. 1–11). Finally, as far as narrative is concerned, we get our Lord moving north and an account of his teaching ministry in the north. In Galilee he calls his first disciples and great crowds followed him as he preached in their synagogues and healed the sick (vv. 12–25).

Chapters 5–7: You have what is famously called *the Sermon on the Mount*. It is not narrative in that sense; it is systematic *teaching*, our Lord's moral and spiritual teaching. What I want particularly to point out to you is how chapter 7 ends. '*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes*' (v. 28–29).

Chapters 8 and 9: Notice that little phrase, '*And when Jesus finished these sayings*'. What happened next? Now we have a whole lot more *narratives*, stories.

Some people prefer stories to teaching, you know. They like the Gospels better than the Epistles. Well, they are full of beautiful stories, aren't they? As for Paul and all that endless teaching, oh dear! I know we in Europe owe our salvation to him, and when we get home to heaven we shall congratulate him. 'We owe a lot to you, Paul, for what you wrote. Of course, much of it we didn't understand, and we preferred Matthew because he had stories to tell!'

Chapter 10: Then there is a great wodge of *teaching* in chapter 10, which is the briefing of the apostles as they went out on their evangelistic mission.

Chapters 11–13: That teaching comes to an end. '*When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities*' (11:1). Matthew is in danger of repeating the pattern, isn't he? First, narrative, then teaching; and when our Lord has ended the teaching, more narratives, and then a bit of teaching in the form of parables. How does that end? Let's look and see. '*And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there*' (13:53).

Chapters 14–18: What then? You get a good measure of narrative now. It is really going places up to chapter 18, and you come then to teaching. You wouldn't guess how that ends, would you? For the fourth time: '*Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan*' (19:1).

Chapters 19–25: In Jerusalem, narrative and teaching become intermingled. Then it came to an end. *'When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples . . .'* (26:1).

Matthew is a very neat and orderly writer; he knows how to organize the books. He was a tax gatherer and an accountant. Let's be grateful for accountants, if we can't manage to be grateful to tax gatherers. But when Matthew has been so careful to organize his Gospel, then, if we take it seriously that he was an inspired apostle, we ought to take his writing seriously. It's not just a jumble of unrelated topics.

Narrative

Now I want to put in front of you a collection of Matthew's first sections of narrative.²

1. The genealogy.
2. The story of the conception by Mary and the birth of Jesus.
3. The coming of the wise men to Herod's palace; he summons the priests and the Pharisees and they consult the Bibles as to where the Messiah should be born.
4. When the wise men have gone away, the angel warns Joseph to take the child to Egypt. Herod massacres the young children in Bethlehem. The statisticians think there might have been twenty in a village of that size.

So, in chapters 1 and 2 there are four stories, ending in the withdrawal—they went to Egypt with the child, and came back at the angel's command when Herod was dead. Archelaus was reigning and he was even more cruel than Herod, so they withdrew into Nazareth. It was a remote place, and therefore a bit more secure for the growing child.

The narrative continues in chapters 3 and 4:

5. The ministry of John the Baptist and what he preached, how he accosted the crowd, and so forth.
6. The story of the baptism of the Lord Jesus.
7. The temptation of our Lord by the devil and how the Lord overcame him.
8. The withdrawal—he withdrew into Galilee and went and lived in Capernaum.

When our Lord refused to bow down to the devil, and the devil had his counterattack, the next thing you read in Matthew is that our Lord heard that his forerunner, John the Baptist, had been put in prison. Do you see Satan's message in that? 'If you're not going to bow down to me, all the kingdoms of the world are mine and I do with them what I like.' So Jesus hears that his forerunner has been put in prison, and in the custom of the ancient world you might expect a great noble person to be treated in the same way as his forerunner. The gauntlet was being thrown down.

² See Study Notes: 'The Way of the Lord, Matthew 1:1–4:22'.

I have given you a page of Study Notes. Do you find anything peculiar here? Anything worth noticing? Any similarities between the two sides of the page?

The Birth and Development of the Nation	The Way of the Desert
<p>1. The Genealogy (1:1–17) Son of Abraham . . . Abraham begat Isaac. DAVID'S SON CALLED THE CHRIST.</p>	<p>5. Ministry of John (3:1–12) Generation of vipers! Think not today: we have Abraham for our father.</p>
<p>2. The Birth (1:18–25) <i>The Son and the Spirit in relation to sin:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A question of righteousness: Joseph being a righteous man was not disposed to marry Mary, but was persuaded by an angel. b. That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. c. Immanuel: God with us. 	<p>6. The Baptism (3:13–17) <i>The Son and the Spirit in relation to sin:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A question of righteousness: John was not disposed to baptise Jesus, but Jesus persuaded him saying: thus it becomes us to fulfil all righteousness. b. The Spirit of God . . . came upon him. c. This is my beloved Son.
<p>3. Herod, Christ, Priests, and the Scriptures (2:1–12) <i>The two kings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. It is written. b. That I too may . . . worship him. c. Wise men fell down and worshiped him. d. They offered him gifts. 	<p>7. The Devil, Christ and the Scriptures (4:1–11) <i>The two kings:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. It is written (×3). b. If you will fall down and worship me. c. You shall worship the Lord your God and him only. d. All these things will I give you.
<p>4. The Withdrawal (2:13–23)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. He withdrew into Egypt . . . that it might be fulfilled . . . spoken by the prophet. b. He came and dwelt in Nazareth. c. Rachel weeping for her slaughtered children. <p>CHRIST: CALLED THE NAZARENE. GENOCIDE.</p>	<p>8. The Withdrawal (4:12–22)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. He withdrew into Galilee . . . that it might be fulfilled . . . spoken by the prophet. b. He left Nazareth. c. They which sat in the region and shadow of death. <p>THE WAY OF THE SEA.</p>

The birth and development of the nation/The way of the desert

1. *The genealogy (1:1–17)*: In the first paragraph of his Gospel, Matthew goes to great lengths to show us that our Lord was the son of David, the son of Abraham. That is very important; so important that it is put first—see the left side of the page.

5. *Ministry of John (3:1–12)*: Over here on the right, see what John the Baptist is saying. When he saw the Pharisees coming to his baptism, said he, a little bit sarcastically, ‘Who warned you

to flee from the wrath to come? Don't you start saying, "We have Abraham as our father; we're the blue-blooded sons of Abraham." That counts for absolutely nothing, what you need to do is to repent' (see vv. 7–9).

How do you reconcile those two?

Descent from Abraham is very important—descent from Abraham counts for nothing. Why need we be concerned with this long genealogy all about past history? Well, my dear ladies and gentlemen, it is because our Christian gospel is not a philosophy; it is based in history. Anybody can invent a philosophy; many have done so and some have been successful in getting followers. You can't organize to be born of a particular parent, can you? Is it possible to organize that you would be born of some rich millionaire? I think not.

The Christian gospel is based on centuries of history

That is a thing we need to grasp and get hold of because it lies behind certain forms of our witness to the world. When the other nations had gone over into idolatry, God's answer was to call out one man, Abraham, from an idolatrous Ur of the Chaldees and reveal himself to him as the one true and living God. From Abraham he would form a nation that should stand for faith in God alone. That is the phenomenon in history of the nation that sprang from Abraham, the nation God formed as a witness against idolatry and for the one true God.

I know the social anthropologists and others will argue that religion has evolved. You start off by being animists, perhaps, thinking that there's a spirit or something in the trees and in the rocks. Some Japanese in the Shinto religion still hold it, brilliant scientists though some of them are. From believing in *animism* you then personalize the gods and come to believe in a plurality of gods, *polytheism*, and some nations have many gods. And then you evolve a little bit further, so the theory goes. Your nation has one God and another nation has one God, so that's called *henotheism*, one God per nation. So you evolve a little bit further and come to *monotheism*: there is only God throughout the whole world and universe. If you're like Richard Dawkins, you evolve a little bit further and come to *atheism*. It is taught as though it were scientific. It's not truly history.

How do we know that Israel didn't evolve into this belief in the one true God? Well, for the simple historical reason that it was revealed to Abraham. All down history Israel were forever compromising and had to be pulled back by their inspired prophets. It was a centuries-long discipline by the true God, but I have to inform you that he succeeded in the end. When our Lord Jesus Christ entered earth and came to the temple in Jerusalem, there was not an idol in it. There were certainly no temple prostitutes, as there would have been in Greece. Israel had been cured of idolatry in that sense, and was strictly monotheistic.

Why is that important? Why did God wait until they had been cured of idolatry and were standing by the revelation that God had made to Abraham? Why did God not send his Son before then?

If you were a Greek, imagine what it would be like going to a Greek friend and saying, 'Do you know that Jesus is the Son of God?' Your friend would say to you, 'That's very interesting. Zeus has no end of wives, and sons galore. Which god is Jesus the son of?' When our Lord came to earth, if his nation had still been idolatrous, we might be in doubt as to what is meant by the claim that Jesus is the Son of God.

So the Christian gospel is built on history, and Matthew divides the genealogy into three major parts. Why is that? Because he's telling you to look back into the Old Testament and the lessons that God was teaching Israel in the course of that long genealogy. We shall come back to that on another occasion. Christianity is built on history; and of course our Lord's miracles, his life on earth, his death, his resurrection and ascension that we preach, these truly are history.

See the balance on the right side of your notes. Listen to John the Baptist telling the Pharisees about the wrath to come. 'You'd better start repenting, because already the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (see 3:10).

If you were to go through Botanic Gardens one of these days and come across a big tree that looks a bit wonky, and you saw an axe that had been laid there—the workmen had gone off to lunch or something—you might draw the conclusion that they intended to have the tree down shortly.

'You'd better start repenting,' said John to the Pharisees, 'for the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Don't stand there and say, "We don't need to repent, we have Abraham as our father." That counts for nothing. It's your personal standing before God, your spiritual state. You need to repent of the rebellion of your sins and be forgiven.'

2. *The birth (1:18–25)*: This doesn't contradict the first part of the story of how God's Son came into our world. It's the story of *the way of the Lord*, if you like (3:3). When he left the mansions of glory above and came down to our world, how did he come and by what means and methods? This is the wonderful story of it.

3. *Herod, Christ, Priests, and the Scriptures (2:1–12)*: After these long years of genealogy, the marvel of his virgin birth and so forth and so on, we see people with the Scriptures in their very hands, either not interested in the coming of Messiah or planning to slaughter him. When they couldn't get at him, they slaughtered all the children to make sure that he would be among them. It is a little example of the genocide that has gone on all down the centuries, as Satan has tried to obliterate the nation from whom the Christ was to be born.

6. *The baptism (3:13–17)*: So he came into our world as a babe. But there is *the way of the Lord* in another sense. John came, claiming to be the fulfilment of Isaiah 40 that rings out the call:

A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.' (vv. 3–4)

In an ancient city, if they were to be visited by the emperor and knew he was coming, the people would send out the workmen to smooth out the road, potholes would be filled and humps would be demolished, so that there would be a nice even road for the emperor to ride his chariot down. Isaiah uses it as a metaphor, 'Prepare the way of the Lord', and 'the way of

the Lord' of course will be prepared by people's personal and national repentance and seeking God.

'Don't stand there saying, "We are Abraham's children," because a lot of Abraham's children will at last be lost.' Some of them took their Messiah and had him nailed to a tree. Therefore, if the Lord is going to come not only into our world, but into our hearts, it doesn't matter who we are, or what race. 'Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God' (John 3:3).

Summary

I trust I've said enough to indicate that Matthew's predominant motive in writing his record is to persuade us to come and take the yoke of Christ. He is king, his yoke is easy, and in coming to him we find rest. But then we find a yoke, which he imposes on us by his teaching, and we shall find in his teaching rest for our souls. Real though it is, his yoke is easy and his burden is light. It reminds us of our duty as believers. We're not just to go out and preach that folks may believe—that is absolutely necessary, of course, but we are to make disciples, we are to make learners, teaching all that he has commanded.

We have seen how Matthew himself took the yoke of Christ; how it broke his slavery to the love of money and made him a follower of the Lord. What a debt we owe to Matthew for his Gospel. We've noticed how God used his natural talents and inclinations so that, in writing his Gospel, he's not just put down a lot of incidental stories, to make of them what you will. He very carefully selected them and then organized them, so that we can take the meaning out of each one.

As we continue our studies, we shall compare one with the other and see that, very often, there are two sides to a question. Sometimes there are four sides, and it's part of our Christian thinking to observe the balance in holy Scripture so that we might profit the more deeply by what those writers have been inspired to record for us. Thank you for your great patience.

Shall we pray and give thanks for the food.

Sovereign Lord Jesus, we praise thee for thy servant, Matthew, through whose pen we read thy words and find them living in our minds, our consciences and in our hearts. We bless thee for the reality of the rest thou hast given us. We pray, Lord, that increasingly we might learn of thee. Ever more closely, put thy yoke upon us that we may serve thee gladly and find rest for our souls. In our studies of this Gospel, we pray for the gracious help of thy Spirit, that thou wilt teach us not merely the facts, but how to think about them; and then show us what application and direction they should give to our basic thinking and to our way of living.

And now we thank thee for Christian fellowship, for the refreshments that will be offered to us, and pray thine evening blessing and thy grace, for thy name's sake. Amen.

Authority and Discipleship

Chapters 8–10

Today I received the tentative programme for our next visit to Ukraine. It is to start off in Kharkiv, where we were before, and then some other places with unpronounceable names. I would ask your prayers for two women in Kharkiv; highly responsible political appointees. The first of them has virtual control of all the educational establishments in the Kharkiv area, including the university. When we first met her about two years ago she was a little bit reserved, but she has become our friend. She was able to get us into all sorts of institutions and the university itself. The other good lady was in charge of the training of the methodologists. In Ukraine, education is largely in the hands of women, simply because teachers' salaries are so abysmally low that men don't go in for it. These are very high-powered ladies, very responsible and very able. Pray that God might meet them and save them and reward them for the way they are moving to get us into the educational establishments.

Review of previous study

So welcome tonight to this study in the Gospel by Matthew. This is the second of the seven studies that I have been asked to give in the form of an overview of some of the major features of the Gospel. On our last occasion, I pointed out how Matthew has a decided tendency to group narratives together, and then teaching. That is not a universal rule throughout his Gospel, but it is marked enough that most commentators point to it. I then made the point that the narratives are not just selected at random, nor are they unconnected. They are carefully chosen and arranged. Let me just remind you of the evidence of that.

We saw that the first four chapters of the Gospel are largely narrative. In the genealogy, great stress is laid on the fact that our Lord was ultimately the son of David and the son of Abraham, and the long genealogy reminds us of the importance of the history behind Christianity. The Christian gospel is the result of centuries of historical intervention by God into human history, particularly through the call of Abraham and the development of the nation of Israel, the prophets pointing to the Messiah, and the eventual coming of our blessed Lord. We emphasized the importance that our Lord was the son of Abraham (1:1).

Then we noticed the contrast. John is now preaching to the crowds and he says to some of them, 'Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father"' (3:9), for now physical descent from Abraham counts for absolutely nothing. On the one side, it was a question of the way God had of bringing his Son into our world; but on the other side, it's the

way God had through his Son to get into the hearts of men and women. The first is historical, the second is moral and spiritual; both, of course, are needed to put a balanced point of view.

Authority and worship

Or take another easy example from those same four chapters. This is about two kings. On the one side of your Notes, it's the wise men asking the religious authorities, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?' and the story is taken up with the response of Herod the king. When you come to the other side, it is likewise about two . . . shall I say kings, or princes? For this is the question of our blessed Lord being tempted by the devil. You will notice that common to both of them is the question of *worship*.

Let's have a look at the Notes and continue with our studies.

3. Herod, Christ, Priests, and the Scriptures (2:1-12)

Said Herod to the religious authorities, 'Where is this king to be born?' They knew the Scriptures, so they pointed him to the Old Testament prophets and assured him that it was in Bethlehem, but there is no record that they bothered to go and find the king. Herod said to the wise men, 'You go and search for the child, and when you've found him come and tell me, so that I too may come and *worship* him.'

I must remind you that 'worship' in the Bible does not always mean the singing of hymns and choruses and praising the Lord with hallelujahs. The basic meaning of worship is to bow down before somebody and own their overall authority. What Herod was saying was, 'As a king myself, when I've found him, I will bow down to him,' which was a lie, for he'd no intention of bowing down to him. When he had found the Messiah, born in Bethlehem as the prophets said he would be, Herod would have obliterated him. It was a challenge to the authority of the word of God and the Christ of God.

7. The Devil, Christ, and the Scriptures (4:1-11)

You will notice that this is also the question of *worship*. Here is the king himself, our blessed Lord, and he is being tested by the devil. God allows it, and the issue at stake is the validity of the word of God. The devil quotes Scripture, perversely enough, in order to tempt the Lord to go against God and to serve him.

On each occasion our Lord answers the devil with the assertion of God's word, 'It is written'. First the devil said, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread' (4:3). 'You've been fasting for forty days; make these stones bread.' I've never been tempted by the devil to make stones bread; I don't know about you. He knows I can't do it, but our Lord did have the more than human power to do it. It shows his amazing grace that he let a creature like Satan tempt him to use his divine power for his own enjoyment, as distinct from doing the will of God. Because of his submission to the authority of God and his word, our Lord proved himself worthy to be king of the universe.

When Satan failed to provoke him there, he took him up a mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall

down and *worship* me' (v. 9). Once more, by the term 'worship', Satan didn't mean, 'if you bow down and sing a lot of hymns in my honour.' That isn't the point.

He was saying, 'Look here, young man, it's okay for you to go round preaching and stirring up the crowds, and I won't hinder you if you will acknowledge that I am an absolute power. But if you try to upset my power, then I'm warning you what may happen.' Christendom has often been tempted to compromise with Satan and his powers; I leave my comment at that.

Our Lord refused, and as a result the very next thing that is to be heard in the Gospel of Matthew is that John the Baptist was imprisoned (v. 12). John the Baptist was our Lord's forerunner, and it was normal that the one announced by the forerunner would be treated in the same way. Do you see the sequence of thought? If Christ will not bow down and acknowledge Satan as an ultimate power, then he'll warn him, 'Do you see what's happened to your forerunner?' That was a threat. You'll notice the words that are used now: 'Then the devil left him' (v. 11).

This is only by way of offering a little evidence that the narrative portions of Matthew, like many other parts in the Gospel, are very carefully selected and compiled. We cannot afford simply to take them as one-off separate stories, though, by all means, please do that. Any study of God's word is good, if it's done in a proper mood. If you can only manage one story, well manage one story then. But to get the full significance of the stories, one must take them as they are written as a whole and observe their interrelationship between each other, for very often they put the different sides of a similar question.

You'll notice that I've not attempted to expound the passage. I say that because some people seem to think that, in studying the Gospels, the thing to do is to see all sorts of patterns in them, and that's all there is. No, it isn't. To notice that the stories are related and form a coherent whole is only the first stage towards a responsible exposition.

Dominant themes

After chapter 4, following the narrative, come chapters 5, 6 and 7, containing the famous Sermon on the Mount, our Lord's moral and spiritual teaching. As this is meant to be simply a brief overview of the Gospel as a whole, I shall say nothing about it. There is enough in that sermon to keep us occupied for months.

The next block of *narrative* goes through chapters 8 and 9; whereas chapter 11 is once more a passage of *teaching*, as our Lord briefs his apostles for their evangelistic mission around Canaan.

On each occasion, when Matthew sums up our Lord's teaching by some remark like, 'And when Jesus had finished these sayings,' or, 'When Jesus had finished these parables,' what he says next is a key to understanding what shall follow. What he says here is, 'the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him' (7:28–8:1).

Discipleship

I'm about to suggest that now in chapters 8 and 9, the dominant theme is a question of *discipleship*. What it means to be a disciple and what it will involve; how do you begin a path of discipleship and what course will it initiate us into? One of the reasons that makes me think it is the dominant theme here, is the verb at the end of 8:1, 'When he came down from the mountain, great crowds *followed* him.' Can you see them? It means literally, they followed him *geographically* down the mountain; but they'd had such tremendous teaching up that mountain that they came and they followed him.

Very good, but notice how that verb repeats itself in 8:19, 'And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will *follow* you wherever you go.'" Not just on the mountainside—'wherever you go'. Our Lord had to lay down the conditions for him. 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (v. 20). To another man he said, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead' (v. 22). He's talking about the priorities of discipleship; priorities involved in following the Lord Jesus. Now look at verse 23, 'And when he got into the boat, his disciples *followed* him.' That's precisely what disciples are meant to do: disciples are those who follow the Lord Jesus.

Finally, in chapter 9 Matthew gives us the story of his conversion. He puts it in these terms, 'As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and *followed* him' (v. 9). That's an interesting story of conversion. Our Lord didn't say to Matthew, 'If you believe on me you will have eternal life,' he just said, 'Follow me.' That's how Matthew got converted, and from the very start he understood what conversion means—that was fortunate, wasn't it? It means being converted to follow Christ, and at his command Matthew rose up and followed him.

I'm suggesting that the repetition of this verb in these passages is beginning to emphasize this matter of discipleship, what it involves, and how you become a disciple. Let's check up for ourselves. Is that a reasonable theme for Matthew to devote two chapters to? Well, very reasonable, because Matthew tells us that he was present when, at the end of his ministry on earth, our Lord gathered them in Galilee to a mountain, and said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples* [make learners, make followers] of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (28:18–20)

This is Matthew's Gospel. He tells us that conversion means being converted to follow Christ; and here he describes what following Christ will mean. I don't know how you feel, but sometimes a thought comes to the human heart, 'What if he should demand too much of me; things that I can't possibly do? Am I wise to embark upon a course of discipleship? Suppose he were to ask for *everything*? I can see the point of salvation: we come to Christ and we're born again; we receive eternal life and we go to heaven. Praise the Lord, that's certain. But what will being a disciple involve?'

We gear ourselves up to learn, and then to do what we learn. I don't know whereabouts Matthew is in glory, but when he wrote this he had his eye on us, you know.

What will discipleship involve?

First of all, he has four stories that put forward, if I may say it, the *easy* side of being a disciple (8:1–17).

You say, 'You made out that it was going to be hard, and now you're saying it's easy.'

'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,' says Christ, '. . . For my yoke is *easy*, and my burden is *light*.' What a gracious invitation that is to fearful souls about to embark on a life of discipleship—his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

The leper's experience of the power of Christ (8:1–4)

So they came down from the mountain, and there came a leper and bowed down before him, saying, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean' (8:2). And so, in this easy section, you find people whose faith in our Lord's power has been provoked. We were told at the end of chapter 7, 'the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes' (v. 28). The supreme authority of Christ attracted them.

I am sure you don't preach a wishy-washy doctrine that Christ is merely a councillor put on by the city, or something. There is more beyond that. He has absolute authority, and it was the authority of his word and his teaching that attracted these multitudes. They followed him because they were astonished at his teaching; 'he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.' Faith was provoked in this leper and he came to the Lord Jesus and said, "'Lord, if you will [you have the power to do it], you can make me clean.'" And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed' (8:2–3).

We don't know whether it was the disease called leprosy, or some outrageous skin disease. This we do know, that, according to the Old Testament, it made a man or woman unclean, and therefore they had to be banished from close association with other human beings. They would have defiled all the people they mixed with and made them unclean. So, when our Lord stretched out his hand and touched him, that was a magnificent gesture, because no one would have dared to touch a man like that. According to Old Testament regulation, he had to cover his mouth and cry, 'Unclean, unclean,' so that nobody even came accidentally near him. Here is our Lord reaching out his hand and touching him. Of course he wasn't defiled and the uncleanness was banished.

This is a lovely thing. He didn't simply tell people, 'You ought to be clean,' or, 'Do try and be clean.' He has the power to make people clean, and who wouldn't be a disciple of such a Lord, if he can make you clean? Here's the glory of the thing, and I quote his word lest you think I exaggerate:

The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean . . .

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. (John 13:10; 15:3)

So clean, as the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, that 'we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let

us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water' (10:19–22).

'Our hearts sprinkled'; that is, with blood. In the Old Testament, people are never washed in blood, you know. Washing in blood is a pagan ceremony. You won't find it in Scripture. You'll wash garments in blood, but not people. Says Hebrews 10, 'We've boldness to enter into the holiest of all, into the very presence of God, our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience.' The blood cleanses our hearts from guilt; our bodies are bathed all over by living water—what Paul would call the 'washing of regeneration' (Titus 3:5). Shout 'hallelujah' in your heart!

Incidentally, you can begin to see why even I have been embarked on a path of discipleship for over seventy years, because this was made easy for me by his supreme authority. He doesn't just tell me to be clean; he can make me clean. That's the gospel.

But notice what Jesus said next to the leper. He said, 'I will; be clean.' And then he said, 'See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them [to the priests]' (vv. 3–4).

Now the priest couldn't cleanse anybody of leprosy, but our Lord didn't say, 'Look here, my good friend, see how much better I am than the priests. With all their ceremonies and things, they couldn't cleanse you, so you may leave them now that I've cleansed you.' He didn't say it like that. He said, 'Don't tell anybody else; go to the priest', for our Lord wanted to uphold the authority of the priest, because it was based upon the Old Testament being the word of God. God had laid it down in his word that the priests should examine a man, and if it was leprosy the priests should pronounce him unclean, with all that it entailed (see Lev 13). They had no means of healing it in those days, except by a miracle like Naaman, the leper who got cleansed (see 2 Kgs 5; Luke 4:27). These laws were very necessary for the preservation of the health of society.

I wish the BBC was listening. One senior management figure has had to resign, because of the outrageously filthy stuff knowingly put out on Radio 1. Our Lord isn't of that brigade. Uncleanliness is very serious; God's law wasn't playing around. The priest had been carrying it out and our Lord wanted to show the priest that he backed his authority, based on God's law. But simultaneously, what a testimony it was for the priest. Maybe that same priest had declared the man unclean; he couldn't cleanse him, and Christ had done what the law couldn't do.

It is an example of Romans 8:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (vv. 3–4)

The centurion recognizes the authority of Christ (8:5–13)

This is the story of the centurion from Capernaum, whose servant was paralysed and grievously tormented. When our Lord said, 'Yes, I'll come and heal him,' the man began to think a bit more. He said, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof' (v. 8). 'You

don't need to come to my house. I'll tell you why. I *also* am a man . . .'—did you notice the 'also'? 'I'm a man like you; I'm also under authority. I'm under the authority of the emperor in Rome; and because I'm under his authority, if I say to this soldier, "Go there," he goes; and if I say, "Come here," he comes, and if I say, "Do this," he does it. You don't need to come; you need merely to speak the word.'

With the leper, it was a question of power. With this man, it's a question of authority. 'Speak only the word.' The word that Christ speaks is not mere fact; it carries authority. 'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1:1); and when he spoke the universe came into being. His word carries authority. Our Lord commended the man because of his faith. 'Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith' (v. 10). This man was a Gentile, but look at his faith.

How do you get that kind of faith? 'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Rom 10:17). It's not something we work up; it's by listening to his word that faith comes. You see it in this centurion. That's why the job of a disciple is to learn. Go and make *disciples*: people who learn Christ's word and seek the Lord. Christ speaks his word into their hearts and it carries his authority.

Peter's mother-in-law enjoys the healing touch of Christ

Then there's a delightful little thing in verse 14, 'And when Jesus entered Peter's house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever.' I don't know whether Peter had warned his wife that he was bringing the preacher in. Allow me, who has no experience in these things, to say that it's wise for husbands, if they're going to bring the preacher home, to forewarn their wives, and if necessary their mothers-in-law as well.

It used to be told to me as one of these warning stories, of a good man who came home and he'd so enjoyed the sermon he'd brought the preacher back home with him. And so they went to the various rooms, and his wife came out into the hallway and saw her husband, bending down to pick something off the floor and she gave him a great kick and, said, 'Take that for bringing a preacher home.' The man got up, but it wasn't her husband. It was the preacher himself. You have to be careful, don't you? I can see that.

But there was Peter's mother-in-law, and we can see from what eventually happened how gladly she would have served Christ, got the meal ready for him, and whatever else needed to be done. But she was lying sick with a fever and couldn't serve anybody. You've probably never been in such a flap, but I confess that I have. Our Lord graciously touched the lady's hand and the fever left her and she got up and began to serve him.

'His yoke is easy and his burden is light.' If this is what discipleship means, who wouldn't be a disciple, I wonder?

Healing many who were oppressed by demons and the sick

That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.' (vv. 16–17)

I think the metaphor is wonderful. I know you'll tell me that his cure of diseases points us forward to the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy in our Lord's atoning death, but let's just take the words in their immediate metaphorical meaning. He found all these folks with their weaknesses and distresses, he put his shoulder under the weakness and carried them. Ah, that's the lovely Son of God; he knows my weakness, he's there to put his shoulder under it and carry it.

The journey of discipleship

That is the first big section on discipleship, but now let's notice verse 18.

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side.

Perhaps this strikes us as odd, because if you've been able so far to get a great crowd to come and listen to you, why not increase the numbers? In one sense, you've got what you wanted, haven't you? If these people are going to be genuine disciples, they've now got to be taken further, and there are lessons of discipleship that cannot be learnt unless people are prepared to go on with Christ along the journey of discipleship.

The scribe who wanted to follow Jesus

So when Jesus saw them, he said, 'Let's go over to the other side.'

And a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' (vv. 19–20)

In other words, he had no home on earth. Some people entertained him in their homes, but he himself had no home. He was always on the move. Perhaps this scribe copied out Scripture and was a good theoretician. But when he said, 'I'll follow you wherever you go,' our Lord said, 'Let me tell you honestly, my good man, I've nowhere to lay my head. If you're following me, you'll always be on the move.'

That is discipleship. It's okay for me to say that I was saved in the year 1935, and thank the Lord for that; but am I still on the move with Christ?

The man who wanted first to bury his father

Another man came, and he was good intentioned. He said,

'Lord, let me first go and bury my father.' And Jesus said to him, Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.' (vv. 21–22)

We should not suppose that our Lord is telling the man that he needn't now fulfil his duty towards his father. We know from chapter 15 of this very Gospel that our Lord outright and publicly condemned the Pharisees for saying that so long as a man fulfils certain religious duties put on him, then he is no longer responsible to honour his father and mother and

maintain them in their old age. Our Lord roundly condemned that, but the fact is that when Christ is our master and we are his disciples, he must be first in everything.

I was in Malaysia once and my dear Christian friend brought me to a meal with a friend of his. I suppose he was in his middle fifties. He was 'kind of interested in Christianity', my host told me, and perhaps there would be a chance to speak to him. So I got in conversation with this good man and he explained to me, yes, he was very interested in Christ and would like to trust Christ. But, being a good Chinese man, he couldn't do that just yet, because his eldest brother hadn't died, and in Chinese family law you not only have to obey your father and mother, but, even more important, your eldest brother. You wouldn't think of taking any decision in life if you didn't consult your first brother senior, and this brother wouldn't have approved of him becoming a Christian. 'I can't become a Christian yet,' he says, 'until my brother has died.' Just fancy that.

'No, no,' says Christ, 'if you're going to be a disciple, it's not anything first before me.' Christ must come first, and if we make him first he will tell us to look after our parents, of course. But that's the order: Christ first. Our hearts feel for many of our friends in other countries who, if they want to put Christ first, will offend the family so much that they might be in physical danger. This is tough, isn't it? 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead,' says he. 'You follow me,' or, as he puts it elsewhere, 'You go and proclaim the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:60). That is not Christ being hard-hearted.

Suppose you have a teenage son and he's got knocked down on the road, and you take him to hospital. He's got a broken leg, and you say to the surgeon, 'While you've got a needle there, would you patch up his trousers for me? They've got torn in the accident.' What do you think the surgeon would say? 'Nonsense, anybody can sew his trousers up, I'm here to do what other folks can't do—to save his life.'

When it comes to following the Lord we must not be hard-hearted, we must be kind. But we have to do what Christ has given us to do that other people can't do. We must not be deflected from our sacred work that the Lord gives us to do for him, to do for other people what they could easily do for themselves.

Jesus calms the storm

So then he got into a boat, and his disciples followed him—that's what disciples do.

And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, 'Save us, Lord; we are perishing.' And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?' Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marvelled, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?' (vv. 24–27).

I remember years ago, someone got up and read the story of the storm on the lake and how the apostles feared that the boat was going down. The Lord rebuked their lack of faith

and the boat didn't go down, and he exhorted us on that score. In that very same meeting, there was a stranger present. Tall, face tanned with some hot sun, and later on he said very quietly, 'My brothers and sisters, I have to tell you that sometimes the boat goes down.' He was a missionary. He told us that the five men who had just been murdered by the Auca Indians were his colleagues.³

Sometimes the boat goes down. Therefore, what lesson is being taught by this incident, and why did he rebuke them for having little faith? Well, when the storm arose he was asleep. But wait a minute, who was he? Is your faith big enough to say that he was the Christ? Big enough to say that he was the Son of God? Do you think it possible that, because he happened to be asleep, he'd go to the bottom and be drowned? I don't think so. He took them this way to show them that, in following him, they should recognize that he is the master and Lord of the material forces of the universe, and therefore we can journey with him.

When our time comes he may allow us to be executed or die of some disease, but it will never be because he'd fallen asleep and wasn't aware of it. That kind of spirit is needed sometimes, isn't it? It would take it, if you were the Apostle Paul on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, tossed with the wind for a fortnight with no sun or stars visible, not knowing where on earth you were, whether you were near land, and fearing any minute to go to the bottom (see Acts 27). His faith was in the Lord who controls all the forces of nature, and we're safe in his hand too. We shall never perish because he wasn't paying attention, but that's a lesson you can learn only as you follow him through life and meet life's storms.

Jesus heals two men with demons

When he came to the other side, two demon-possessed men met him; so fierce were they that nobody could pass that way (v. 28). Yes, following Christ on the path of discipleship is not just a game. Sooner or later, to a lesser or greater degree, Satan will try to make it impossible for us to move forward.

If it's any encouragement to my younger brothers and sisters, years ago, when I first began to take God's word seriously, the Lord had begun to speak to me so that I felt as if I was walking on the clouds, listening to the Holy Spirit telling me of Christ. It was magnificent. But that was followed by an experience that I came to think was the devil trying to put me off studying Scripture forever.

That is the way our Lord took them and the boat. There were hard and sometimes frightening lessons to learn. He cast out the demons and made progress possible, demonstrating his power, not theirs. The demons are given permission to go into the pigs, and the whole herd ran down the hillside and drowned in the lake. The townspeople came out and saw all this loss of pigs and heard what had happened to the demon possessed men. The cost was too much for them. They'd lost a whole herd of pigs and they preferred the men being demonized, and they asked our Lord to depart. The tremendous wonder is this, that he who could command the forces of nature, and who was superior to the forces of hell, when

³ On 8th January 1956, Jim Elliot (28), Pete Fleming (27), Ed McCully (28), Nate Saint (32), and Roger Youderian (31) were killed by the Wuaorani Indians (referred to at the time as the Auca Indians).

the people asked him to go, he went. It is seriously possible to say 'no' to God and to God's Christ. That's an awesome choice to have to make, isn't it?

Chapter nine will return to the wonderful easiness of discipleship, 'the yoke is easy and the burden is light'. But when we come to chapter ten it will begin again to probe into our very deepest heart-emotions, troubles and disabilities, and show us how the Lord can cope with them. But we must leave it for tonight. Next week, I hope to look at another major part of the narrative, and I shall be suggesting that, from chapter eleven to the end of chapter thirteen, this deals, not with discipleship, but with the problem of evil.

'What's that to do with us?' you say.

Well, everything. I've told you the story before, but let me tell it again—that's what old men do. I remember after a lecture in my student days, there came a fellow student. He was a Jew, his parents had recently been gassed in the gas chambers in Germany and he had escaped. Like me, he was learning Hebrew.

He said to me, 'David, your Jesus cannot be the Christ. He can't be the Messiah.'

I said, 'How's that, John?'

He said, 'Because the Old Testament prophesied that when the Messiah came, he would put down all evil, and your Jesus just hasn't done it.'

He had reason to speak, didn't he? His parents had just been gassed by Hitler.

'Don't start inventing the idea that Jesus set up a spiritual kingdom. That's what you Christians made up to cover your disappointment when Jesus didn't put down evil.'

How would you answer that to a Jew? But, you see, if Matthew is going to say that Jesus is the Messiah—and he's writing for Jews as well as Gentiles—he'll have to face it, won't he? How can you say that Jesus is the Son of God, or even if there's a God at all, if he hasn't stopped evil? Matthew knows his Gospel; he knows the problems that people would hurl at him from his own Jewish community, if he tried to say that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But of course, he has to answer the question. What is the answer to it?

Like any good newspaper writer, I leave you on tenterhooks, hoping you'll come back next week.

Just let's pray and give thanks to God for the refreshment.

Our Father, we thank thee for thy holy word, and we thank thee even more for him who is the Word eternal. And we thank thee, Father, for causing us to hear thy word, living and abiding and stirring new life in our hearts and a desire to follow thy dear Son.

We bless thee for his easy yoke and the light burden that he puts upon us; and yet we pray, Lord, for thy grace and courage in our faith, so that we may follow Christ on the path and never give up moving forward and progressing in the way of discipleship. And so we commit one another to thee and pray that thy Holy Spirit will make thy word meaningful to us, both in comfort and encouragement, and stimulation for the future.

And now we thank thee for kind friends who have provided refreshment for us. Bless it to us and our fellowship together, and remember those who afterwards go to 'talk shop'. Bless their testimony, we pray, and grant them in thy good time to see the fruit that shall come from it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Challenges to Christ's Authority

Chapters 11–12

It is a pleasure to see you, my good friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the third and last in the first part of this mini-series of talks in which I was asked to give some introductory studies to the Gospel of Matthew.⁴ I suppose it is good for our spiritual muscles to attempt the impossible from time to time; it makes us strong if we don't faint. But it was absurd on my part to suppose that in three talks I could give an introduction to the whole Gospel. What we have been trying to do is to take some of the narrative sections and show their dominant themes and how they hang together.

We tried to show that the contents of chapters 1–4 are not a haphazard choice of individual things that just happened to happen, but, like beads or jewels on a sophisticated necklace, they were put together so that each should contribute its colour and brightness and shape to the overall effect of the narrative passage in which they are put.

Last week, we went on to study the narrative section that lies in chapters 8 and 9 and found that at least one of its dominant themes was the question of *discipleship*, a topic that lies at Matthew's heart. It is he who records that, from the mountain top where our Lord ascended, he charged his apostles to go and make disciples of all the nations. So it is not strange to find that Matthew has devoted these two chapters to incidents that describe, analyse, and show us the meaning of, what discipleship is and what it involves. We only managed to get halfway through, but I hope I have said enough to show that one of its dominant themes is the question of discipleship. I must move on without attempting to complete that section of narrative, otherwise we shall get nowhere in particular.

Tonight I want to attempt an equally impossible thing. First of all, I want to take the narrative section that extends from 11:1 to the end of chapter 12.

When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. (11:1)

That is not an unnecessary remark. If we were to study the teaching section in the array of parables in chapter 13, we should find that our Lord enunciates what is said here.⁵ His immediate way of setting up the kingdom of God was to teach and to preach, and the

⁴ Following this talk Dr Gooding visited Ukraine and there was a space of time before he continued with the second part of the series.

⁵ As with the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7, these studies do not include the Parables of the Kingdom in chapter 13.

significance of that will become clear as we now consider some of the problems raised in the narrative from chapter 11 onwards.

Problem 1: The doubts John the Baptist had about Christ

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.' (11:2–6)

Some of you may well object, 'We didn't come here tonight to hear heresy. What are you saying? How could John the Baptist, the divinely appointed forerunner of Christ, possibly have had any doubts?'

If he didn't doubt Christ, what did he do then?

You say, 'John had introduced our Lord as the Messiah, but somehow he didn't seem too keen on telling anybody. Every time he addressed the crowds, wouldn't you have expected him to stand up and say to them, "I am the Messiah"? But he didn't do that. In fact, even when he healed somebody, he charged them not to tell anybody. John wasn't doubting Christ; he was just getting impatient. So he sent these various disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" In front of the crowds, the Lord would be obliged to say, "Of course I am the Christ."'

Even so, John still seems to be criticizing Christ. May those of us who have never had any doubts cast the first stone at John. Consider where he now was. He had preached with great power that our Lord was the unique one sent from God. For Jesus of Nazareth to baptize people with the Holy Spirit, surely he must be God? The Holy Spirit is not some impersonal power like electricity; he is the third person of the divine Trinity. For Christ to pour out the Holy Spirit, as Peter observed on the day of Pentecost, who then is Jesus? John said, 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Matt 3:11). In what sense? Well, 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (v. 12).

That's how John preached. You'll have to admit that he wasn't a very modern preacher; simultaneously he was preaching salvation and judgment. When the Pharisees came out to his baptism, he got particularly vociferous and said, 'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance . . . Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (3:7–8, 10). That's what he preached. But Herod's 'wife' objected, particularly when John publicly denounced the king for taking his brother's wife. She didn't like it, so she persuaded Herod to arrest him and put him in prison (14:3).

If you had been John the Baptist, what would you have been expecting Christ to do? He'd come to execute the judgment of God and bring salvation and the Holy Spirit to those who repented and trusted him. Wouldn't John be expecting Christ now to execute the judgment of God on Herod and his so-called wife, and deliver him? That's what he preached, wasn't it? He heard some footsteps—that would be the Christ, but it wasn't. It was the jailer with his

food. Later he heard some more footsteps—it was the jailer come to slice off his head and put it on a platter to adorn the table of Herod at his birthday party, the *pièce de résistance* (14:11).

'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' (11:3). It is the problem mentioned throughout the Old Testament and elsewhere in the New, and repeated thousands of times by the godly in times of persecution. 'O Lord, to whom vengeance belongs, how long before you rise up and avenge your elect, and see that justice is done?' It's a question asked many times by the unconverted. During the war, all those years ago, ungodly people would say, 'If Jesus is supposed to be the Son of God, why doesn't he stop the war?'

The problem of evil

Last week I mentioned my fellow student who was a Jew. He had escaped, but his parents had been gassed by Hitler. 'Your Jesus cannot be the Messiah because the Old Testament said that when the Messiah came, he would put down evil. Jesus hasn't done that and it's no good talking about him setting up a spiritual kingdom. That's only a story you Christians invented when you got disappointed that he didn't put down evil.'

It's a real problem, isn't it? It is called *the problem of evil*. Our Lord in his mercy didn't rebuke John through his messengers, but offered him evidence. When we find fellow believers in serious doubt about the faith, it is not wise to rebuke them, is it? What they need is comfort and evidence. Our Lord gave John evidence that he was fulfilling certain of the prophecies that prophets like Isaiah had made: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them' (vv. 4–5; see Isa 35). That is, evidence that our Lord was fulfilling what the prophets said the Messiah would do when he came, and John would know his prophets well enough to recognize the prophecies, and that Christ was claiming to be the fulfilment.

There would be two comings of the Messiah

The problem arises, of course, because our Lord interprets the Old Testament to imply that there would be two comings of the Messiah. We have been taught so often about the *first coming* of Christ that we take his *second coming* for granted. But as far as I'm aware, there is no part in the Old Testament that explicitly says there are going to be two comings of the Messiah: he'll come, and then he'll go, and then he'll come again. If you know of such a passage, please correct my ignorance afterwards. There is one prophecy that says he would come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech 9:9), and another that he'll come with the clouds of heaven (Matt 24:30). Common intelligence would tell us that they couldn't both be on the same occasion. There must be two comings, but the Old Testament nowhere says that there would be two.

His first coming was not to avenge but to save

You will remember the result when our Lord preached his programmatic sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth. He quoted from the scroll down to the verse, 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:19; Isa 61:2). Then he rolled the scroll back up again, gave it to the attendant, and said, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Preachers galore have acknowledged with gratitude in their hearts that our Lord stopped where he did. The

very next phrase in Isaiah says, 'and the day of vengeance of our God'. They point out that he didn't quote that verse and then say, 'Today *this* Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

We should think a little bit about that too. When they read the verse in the synagogue, 'the day of vengeance of our God,' the people weren't thinking of God's judgment on them. They were thinking of what Psalm 94 says many times over, that when God would rise up he would avenge his people, see that justice was done and deal with the enemies that were persecuting them. Because they held that view—which is the true view of what the verse means—they were upset when he didn't *avenge* them of their enemies. Not *revenge*, *avenge*—see that justice was done.

Why didn't Christ do it? How many Jews went to the gas chambers, crying in their hearts, 'O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve!' (Ps 94:1–2). People say it still. Atheists don't like the idea that there's a God up in heaven. Isn't it curious, when they want there to be a God up in heaven they say, 'If there's a God up in heaven that cares for justice, why does he allow all the wickedness to go on in the world?' People have a simplistic idea of executing judgment and putting the world right, don't they? They think it's an easy thing. If you want to clear the world of the unrighteous, what you do is to get all the good people in one bunch over here, and all the bad people over there, take a sword and cut the heads off the bad people and you're left with the good people.

If God did that, do you mind my asking, which group would you be in? Our Lord is on record therefore, as saying, no, at his first coming he had not come to judge the world, but that the world through him should be saved (see John 3:17).

At his second coming his enemies will be made his footstool

When in chapter thirteen he gives a parable of the programme of his work, he tells us of a farmer who planted good seed in his field, and then his enemy came in and sowed weeds among the wheat. When it became obvious that there were weeds among the wheat, his servants asked him, "Do you want us to go and gather [the weeds]?" But he said, "No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest" (vv. 28–30).

This was our Lord's deliberate purpose, and he explained later on what the harvest was going to be, and when it was going to be. 'The harvest is the close of the age' (v. 39). There were to be two comings.

You say, 'Where do you get that in the Old Testament?'

Later on, in 22:44 of this Gospel, our Lord is on record as pointing out to the Pharisees what Psalm 110:1 says. 'The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."' "

When I think about my Jewish friend all those years ago, I wish I had known that Scripture then. How stupid we are not to know our Bibles, aren't we? I could have said to him, 'But look here, your Psalms indicate that there's to be a coming of the Messiah; God would call him to ascend and sit at the right hand of God; then there would be a period until his enemies should be made the footstool of his feet at the end of the age.' That is the Old Testament timetable.

The very fact that according to Psalm 110:1 our Lord is invited to sit at God's right hand, shows that he was not always to be at God's right hand.

If you come home one of these days and find me sitting on the best seat in your lounge, you won't say to me, 'Please sit down,' because I am already seated. If I came as a visitor, you may well say, 'Please sit down.' The very fact that God has to say to the Messiah, 'Sit at my right hand,' presumes there would be a time when he wasn't seated there. In other words, that is pointing to his incarnation and his ministry here on earth; then he is summoned to sit at God's right hand until his second coming.

So our Lord comforted John that, as the Christ, he was fulfilling what you might call the 'gospel promises of the prophets'. But no more at this stage; and he allowed John to be executed. We need to grasp hold of these things, don't we? Because many an atheist, if he's thinking about the possibility of trusting Christ, will, in my experience, come up with a question, 'But if there's a God, all loving, all kind, who cares for justice as you Christians say, why doesn't he stop evil men?' We need an answer, don't we?

Problem 2: The people not only rejected John, they rejected Jesus as well

From Matthew 11:7 to 19:11, we shall find another problem, and admire Matthew's honesty for recording it. It's not only that John the forerunner had his doubts; the majority of the people not only rejected John, but they rejected Jesus as well. How do you get round that? It is the historic fact that the majority of the people who knew him, heard him preach and crowded round him, weren't convinced and refused him. How do you explain that to yourself?

What if somebody were to say to you, 'You're living two thousand years since Christ was here, are you sure that Jesus is the Messiah? His contemporaries who saw him, heard him, watched him, they weren't convinced; so how can you be convinced?'

What is the answer to that? You'll notice that Matthew doesn't hesitate to tell us these facts, so when the messengers of John were departed our Lord began to talk to the crowd and to the Pharisees about John.

I mustn't attribute sarcasm to Christ. If I step over the line, I'm sure you'll forgive me. These people needed a little reminder. When John first started preaching out in the desert, multitudes went out to hear him. Talk about a popular preacher! Thousands went to the Jordan and got baptized by him. When they first heard him, there had been no prophet in Israel for about four hundred years, since Malachi. Isaiah had prophesied that one day there would come a voice in the desert, crying, 'Prepare the way of the Lord,' and here was this voice. It set every ear a-tingle in Jerusalem, Judaea and Galilee, and they went out in their thousands to him.

They'd cooled off now, hadn't they? Like people who attend a great evangelistic rally and profess all sorts of things, after a while you never see them again. So our Lord began to examine them.

'Now,' says he, 'I believe you went out into the desert not so long ago; what did you go to see? Perhaps it was a reed shaken by the wind?' (see 11:7).

That's not the reason most people go out into a desert in their thousands. Perhaps he meant it metaphorically, 'Did you go out to see some spineless creature blown here and there by every wind of doctrine? Of course you didn't do that, but there must have been some reason why you went out. Did you go out to see a man clothed in soft clothing? No, of course not; people who dress like that are in kings' palaces. All right then, why did you go out? Was it not because at the time you believed that this was the prophet spoken of by Isaiah, calling on you to prepare the way of the Lord?'

If John was that prophet, Jesus was the one whose way John was preparing. Why didn't they believe it, why did they reject John, and then why did they reject Jesus?

Our Lord becomes very stern. He says, 'You're like a lot of children playing in the marketplace, saying, "We played the flute for you, and you didn't dance; we sang a dirge, and you didn't mourn" —you wouldn't have it either way. When John came neither eating nor drinking, suggesting that the people were sinners and telling them to flee from the wrath to come, they found it offensive. When the Son of Man came eating and drinking, did they say, "This is marvellous, this is the stuff we like"? No, they didn't. They said, "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"' (see 11:16–19). They wouldn't have it either way.

Years ago, the church of which I was a member decided to have some evangelistic meetings in a tent on the outskirts of Cambridge, so I went along to see how I could help. I remember one night, after the preacher had preached, a friend of mine came to me and said, 'I've got a lawyer friend here. He's come tonight and he's pretty upset. Would you come and talk to him?' So I went across and there he was, very worked up.

He said, 'Just listen to that man, shouting about the wrath to come. I'm one of those people who likes to draw people by the love of God, and here is he, shouting at the top of his voice about the wrath to come.'

Well, he hadn't been actually; he'd done it in very sober terms. Being a student and rather silly at the time, I turned round and said, 'In what kind of a voice do you suppose John the Baptist said, "Flee from the wrath to come"?' But that didn't help really. Anyway, my friend had invited him up to supper. The lawyer came in his own car and I went with my friend in my friend's car. On the way up, I suggested to my friend that if the conversation resumed we should not talk about the wrath of God whatsoever; we should talk about the love of God. The conversation did resume and we talked about the love of God and how marvellous it was. We talked about how God so loved the world, and that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life, and how you could know your sins are forgiven and that you have eternal life.

Said the lawyer, 'No one can know they have eternal life.'

I said, 'That's very curious, my good friend,' and then I quoted 1 John 5:13: 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.'

'Oh, shut that old book,' said he.

He didn't want the wrath of God, he didn't want the love of God, he just wanted a nice little religion.

As I understand it, that is what our Lord is saying to the crowd. That's why they didn't believe. If you ask me, 'Is that true to life—have you ever found that in your own experience with your contemporaries?', I should have to confess that I have, frequently. They talk about the love of God and they don't like the idea of judgment, but when they're faced with the love of God they don't like that either. They love religion, so long as it leaves everybody uncertain as to what the results are going to be.

Christ will be the final judge

Then our Lord began to denounce the cities in which he'd done his mighty works.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgement for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom than for you. (vv. 21–24)

Observe the balance that Matthew's record achieves. The Lord had not come to judge. Don't get the wrong impression; that wasn't because he didn't believe in judgment. He preached the day of judgment twice in these few verses. There is going to be a judgment, and he says that it shall be more tolerable for some than for others.

You say, 'How does he know?'

Well, for the simple reason that he's going to be the judge. That is an awesome thing, isn't it? When you come and meet Christ, you are meeting the final judge. 'The Father . . . has given all judgement to the Son . . . whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:22, 24). That came from the lips of the final judge himself and there's no appeal against his sentence.

Degrees of judgment

Mark what he knows. He has contingent knowledge of history. He knows what Sodom and Gomorrah would have done if they had had the witness that the northern cities had. He said that it shall be more tolerable for Sodom than for the people of Capernaum. The notion that there is one destiny for those who reject Christ is true, of course. That is *eternal perdition*. But it's not true to suppose that the punishment will all be equal. It shall be according to people's works (see Rev 20:12). And we mark the word that our Lord used, 'It shall be more *tolerable* for some than for others.'

The mixture, therefore, of our Lord not come to judge, but announcing the terms of judgment; and already announcing the terms of judgment on some of the people of Capernaum and Bethsaida. He didn't come to judge, but, as he explains in another Scripture, his coming into the world *is* a judgment (John 9:39). When we meet Christ how we respond to him is fixing our eternal destiny. Nothing less than that.

You say, 'It must have been very disappointing for Christ. He'd gone around preaching and doing miracles, so he must have been very discouraged about very few people getting converted. He had just a few disciples, about twelve of them, and one wasn't genuine.'

And I must be careful what I say about the others, but they weren't academics. Some of them were fishermen. God be thanked for fishermen; you could starve if you had only academics, you wouldn't starve if you only had fishermen, would you?

Knowing God personally as revealed in his Son

Our Lord wasn't disappointed. 'I thank you, Father,' —[and the words that he used mean, 'I agree with you, Father, and thank you for it']—'that you have *hidden these things* from the wise and understanding and *revealed them* to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will' (Matt 11:25–26). We must be careful not to misread it: that does not mean that some have no chance of ever being saved because they haven't been chosen. It does remind us that God is a person.

To compare tiny things with great: I'm a person, so now compare me with an atom. If you've got the skill and the mathematics necessary, you can put an atom into a machine and find out all that is in the atom because atoms are only things. But you could put me in a machine, analyse every atom in my body and in my brain, and you wouldn't know me. I'm a person, and you can know a lot *about* me, but unless I reveal myself to you, you won't know me.

God is a supreme person. He's not a subject that we do, like we do physics. He is the great subject, in the sense that he is the subject of the verb and *he reveals himself*. But he uses his divine right, of course, to lay down conditions. To the wise and understanding—that is, in their own estimation—he hides the things. If you take the position of knowing everything there is, and submit God himself to your little intellectual powers to decide whether he has the right to exist or not, you mustn't be surprised if God hides himself from you. He's a person; he isn't the final conclusion of a philosophical reasoning. He's the living God, but he's prepared to reveal himself to little children. You can become a child, if you like. Indeed, our Lord talked about being converted and becoming as a little child, without which you'll not enter the kingdom of heaven (see Matt 18:3 KJV).

Before God, what are we anyway? If we take the place of being children, then he will reveal himself.

All things have been handed over [delivered] to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt 11:27)

Forgive the term; our Lord has the *monopoly*. I don't like the term—that's the marketplace, isn't it? Christ doesn't sell anything; he doesn't need to, but he is the sole source of our knowledge of God. He is the eternal Word, who originally spoke the very commands of God in the universe, and it sprang into being (see Ps 33:9). Every revelation of God all through history has been made through him. All things are *delivered* to him.

It is marvellous, isn't it? It bows the heart in worship to see Jesus of Nazareth standing on this earth, conscious that all things are delivered unto him of his Father, and no one will know the Father except he reveals the Father to them.

Then he adds the delightful words of his invitation, 'Come to me, *all* who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (vv. 28–29). That is amazing, you know. I've known some professors and you wouldn't dare to ask them a question in public. They'd make you feel so small for ever asking it. What's it like to come alongside the Son of God, who has absolute knowledge of the Father? 'I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

What is his secret? How is it that, when we take his yoke and his burden upon us, we find the yoke is easy and the burden is light?

Sabbath day stories

I want arbitrarily to take one phrase from each story in the first two paragraphs of chapter 12. We haven't time to investigate all the details and to expound them as they should be expounded. They are both Sabbath days, and our Lord did something that the Pharisees accused him of breaking the law. It's how he answered them that interests us at the moment. They are both statements of comparative greatness.

The first story

Have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. (vv. 5–6)

The second story

He went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'—so that they might accuse him. He said to them, 'Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.' (vv. 9–12)

So I want to select those two statements of comparative value, and my aim is partly to illustrate how the yoke that he offers to us is easy,

1. 'Something greater than the temple is here' (v. 6)

I suggest to you that that is what we are to think of Christ—one greater than the temple. As our Lord pointed out, the priests in the temple broke the Sabbath. Well, of course they did. The Sabbath was given in order that people might cease from work, not that God shall cease from attendance. So the priests had to work in the temple on the Sabbath day, and work quite hard some of them. They were serving God, weren't they? And therefore, it was right for them to break the Sabbath because of what they were doing in the temple.

But as they walked through the cornfield, his disciples began to pluck the ears of corn and the Pharisees accused him of allowing his disciples to break the Sabbath. He reminded them of his claim, 'Something greater than the temple is here, and my servants are serving one who is greater than the temple.'

What do you think of Christ, my dear brother and sister? When the going is hard in the kitchen, when the business problems are difficult, what a lovely thing it is to be able to write over it, 'One greater than the temple is here.' That's what we think of him.

2. 'Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!' (v. 12)

Value to whom? The immediate answer is, value to Christ, of course, value to God. How much value do you think Christ puts on you? Do I hear you say, 'He put such value on me that he freely and deliberately gave his life for me'?

What we think of him; what he thinks of us—it's putting those two things together that will make us find his yoke easy and his burden light.

It's good to have a Sabbath during the weekdays so that the body and brain can rest. I'm not going to tell you what my Sabbath day is in case you come round with a few questions! I don't always manage to keep it, but nevertheless the point of the Sabbath was that you work six days for yourself, and then you keep the Sabbath for God. Is Christ letting down the standard? No, indeed not. If I see that one greater than the temple is here, it'll be seven days for him, won't it? Not that he will drive us and abuse our bodies and minds, but even the Sabbath will be for him.

Why did Christ 'break the Sabbath'?

And as for him keeping the Sabbath, there came in this man with a withered hand and they asked him if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. He said to them, 'If a poor beast had fallen into a ditch and couldn't get out, anyone would go and rescue his sheep from that catastrophe. But what about my brother?' The Pharisees wouldn't rescue him. He had a withered hand, poor chap. He wasn't 'keeping the Sabbath', because he couldn't work anyway, and our Lord healed him. He didn't say, 'My good man, I'm God incarnate and this is the Sabbath, so you'd better wait.'

It is in the calendar these days, so I've gradually become aware that there is a day called *Mother's Day*. I understand that father makes the breakfast and he encourages all the children to help. They've got to clear up the lounge and it's got to be nice and polished for mother when she does come down. This is Mother's Day, and we all serve mother today. When the four-year-old is attempting to climb up the stairs, he trips on something and falls headlong all the way down the stairs to the floor. Father lets out a cry, 'Jimmy has fallen down the stairs,' and mother says, 'I can't get out of bed; this is my day and I don't do any work on my day. Bother the child!' What would you think of a mother like that? You'd say, 'She's not worthy of the name.'

God instituted the Sabbath for good reasons. The Sabbath was to be kept for the Lord. When he saw a man with a withered hand, the divine heart went out to him to do the work necessary to restore him, Sabbath or no Sabbath.

There's so much more in that section of Matthew. In chapter 12 you will get a demonstration of what the final judgment will be like, as Christ will not merely condemn the impenitent but demonstrate to them that they were deliberately perverse in their rejection of the witness and voice of the Holy Spirit. But I mustn't yield to temptation and attempt to expound it, so let's commit our study to the Lord.

Our Father, we thank thee for thy holy word, these records of thy dear Son and what he said and did here on earth; for the opportunity to walk with him and by thy Spirit to receive impressions of him and the wonder of his person, his righteousness and holiness, his compassion.

We thank thee that there will be a day of judgment and earth's wrongs will be put right, but we thank thee that before that judgment comes thy dear Son went to the cross so that none need perish. Thy desire is that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Give us ever deepening understanding of thy dear Son, his words and his actions, so that we may please him and know, as his representatives, how to answer men and women who find this world a puzzling place and find it difficult to believe that there is a God. Give us wisdom, and bless thy servants in their witness for the Saviour.

And now we thank thee for the refreshments that we shall enjoy and our fellowship together. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PART TWO

1

Challenges to the Deity of Christ and Evidence for it

Chapter 14

Review of narrative sections in chapters 8–12

Welcome as usual to Apsley, where we continue tonight our studies of the Gospel by Matthew. Some months ago I attempted to suggest that the narratives that begin in chapter 8 concentrate on the authority of our Lord and his teaching, and therefore talk about *discipleship*. The word ‘disciple’ means a learner and, therefore, if you have the Lord as teacher, and he’s not talking into thin air, he is expecting to make learners of his people. So the two things come together in the narrative section through chapters 8 and 9.

Then, on a subsequent occasion, we looked at the narrative that begins in chapter 11, and there I suggested that Matthew deals with what is technically called *the problem of evil*. He expresses it through the question that John sent to our blessed Lord when John was in prison and soon to be beheaded, asking if our Lord was the one who should come, or were they to look for another. Our Lord comforted John with the remark, ‘Blessed is the one who doesn’t stumble in me’ (see v. 6). John at least was stumbled, understandably. He wasn’t rejoicing at the prospect of feeling the steel of Herod’s sword removing his head, and if Jesus was the Messiah why then didn’t Jesus put down evil, as the Messiah prophesied of in the Old Testament was promised to do?

Our Lord answered John, and then proceeded to point out, particularly in the parables that follow the narrative, that at his first coming he was not coming to put down evil – that must await his second coming and the end of the age. At his first coming, he’d come to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament that talked of Messiah liberating the captive, giving sight to the blind, healing the lame and so forth. He had done that in abundance, so he sent John’s messengers back to remind him that our blessed Lord himself was fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament – not all at once, but some at his first coming and he would fulfil the others at his second coming.

And now we reach another narrative section.

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his home town he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, ‘Where did

this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?' And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honour except in his home town and in his own household.' And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. (13:53–58)

Whose son is he?

It seems to me that, in citing the reaction of the people of his own country, Matthew is setting what is to be a major topic; not the only topic, but a dominant topic in the following chapters. Look at verse 55 again, 'Is not this the carpenter's son?' One of the dominant themes in this part of Matthew is going to be 'whose son is he?' In other words, that our Lord was the Son of God: it is a question of our Lord's deity. As Christians we are so used to believing that Jesus is the Son of God that we don't always realize or take the pains to remember this is one of the crucial things, not only with Christianity and Judaism, but with Christianity and Islam. We stand for the deity of the Lord Jesus. Let's notice how it is mentioned in the next few chapters of the narrative.

And Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, 'Lord, save me.' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.' (14:28–33)

At this point only Matthew has that story of Peter walking on the water. Only Matthew, therefore, has the conclusion when those in the boat confessed him as the Son of God. Let's look at chapter 16.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' (16:13–18)

This is the second mention of Christ's deity. 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

Let's look on to chapter 17. This is the account of the transfiguration, the third reference in these few chapters to the deity, the Sonship, of our Lord Jesus.

And Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He was still speaking when, behold, a

bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.' (17:4–5)

Finally, for the moment, let us look further down that chapter:

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the tax?' He said, 'Yes.' (vv. 24–25)

There is dispute about what tax this was, but I join those who humbly declare it was the temple tax; somewhat altered from the days of Moses, which accounts for what our Lord now says.

And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?' And when he [Peter] said, 'From others', Jesus said to him, 'Then the sons are free.' (vv. 25–26)

Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Son of God, but we're not always consistent, are we? Our beliefs could be 'this', but sometimes our thinking is 'that'. Peter hadn't quite worked it out yet, so when they came from the temple and said, 'Doesn't your master pay tax to the temple?', Peter said, 'Yes, of course he pays tax.' But our Lord worked out the implications for him.

'From whom do the kings of the earth take tax; their sons or strangers?' (see KJV)

Peter said, 'From strangers, of course.'

'Ah,' said Christ, 'then the sons are free.'

Marvellous, isn't it? Fancy coming to the Son of God and asking him to pay taxes for his Father's house! Of course, our Lord then did a miracle and paid not only for himself but for Peter as well. But first there was the protest, lest his paying of that tax should be misunderstood. He was the Son of the God, whose temple it was.

Why is it so important to believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus?

So I'm going to suggest that, in this narrative section of Matthew's Gospel, we are being introduced to the deity of the Lord Jesus. It raises a practical point: why should we bother about the deity of the Lord Jesus? What difference does it really make?

I'm going to ask Matthew's permission to inset here just a word or two from the Apostle John. 'Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?' (1 John 5:5). Why is it important—practically important, spiritually important—that I should believe with firm unwavering faith in the deity of the Lord Jesus?

Says John, 'The secret of overcoming the world is this: "who is it that overcomes the world except the one who . . ." what?

You say, 'Except the one who believes his sins are forgiven. That's what it is. If you believe your sins are forgiven, you'll overcome the world.'

Yes, well perhaps you might. But if Jesus isn't the Son of God, I have to tell you that your sins aren't forgiven anyway, are they? Why do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? I mustn't be so impertinent, but I'd love to come round and give you all the chance to say one reason why you believe that Jesus is the Son of God. What would you say?

You say, 'Well, my mum told me he was.'

Dear old mum. That's a very good reason for believing it; but it mightn't in the end prove enough when the world starts putting the pressure on.

Some years ago, when I first noticed it as a younger man, I decided to tuck up under my cap every little bit of evidence I could find that Jesus is the Son of God. You see, if he isn't the Son of God you would be a fool to sacrifice anything for him. You would indeed. But if he is the Son of God you would be a fool *not* to suffer for him. And when the world looms large, in that biblical sense of the term, and puts its pressure on, then we shall need to be able to grasp good reasons for believing that Jesus is the Son of God.

John immediately gives us some of the evidence. 'This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood' (1 John 5:6). What evidence is that for his deity?

He came by water

John's own Gospel tells us that John the Baptist was the official, authorized precursor, come in advance to herald the coming of God's dear Son, and John the Baptist baptized him.

And John bore witness: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.' (John 1:32–34)

If the Holy Spirit is God—the Spirit of God—who then is Jesus who poured out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost?

He came by blood

You say, 'Surely that must mean he *went* by blood, because he died on the cross?'

Well, that is perfectly true; but he *came* by blood (1 John 5:6). You see, when John baptized, he called the crowd's attention: 'Behold,' said he, 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). He was publicly introduced at the beginning of his ministry by the official forerunner. *He had come to die*: on purpose to die. He taught a lot of things, but the purpose of his coming was to die for our sins.

Did Muhammad come to die for anybody's sins? No, he did not. The Buddha didn't come to die for anybody's sins. Find somebody in the whole history of mankind, who'll come alongside you and say, 'I love you with the creator's love and I came to die for you.' Therein is our Lord unique, of course. So then, it is of great practical importance, as well as spiritual importance, that we believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus.

Notice how many times Matthew mentions Peter

Now I want you to notice another thing in these chapters, beginning at chapter 13, and that is how many times Matthew mentions Peter.

So let us look back again at chapter 14, a story of our Lord walking on the water. Only Matthew has this story. 'And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water"' (v. 28). It was Peter, not any of the others, who sought the Lord's

invitation for him to come and walk on the water, as a result of which, the rest of them in the boat perceived that Jesus was the Son of God.

Now chapter 15: 'But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us"' (v. 15). Notice it was Peter who asked in the name of the others.

Chapter 16: 'Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"' (v. 16). And then verses 17–18: 'And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."'

Chapter 17: Waking up from his sleep, it was Peter who said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah' (v. 4). His suggestion was put aside by the voice from the cloud. And then, as we noticed earlier: 'When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"' (v. 24).

Why all the emphasis on Peter?

As good Irish men and women you may have all sorts of answers, but it is important, because he was the first one who said, on behalf of the others, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' This is a very interesting historical thing. Do allow yourselves to visualize in your mind the actual historical narrative. It's not a bad thing to do. How did Peter come to believe that Jesus was the Son of God?

AUDIENCE: 'The Father revealed it to him.'

Yes, the Father revealed it to him; that is the glorious fact. But let me just add a question to that. *How* did the Father reveal it to him? Did Peter wake up one morning and the Father graciously said to him, 'Peter, do you know that Jesus is my Son?' And Peter said, 'If you say so, Lord, I believe at once that Jesus is your Son. But do tell me, who is this Jesus that you're talking about?'

What evidence was there for believing in the deity of the Lord Jesus?

It wasn't like that, was it? It was perhaps a year and a half after meeting the Saviour, carrying him in his boat, and then preaching for him with the rest who were sent out on their evangelistic missions throughout Canaan. It was Peter who had the wonderful draught of fish in his boat (Luke 5). It was as he experienced the *evidence* that the Father was able to show Peter what it implied—the Father revealed it to him (Matt 16:17). We're not the first ones who have come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We belong to a long, long tradition. It's a very interesting thing to ask, 'How did the first people who believed that Jesus was the Son of God come to it? What evidence did they have?'

That is what we're going to try and think about tonight and, God willing, in the nights that are to follow. We shall be talking about the deity of Christ and how people came to discover it. But first of all we start with the questions of his contemporaries in Nazareth.

And coming to his home town he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?' (13:54)

Two pieces of evidence had begun to strike them.

1. 'This wisdom'

Is Christ's teaching part of the evidence for his deity, or do you first have to believe his deity before you take any notice of his teaching? John 7 tells us that, when he went up to the Feast of Tabernacles, he didn't go up with the crowd. He told his brothers that the Jews down in Jerusalem hated him and were keen to kill him, so he didn't go with the rest of the pilgrims. When they had gone up to Jerusalem, then he went up, but not openly and publicly. He went up in secret. There were thousands and thousands of people in Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. They were from all round the Roman Empire, as well as the locals, so he wouldn't be noticed. A lot of them had never met him before and didn't know who he was.

Half way through the feast, he went up into the temple and began teaching. 'The Jews therefore marvelled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?"' (John 7:15). He didn't talk like the rabbis. Sometimes you can tell people have been to Bible school by the language they use. They realized that the Lord Jesus hadn't been to the rabbinical schools, so where did he get his wisdom from?

Some great wise man once said, 'If Jesus isn't the Son of God, then we ought to bow down and worship the men who wrote the Gospels.' If it was Matthew, Mark, Luke and John who invented the stories that our Lord told, then perhaps we ought to bow down and worship them. They contain marvellous stories, don't they? The prodigal son story, for instance, and many others. And then his moral teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, and so forth. Let us be impressed by the uniqueness of our Lord's teaching.

2. 'These mighty works'

His family and the people of Nazareth couldn't work it out, because they said, 'He's the carpenter's son, isn't he?' Well, in the legal sense, he was the carpenter's son, though the carpenter wasn't his father. He was a son of Mary, and therefore his half-brothers and half-sisters were there. But if that's all he was, you have a problem how to account for his teaching and for his miracles. His signs weren't just works of power, were they? Every sign he did was a message in itself. But if you're going to say he's just the carpenter's son, there remain these two great bits of evidence.

Of course, the chief bit of the evidence will be that *he said he was the Son of God*. C. S. Lewis used to stress it, and rightly so. By common consent, even of atheists, Jesus' teaching of the Sermon on the Mount ranks him among the moral leaders of the world that ever have been or shall be. If he claimed to be the Son of God, then you may be sure he was not telling any lie. If he was telling a lie, his moral teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is a lot of hypocrisy. Throw it out of the window.

So, you face a problem. He claimed to be the Son of God, and, as C. S. Lewis would have said, he was either a raving lunatic—like the man in a mental hospital who thinks he's

Napoleon the Great or something—or he was a deliberate deceiver. So we're beginning to think of the evidence that Jesus is the Son of God.

Jesus awakens Herod's conscience about John the Baptist

And then there's the first big story in chapter 14, of a party that took place in the palace of Herod the Tetrarch. At some time before the events of chapter 14 Herod had executed John the Baptist, but when Herod heard the report concerning Jesus it set him thinking. He said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him' (v. 2). Herod was an ungodly man, but when he heard of Jesus he got the impression that this must be a voice from beyond. That's an interesting thing about Christ; he makes people think of what lies beyond this life.

Witness even Richard Dawkins. He gets far too much publicity, but allow me one more, with his advertisement on the London Buses: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.' He let the cat out of the bag there, didn't he? 'Enjoy your life': why would you think that believing there's a God would stop you enjoying yourself? For multitudes of people, if there's a God and there is a beyond, they have a bad conscience. If you're going to say that morality means that much—so that even when you're dead, it isn't done for and you'll be raised again to face your life and your misdeeds—for many people that is a horrible thought. They couldn't enjoy themselves if there's a God like that. So, 'probably there isn't a God,' says Dawkins, 'so don't worry, go and enjoy yourself.'

Herod made great attempts, as we shall see, to enjoy himself, but hearing of Jesus made him think that this must be John the Baptist risen again from the dead, a voice from beyond. Christ has that effect on people, you know, and why particularly upon Herod? Because Herod had a very bad conscience. Herodias, the woman he was living with, was his brother's wife, and this was public knowledge. John the Baptist had rebuked Herod for it, and Herodias didn't like it. She certainly didn't like John the Baptist, and egged Herod on to get rid of him. That put Herod in a difficult position because all the people held that John was a prophet and Herod couldn't afford to execute him or he'd have a riot on his hands. Anyway, Herod liked listening to John. Mark tells us that he used to seek him out even when John was in prison and let John talk to him (6:20). Some people do enjoy having their consciences raked over, you know, but they're not intending to get converted. So Herod thought that, to solve his problem, he would put John in prison and that would satisfy Herodias. He wouldn't execute him, and that would please the people. He'd solve the problem by this compromise, but he'd reckoned without Herodias.

Herod's birthday party

Then came Herod's birthday. It was going to be some birthday feast. If you were going to be there, you needed to bring the best gold you could for a present. All the ministers of state were there, and it was some do, this birthday feast. Herodias sent in her daughter, Salome, to dance, and Herod by this time I daresay was a little bit tipsy, his guests probably likewise. Carried away by the dance, he swore an oath that he would give her up to the half of his kingdom. What an absurdity. Not knowing what to ask, she went and consulted her mother, who said,

'Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a big plate.' When Herod heard that, he was distressed, but now highly embarrassed. He didn't like to go back on his oath in front of all his guests, so he gave a commandment to one of the guards and they cut off John's head and brought it in on a big plate. What a dish to set before a king.

Rulers have the power of life and death

The solemn thing about rulers is that they have the power of life and death. There was an earlier Herod in this Gospel, and when the wise men came, saying, 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews?', Herod called in the experts in the Bible, the Pharisees, and they said, 'In Bethlehem of Judea.' Herod said to the wise men, 'Go and find out exactly where he is and come and tell me, so that I may worship him.' He wasn't considering worshipping him, as we know from what followed. Warned by an angel, the wise men didn't come back; they went straight home. Herod used his power of life and death to slaughter about twenty innocent babes, anyone under two years old, in Bethlehem. He would rule for the benefit of his subjects, if he could; but if not, he'd rule anyway. Fancy living under a Herod, deliberately massacring infants to keep his power and to stop the Messiah coming.

This other Herod had the power of life and death too. Would you like it if the power of life and death over you was in the hands of a Herod? He didn't want to put John to death, but he got a bit tipsy and was inflamed by this dance, and then he was afraid to go back on his oath before the guests. So he felt forced to shed the blood of the greatest of all the prophets. Oh, what a dreadful thing sin is, and its compromise with conscience. Some time later he hears of Jesus. That brings the whole thing up again and makes him aware of eternity, the possibility of resurrection and a judgment day.

So, they were beginning to discover who Jesus was.

Feeding the five thousand

The next story in chapter 14 is the story of another banquet; a wonderfully royal banquet. It doesn't mean it was in a sandy desert; it was a desolate place (v. 13). The grass was there, but it was empty countryside. There Jesus taught the people, and then had compassion on them. They'd been there for hours without food, and he told the disciples to feed them. They said, 'We have only five loaves here and two fish.' So our Lord took the bread and the fish and Matthew tells us vividly, 'he looked up into heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds' (v. 19). Isn't it a lovely picture? It literally happened. Christ on earth, lifting his eyes to heaven, the miracle of God's provision, miraculously given for this multitude.

Do you think that is an old yarn? Will someone say 'we don't believe in miracles any more'? If you don't believe in miracles, stop eating your toast at breakfast time, because there isn't a scientist in the world who can make a kernel of wheat. It remains a miracle still, and Christ performed it. In his compassion, those hands brought down the creator's power from the other world to feed the people in the wilderness. It's what the theologians talk of as 'a messianic banquet'. Read Isaiah and discover how he talks of the times of the Messiah, when God will feed his people magnificently.

And we say, 'Yes, but we already have experienced it: "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33). And not only to feed us, but to be in us with the guarantee therefore that, if the very living bread of heaven is within us, Christ is in us—we shall never perish and he will raise us up at the last day (v. 39).'

The second banquet shows us how you discover that Jesus is the Christ: the way he has of satisfying not only our ordinary human needs, but satisfying us with the very bread of heaven.

Jesus walks on the water

And the final story. As he sent the people away, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go to the other side. He went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Can you visualize it? They were put in a boat, going across the sea, and our Lord was on a mountain praying for them. That's true still. We're down here, and from time to time beaten by the waves with the wind against us. Our Lord has gone above and is at the right hand of God, interceding for us (Rom 8:34).

So here were the disciples, struggling with the wind and the wave and the tempest that can arise on the Lake of Galilee, when they see Jesus coming to them, walking on the water. At first they cried out, 'It is a ghost!' (Matt 14:26). I don't know if you have ever seen a ghost. I have never seen one, but I think they're pretty insubstantial, somehow or other, so you can imagine a ghost walking on water. I mean, no weight in them, and you can almost see through them. So, they thought it was a ghost. But no, the voice said, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid' (v. 27).

Peter steps out of the boat

Matthew is the only one who tells us this bit: 'And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water"' (v. 28). Now I don't know what kind of logic Peter was using, do you? I try to think it through sometimes but I don't get anywhere. 'Lord, if it is you, the Son of God, walking on the water, bid me to do like you're doing.' Peter had rowed with him in the boat. He was solid enough, and real; yet now he was walking on the water.

Says he, 'Well if it's really you, Lord, bid me to come to you on the water.'

And the Lord said, 'Come'.

So when Peter stepped out of the boat, it wasn't sheer foolhardy nonsense. He had the Lord's command to come.

I would have held on to that boat for a long while, wouldn't you? I'd have put one foot down and said, 'How solid is this after all?' But Peter obviously got out of the boat and began to walk. Then he saw the wind—I don't know how he managed to see that. He perhaps saw the effect of the wind and the waves roaring. He 'got his eyes off the Lord', as preachers have said, and began to sink.

It is very interesting what the Lord did next. When Peter began to sink, he cried out at once, 'Lord, save me,' and the Lord immediately put out his hand, grasped Peter and stood him up on the water. *Then* he preached him his little sermon. It's a good example to follow when people are in distress. Not first the sermon, but first the hand to uphold them.

'O you of little faith, why . . .?' It means to fear in a sense of to hesitate, to dither. I should have thought it was obvious why; because of the wind and waves. Very often preachers use

this story as a parable that sometimes we experience the storms of life, persecution maybe, or bereavement, or opposition and difficulties; and we're told that our Lord can deal with them and maintain us through them. And certainly he can, but perhaps we ought to start with the literal thing. This was a literal sea and it was sizeably deep; it was a literal wind, and in our present situation we're not made for walking on water.

Jesus is Lord of the physical powers of the universe

Peter was beginning to learn who Christ was. Perhaps the Father hadn't yet revealed everything to him, but Peter was discovering that Jesus is Lord of the physical powers of the universe.

If you're ever going to be a missionary, you should get hold of this. Whatever other storms may come, if you find yourself in countries where nature itself is hostile, you'll need to put faith in a God who can control the physical powers of the universe. On his trip across the Mediterranean on his way to Rome to stand before Nero, Paul encountered a storm at sea. For two weeks they didn't know where they were. They had no compass in those days; they went by the stars, and kept as close as they could to the land, so they could see it. But the storm had obliterated it all and they didn't know where they were. Most of them were fasting and it seemed that at any moment they were going down to the bottom. They'd need to have faith in a God who controls the physical powers of the universe, and that is true of our Lord.

I want to read you a famous passage written by this same Paul:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39)

Notice Paul's description of the universe, 'nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation'. Marvellous, isn't it?

I don't know whether it often occurs to you that you are on a very big journey. You're on a kind of a boat—they call it planet earth. You're never in the same place twice, because once in twenty-four hours our world revolves. Fancy your having travelled those thousands of miles since yesterday, through space.

You say, 'What do you mean by *space*? That's rather insubstantial, isn't it?'

Yes, it's very insubstantial; but that's where we are on this earth, going around. But we're not just revolving round once in twenty-four hours. In a year, we are going around the sun, and that's an enormous way to travel. The trouble is, the sun itself isn't still; the sun is on the move. So here we are on our little planet earth, corkscrewing throughout space, following the sun, and the sun's on the move.

You say, 'Where is the sun going to?'

Well it looks to be going towards what they call the *Great Attractor* at the centre of our galaxy.

'If it ever got there,' you say, 'we'd be still at last.'

No, we wouldn't, because the galaxy is on the move. The next time you get a nice clear night and it's the right time of the year, look up in the *Great Square of Pegasus*. People who have got good natural sight can see what looks like a bit of fluffy cotton wool. It is a gigantic

galaxy, our nearest big galaxy. It's called Andromeda and there are billions and billions of stars in it. It's on the move, and it's coming in our direction.

We don't often necessarily think how great God is, do we, and what a tremendous adventure life is on this little planet? I've known believers who have said, 'Don't say anything more about that. You frighten me stiff, talking about things like that.' I say, 'Sorry about that, but you're safe enough. Our blessed Lord, the very one who died for you, is in control of it. That enabled his servant, Paul, to say, 'nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

And when they got back in the boat, the rest of the disciples in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God' (Matt 14:33).

God grant us too, to know it, not merely as a theological doctrine but, as life goes on, to experience it through faith in him. Come wind or foul weather, or sunny days, the great adventure of life on earth in this great universe is that we might come to know who Jesus Christ really is.

Shall we pray.

Now, Lord, having read thy word, we hasten to bow down at thy feet and confess with Peter and with all the believers of many centuries long, 'thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God'. Show us, Lord, ever more increasingly, thy glory and thy majesty and the wonder of thy purpose, that the more thus we understand thee, the more we shall be impressed that it was 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me'. At the mention of thy name, therefore, blessed Lord Jesus, our knees not only bow, but our tongues confess to thee, that 'Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'.

Bless then thy word to us we pray, as we thank thee for the refreshments that now we shall enjoy. For thy name's sake. Amen.

Jewish Unbelief and Gentile Faith

Chapter 15

We are currently studying the Gospel by Matthew, and last week we embarked upon that section of narrative that Matthew has placed from the end of chapter 13 to the end of chapter 17. This is one of those sections largely given to narrative, as distinct from the other parts of that Gospel that are devoted to recording some of the detailed teaching of our Lord.

When we began this particular passage, we first of all scanned the chapters to notice what, if any, *dominant themes* there were within this section. We found it quite easy to notice the several times that Matthew records that this or that person, or group of people, came to realize that Jesus is the Son of God. This is a part of Matthew that emphasizes *the deity of our Lord Jesus*. That is important in any context, but for someone like Matthew, who was writing against the background of contemporary Judaism, this is one of the major topics that he has to face. Why do these Christians insist that Jesus is not merely a prophet, but he is the Son of God; and in what sense is he the Son of God? And further, what made the early Christians think that he was the Son of God?

We noticed what the Apostle John tells us in his first letter; that it is important for us in our day and generation to believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus. The secret of overcoming the world, says John, is our faith (5:4); not that our sins have been forgiven, important as that fact is. But then, if Jesus is not the Son of God, our sins aren't forgiven anyway. The secret of overcoming the world is a vigorous faith that Jesus is the Son of God. If he is not the Son of God, we should be fools for suffering or sacrificing anything for him. If he is the Son of God, we should be utter and extreme fools not to sacrifice for him.

Then we noticed that, in this part of Matthew, repeated reference is made to the Apostle Peter. For one very good reason. When asked along with the other disciples just who they thought Jesus was, he was among the first to voice the fact. Peter promptly replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (16:16). Our Lord proceeded to say, 'you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (v. 18). It is the fact that the Christian church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets; but it is likewise built upon that basic confession that Jesus is the Son of God, and if Christendom should in any place and at any time deny the deity of the Lord Jesus, they would show themselves not to be on the foundation of that church that our blessed Lord built.

Last week we saw how Matthew raises this question of the deity of Christ at the end of chapter 13, when he tells us that the locals in our Lord's own town and countryside found it difficult to account for him. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is

not this the carpenter's son?' (vv. 54–55). And if that's all Jesus is and was—the carpenter's son, then there are certain difficult things that have to be explained.

His wisdom

They noticed that he was not trained in the rabbinical schools, yet his teaching was not only impressive to his contemporaries, it has lasted with great acclaim all down the centuries. The teacher who first taught the story of the prodigal son, with its delightful literary qualities, let alone its potential to reach the heart—if not the Son of God, he was a literary genius. And if he didn't teach it, but this was a concoction of a few fishermen from Galilee, then perhaps we ought to bow down and worship them. It is a universal classic and behind it, of course, is no mere human author.

His works

How would you account for his mighty deeds, if he were merely the carpenter's son? We saw in our study last week how Matthew presents our Lord Jesus against the background of the court of Herod and the supper that he gave on his birthday. Contrasted with that is the 'messianic banquet' that our Lord proceeded to give to the crowds (14:13–21). And then in the night scene, as the apostles crossed the sea in the boat, our Lord demonstrated himself to them as being in control of the physical forces of the universe. The people in the boat confessed, 'Truly you are the Son of God' (14:22–33).

We saw again the relevance of that to practical situations. If we are to be missionaries for Christ, prepared to work for him, and if need be to suffer for him, we shall need a strong faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, controller of even the physical forces of the universe. 'For to this end we toil and strive,' says Paul, opening his heart to Timothy, his younger fellow servant in Christ, 'because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe' (1 Tim 4:10).

We think of our brother Sookhdeo at this moment. Only a conviction that Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, but the controller of the physical powers of the universe, would sustain him in his particular work for Christ, with all the threats that are made against him.⁶

Challenge from religious authorities

Tonight, we are to think of our Lord's claim to be the Son of God against the background, not now of politics, but of the religious authorities from Jerusalem. Why that is important, we shall think about in a moment.

Before we come down to that, I would like to suggest to you just a teeny weeny little literary problem, so that, if you find the rest of this lecture boring, you may forget what I'm saying and concentrate on the solution to the puzzle that I am now to set.

⁶ 'The jury . . . unanimously found Dr Sookhdeo not guilty on Tuesday 31 July 2018.' (anglicanmainstream.org)

A literary question

I have been arguing that in his Gospel the stories that Matthew selects are not put there simply because they happened and so he wrote it down; something else happened and he put that down as well. They are not just an odd selection of stories that have very little to do with each other. I have urged rather that we should assume that the stories, like the teaching, are coherent. They are deliberately chosen, so that the message they present together is a logical whole. Here is a little exercise that I suggest to you; it certainly won't carry any health danger.

First story: Last week we read the story of King Herod at his birthday party (Matt 14:1–12). There was the king himself, Herod the tetrarch. There was a woman, Herodias, who lived with him, though she was really his brother's wife. John the Baptist had publicly rebuked Herod for this illicit alliance, and she didn't like John and wanted him executed. But Herod so far had refused. He had him imprisoned, but he didn't want to execute him, because he feared the people. They all held John to be a prophet. Herodias had a daughter and she sent her in to dance for Herod, and in a moment of irresponsibility he promised to give her anything she asked, up to a half of his kingdom. Not knowing what to ask, she went to consult her mother, and she demanded the head of John the Baptist on a dish. Herod was ashamed to go against his oath in front of all his birthday guests and he gave in to the woman, granted her what she requested and she got the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

So, there is a king and a woman, and the king not at once wanting to give her what she asked for, and the woman's daughter. The king was eventually forced against his will to give in to her.

Second story: With that in mind, let's look now at chapter 15 and I'm going to read you a story to ask you to think whether there is any connection at all between this story and the one I have described from chapter 14.

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.' But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly. (15:21–28)

And the little puzzle is, are there any similarities in that story with the other one of a king, a woman and her daughter? Don't feel obliged to answer it right now, because we have to set upon what is our major theme for this evening.

Substituting tradition for God's own word

We come therefore to chapter 15. 'Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem . . .' (v. 1). We notice that they came from Jerusalem, which was of course the theological and doctrinal centre for Judaism—this is an official deputation. These are Pharisees, the stricter

from among the leading sects in Judaism; scribes weren't just people who wrote out Scripture, they were experts in the law. And they asked our Lord, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat' (v. 2).

So the challenge from the religious authorities now is that our Lord is transgressing the tradition of the elders, in particular this habit he had of allowing his disciples not to wash their hands when they ate. We shall immediately see, of course, that this has nothing to do with hygiene. It's a very good thing to wash your hands before you eat, lest you infect yourself with some germ, but this had nothing to do with hygiene. This was a religious rule. The Pharisees would wash their hands before they ate a meal. Why? Because they had been downtown, for instance, and had engaged in business. They had handled money maybe, and the money might have been handled by Gentiles. Simply by being Gentiles, they would defile whatever they touched, because they didn't keep scrupulously to circumcision, the laws of Moses and so forth. Therefore, they were defiled, so the Pharisees would wash their hands to get rid of *that kind of defilement* before they ate.

Where did they get the idea from? There were passages in the law of Moses that talked about washing. The priests and Levites had to wash their hands and feet at the laver before they engaged in the service of the Lord in the tabernacle (Exod 30:17–21). Or, in the case of elders, if it was discovered that somebody had been murdered, and the corpse was lying out in the countryside, and nobody knew who the murderer was, the elders from the city that was nearest to the body had to go out, and they had to wash their hands in water to express, by that symbolic action, that they weren't guilty of this murder, nor was anybody from their city, as far as they knew. Like Pilate, when he condemned the Lord Jesus, he washed his hands in water, saying, 'It's not my fault, it's your decision' (see Matt 27:24).

Adding to the word of God

These were sensible commands in the law of Moses, but as the years had gone by the elders were not content with the words of Scripture. They added to them and applied them in all sorts of situations such as the Old Testament never envisaged, until they piled up the rules. They did it not only with this matter, but others too. There were 614 rules that people had to keep, and true religion became a matter of keeping the rules.

For instance, the Old Testament forbade you to walk too far on a Sabbath day: the 'Sabbath day's journey'. You had to measure the distance from your house. But if you drew a wire or a cord from your house to the next door neighbour's house, that's all one house, isn't it? So you could start from the next door neighbour's house; and if you wired up all the houses down the street, that could count as your house; and then you could start the measuring of the Sabbath day's walk from the end of the street, and so on. All sorts of endless rules and regulation that weren't in the word of God at all, but had been invented by the tradition of the elders.

At the time when Matthew was writing, most of these rules hadn't yet been written down. They came to be written down in the subsequent decades and centuries and form what we now call the *Talmud*. *Lamad* means to teach or to be taught, and the Talmud is a collection of the interpretation of the elders, scribes and rabbis all down the centuries. In the big Soncino

edition⁷ of the Talmud, there are thirty-five volumes of all the different traditions of the elders. To this very present day, Orthodox Judaism regards the Talmud as far more authoritative than the Old Testament itself.

I was in the Hebrew university some years ago for a while, and I thought to take the opportunity of consulting a professor of Old Testament. He originally came from Oxford but now was working in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He was an authority, as I thought, on Hebrew and the Old Testament, and I consulted him on a certain translation in the Greek Septuagint. When I asked him the question, he said, 'We don't know anything about the Bible. The Bible is for children; we study the Talmud.'

Earlier I had been working in the University of Durham, and a good Christian lady had made contact with a Jewish student in the Orthodox Seminary for Jews in Gateshead. She had invited him one Sunday afternoon to come and meet me. He said he was going to bring his rabbi, but the rabbi didn't turn up and the student felt relieved.

He said, 'If the rabbi had come, he would have spat at you. And anyway, what is the sense of you trying to understand Scripture? The Scriptures are not for you Gentiles. We are saved, for the Bible says, "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD . . ." (Deut 33:29). 'Salvation is not for Gentiles. You can't understand the Old Testament by yourself; you'll have to read the Talmud and listen to the rabbis and their interpretations.' Of course there came centuries when Christendom held that kind of view, that it's no good for people to try to understand the Bible. You must let the church interpret it.

So here come the scribes and the Pharisees, and they're questioning our Lord now because he broke—he transgressed, as they had it—the tradition of the elders. Notice our Lord's reply.

He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? *For God commanded, "Honour your father and your mother,"* and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die."' (Matt 15:3-4)

'That's what God said; but you say . . .' Oh dear, notice the contrast:

But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honour his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' (vv. 5-9)

We should notice that our Lord didn't answer why he allowed his disciples to eat their food before they had washed their hands. That was a tradition of the elders, and it's not in Scripture. What he turned round on them now was that so very often their tradition actually *contradicted* what God says in his word; they were the precepts of men, not of God, and they were therefore in vain.

So let's take the actual case that our Lord mentioned. It is said that we have to honour father and mother; that's the positive command. On the negative side, whoever reviles father

⁷ The Soncino Press English translation of the original Hebrew-Aramaic text of the Babylonian Talmud.

or mother must surely die. That is what God has said; 'but you say'. And the first thing that ought to astonish us is that when God had said something, they said something different. That is very serious, isn't it? 'For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.'

God says 'one sacrifice for ever'

We should not be too hard on the Jews. We should remember we are part of Christendom, shouldn't we? And still today the Bible says, 'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God' (Heb 10:12). Therefore, the Holy Spirit says, 'there is no longer any offering for sin' (v. 18). There is no such thing as a process of offering anything at all for the forgiveness of sins. Offering for sin has ceased; there is no such process. It's not only that there is no other sacrifice, but even the same sacrifice is finished. Our Lord, having offered it, sat down. There is now no offering, no process of offering anything for the purpose of gaining forgiveness of sins. And yet, in many parts of Christendom, they say to this very present day, 'Lord, take this bread and wine, the work of our hands, and grant that it shall become for us the body and blood of Christ.' They proceed to offer it on the altar to get forgiveness of sins. God says one thing; Christendom's tradition says another. That is an exceedingly serious thing.

God says, 'Honour your father and your mother'

But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honour his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. (Matt 15:5-6).

The question of honouring father and mother is not of paying them lip service or sending them a birthday card; it's a question of supporting them financially in their old age, if need be. That was very important in the ancient world when there were no such things as pensions or state aid. People had a lot of children in the hope that when they grew old the children would maintain them. It was God's word therefore, that it would be the responsibility of children, when they have the means, to support their parents in their old age. Under the guise of religion, of saying this money is *korban*— it is now given to God, the Pharisees and scribes said that the person concerned was no longer duty bound to maintain his parents.

It sounded very good, didn't it? It actually made void the word of God; emptied it of significance and authority. Says Christ: 'You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men"' (vv. 7-9).

An illustration

You will notice a gradation in our Lord's charge. Let me use a humble, not really relevant, illustration, but never mind. The law of the land says that *you shall* drive on the left-hand side of the road in Great Britain. Imagine a driving instructor who took it upon himself to say, 'I know that's what the code says, but don't bother about that. I'm telling you, *you should* drive on the right-hand side.' So now the instructor is transgressing the law of the land, 'Well, I suppose then, you can drive on the right-hand side if you want to.' So it's a matter of choice

whether you drive on the left or the right—it appears to be like that in some countries I've been to! But then the next thing he goes on to say is, 'You should drive on the right, and *you shall not* drive on the left.' That's going a stage further, isn't it? What he is saying is not the government's authoritative law, but his own device and teaching.

A misrepresentation of God

Why should our Lord so strongly denounce it? Because, in the first place, it was a misrepresentation of God. Our Lord is on record as saying, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). 'Hate' in the Hebrew means here 'to put in second place'. If we give ourselves to Christ and he is our master and teacher, then his first condition is that we put him first, absolutely first. But when we put him first, one of the first things he will say to us is, 'Look after your parents.' To take God's word concerned with a person's parents and pervert it in the name of religion is a serious misrepresentation of God. 'I've given the money to the temple. I don't have to look after you.' Oh dear, what kind of a God is he in that temple?

What it is that defiles a person

And he called the people to him and said to them, 'Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.'
(Matt 15:10–11)

Once more, we're not talking about germs, or eating the wrong kind of diet that can do you physical harm. It's talking of religious ceremonial defilement. He said this to the people as a whole, summing up his teaching in those few words. But when the disciples came to him and said, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?', did our Lord say, 'Oh, but we mustn't offend anybody'? No, he didn't.

He said, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up' (v. 13)—'These teachers are not plants that my heavenly Father has planted.' How would you know that? They're teaching the very opposite of what his Father said, and what his word said, and God in the end will root them up.

And secondly, 'Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit' (v. 14). We notice how definite these words are: if you follow that kind of teaching, you'll end up in the ditch for having disobeyed God's word.

Knowing whom to obey and who has authority

He needed to say it, because within a comparatively few months the Lord would be crucified, buried, risen again and gone back to heaven, and these same apostles, Peter and company, would have to go out there and face the Sanhedrin. It would be a question of whether they obeyed God or men, as Peter and the apostles said to the members of the Sanhedrin (see Acts 5:29). They didn't mind them doing miracles, but not in the name of Jesus. 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name' (v. 28). The head of the Sanhedrin was a Sadducee. They had been responsible for the murder of the Lord Jesus, and now they didn't want the apostles teaching in the name of Jesus and saying that he was risen from the dead. The apostles had to

decide what to do. Most of them were only humble fishermen, and these were learned clerics. Should they bow down to them or not? Our Lord was preparing them for what lay ahead.

In the very next chapter he's going to say to Peter, 'On this confession I will build *my* church' (see Matt 16:18). They would have to learn to assess the Pharisees and the scribes at their true value, in so far as they disobeyed God's word, contradicted it, and put in its place their own teaching. 'Let them get offended; they are not plants that my Father planted.' Now this is an important thing to lay hold of. It's not a question of religious strife. It is a decision of who has the authority to tell us what to teach and do.

'But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." And he said, "Are you also still without understanding?"' (Matt 15:15-16). I suppose it's difficult to take in, if you've been brought up to get off the pavement when the rabbi passes by. There remains a kind of a conscience and fear of the family, of the rabbi, and so forth, so perhaps it took a little while for Peter to grasp what was being said.

God in his mercy was kind to him. In the Acts of the Apostles, God sent a particular object lesson for Peter, to clear Peter from the old rules of eating as given in the Old Testament, and set him free to go and take the gospel to a Gentile centurion (Acts 10). But he'd already learnt where the authority was. Faced with the Sanhedrin forbidding him to preach, he openly said, 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29).

So we leave that sorry piece of history: our Lord's teaching challenged by the religious authorities from Judaism, and he as Son of God answering sternly and decisively, defending the character of God and his word.

The Canaanite woman

In Matthew 15:21 we come across a very interesting story. Our Lord had gone into the Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon. We should grasp how unusual this was. As far as we're told in the Gospels, it was very rarely that our Lord went outside the country of Israel. There came out a Canaanite woman. She was a *Gentile*, and as far as Jews were concerned Gentiles were impossible sinners.

Let me quote you Paul talking to Peter. They're both Christians of some years, but they've had a disagreement as to whether converted Jews were free to eat with converted Gentiles, if the Gentiles weren't circumcised, in keeping with the old Mosaic law. Paul said to Peter, 'We ourselves are Jews by birth and not *Gentile sinners*' (Gal 2:15). Paul, subsequently talking to converted Gentiles in Ephesus, says

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practise every kind of impurity. (Eph 4:17-19)

Gentiles were regarded as being unclean, and here is our Lord going out to Gentiles. What a lovely harbinger of the dawning spring, when the gospel would eventually go outside of Judaism to the Gentiles. A wonderful thing. I'm afraid the religious authorities forced it out

of Judaism, and in many a synagogue Paul had to say, 'Because you thrust the gospel from you, we are turning to the Gentiles' (see Acts 13:46).

So now we have our Lord going across to the Gentiles. Did he say to them, 'Look here, Gentiles, we haven't come to tell you that you're sinners at all, we wouldn't be judgmental on anybody; we wouldn't criticize sexual practices that are common to Greeks'? No, he didn't say anything of the sort.

Comparing the two stories

I seem to remember you were going to tell me whether you saw any connection between that first story and this story? The first story was about a king, and a woman and her daughter. The woman wanted John the Baptist dead, but Herod said 'no'. He was afraid to execute him because of the people. But this woman sent the daughter in to dance, and it pleased the king. He promised to give her anything she liked, up to half of his kingdom. She consulted her mother, and she said, 'Ask for the head of John the Baptist.' So the woman got her way in the end. Did you see any connection at all between that story and the story of the Canaanite woman?

They were Gentiles, the woman and her daughter. The daughter had a demon. Unclean, of course. The question is, how did she persuade Christ to give her what she wanted, and the prior question is, why was Christ apparently unwilling to do what she asked?

F. W. Beare,⁸ a New Testament scholar, said that the story is atrocious. Jesus was being narrow-minded. He wasn't interested in Gentiles, she was a Gentile dog, and all this kind of thing.

The apostles said, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us' (15:23). They probably meant, 'Give her what she asks and get her going. We can't be bothered by Canaanite women.'

At first our Lord said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel', but when the woman persisted, he said, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (vv. 24–26). Granted it means 'little dogs', but I'm not sure if that relieves the implication of the word 'dog', for the ancients didn't treat dogs as pets. They were unclean animals.

What was he doing? Well, listen to the woman. She didn't say, 'You impossible, stuck-up Jewish preacher, I want nothing to do with you or your religion.'

'She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith!"' (vv. 27–28).

Listen to the woman. Yes, Israel is in a special position. The woman was facing the facts: they were unclean Gentiles; her very daughter was inhabited by a demon, and Mark tells us it was an unclean demon (7:25). But God is so big that there would be crumbs that fell over the table. After Israel had eaten to their full, was it not right that the Gentiles should get a crumb or two? He was not seeking to make friends by saying that what was unclean wasn't unclean, like the tendency of religion is nowadays. He brought her to repentance and faith.

The dispute among the apostles in Jerusalem

One little quote from Acts 15 will help to secure the message in our minds. There arose a dispute among the early Christians, when some who had come down from Judaea taught the

⁸ Francis Wright Beare (1902-1986).

brothers, saying, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' (v. 1). And then verse 5, 'But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."' "

Among those who replied, first and foremost was Peter. He said, 'Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe' (v. 7). He's talking about the way God sent him to preach the gospel to the Gentile, Cornelius. 'And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us' (v. 8). The point at issue was, how could God possibly give unclean Gentiles the Holy Spirit? Says Peter, 'that is what happened: "He made no distinction between us and them, *having cleansed their hearts by faith*"' (v. 9).

How did our Lord cleanse the woman and her daughter? He provoked her repentance and then her faith, and cleansed her heart by faith. Marvellous that, isn't it? We live in a defiled world. Our task is not to say that defilement doesn't matter, but to preach the glorious gospel that will bring people to repentance by pointing out the seriousness of sin, and then showing them the marvellous greatness and bigness of God, who can cleanse our hearts by faith.

'It is our conviction,' said Peter, 'that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved, even we Jews, exactly and in the same way as the Gentiles are saved' (see v. 11).

Jesus heals many Gentiles

The result was that our Lord went up into a mountain. It was by the Sea of Galilee, but part of the coast that was in Gentile territory. Even while our Lord was here on earth, crowds came out of the Gentile parts and flocked to him on the mountainside. He healed them of their various diseases and distresses (15:30). What was the result? 'And they glorified *the God of Israel,*' says Matthew (v. 31). It wouldn't make a lot of sense to say that if they were Israelites; it was because they were Gentiles. They glorified in the name of the Christ, the God of Israel.

I'm in the habit of telling my Jewish friends that I'm a Gentile, but I don't believe in just any old god. I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And then I tell them who leads me to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: it is Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord.

What a lovely collocation of ideas. Our Lord rebukes the Pharisees and the scribes for their unfaithfulness to holy Scripture, and their substitution of mere man's idea on religion for God's word. Then he goes to the Gentiles. He doesn't minimize their uncleanness, but leads them to repentance and to faith, and multitudes glorify the God of Israel. And we here tonight are Gentiles, are we not?

Shall we not just bow our hearts and bless God for the coming of his dear Son?

Our Father, we thank thee together in the name of our Lord Jesus that thou art so infinitely great in thy holiness, but also in thy grace, longsuffering, and thy mercy. We thank thee, in the name of our Lord Jesus, for the coming of thy Son, which has shown us Gentiles who were far off the magnificence of God's mercy, and we bless thee that we sit here tonight in the enjoyment of thy grace. Help us, Lord, to

learn our lessons from thy dear Son and be faithful to thy word, so that we might take the right and appropriate attitude to the world around us, where so much of religion has compromised with sin. But, on the other hand, fill our hearts with thy grace and thy sympathy, so that, by the grace of thy Holy Spirit, we might lead many Gentiles, and Jews as well, to the feet of the Saviour.

So we commit us to thee and thank thee for the refreshments that we shall enjoy together. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Sign of Jonah and the Confession of Peter

Chapter 16

Welcome, each and every one of you, to our studies in the Gospel of Matthew. We have arrived this evening at chapter 16, so let's begin by reading the first two paragraphs, both of which refer to the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' So he left them and departed. When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, 'Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, 'We brought no bread.' But Jesus, aware of this, said, 'O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (vv. 1-12)

May the Lord give us good understanding and interest in his word.

First lesson for the Pharisees and Sadducees

Two paragraphs about Pharisees and Sadducees, and the first of them is the story of how the Pharisees and Sadducees came with an insincere question, tempting him and asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He rebuked them, remarking that they claimed to be able to interpret the atmosphere and the colour of the sky, both evening and morning, and thus perceive what the weather would be on the next day: 'You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times.' Which raises the question, what signs of what times? What couldn't they discern?

What were the signs of the times that should have been evident to them?

To answer that simple question, I think we must remember how chapter 15 ended up. It was the delightful story, first of all, of the Gentile woman who came and besought Christ to heal her daughter who was demon-possessed. At first, the Lord Jesus made as if he wasn't going to answer her, and said that he was sent only to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel', and then added, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (15:24, 26). It looked as if our Lord was being frightfully rude and very narrow-minded, but it was nothing of the sort, of course. What he was doing was eliciting the woman's faith, and when she replied, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the [puppy] dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table', it became obvious that she had both repented and believed. 'Your God is so big that, though he blesses Israel particularly, he couldn't begrudge but a few crumbs to Gentiles.'

We noticed last week that she didn't resent being described as a puppy dog or as a dog. Gentiles were unclean and our modern Gentile world is very unclean. Witness so many programmes on the TV and on Radio 4, so-called comedies that blaspheme the name of God and Christ and get most of their mirth from perverted sexuality. This woman came and owned the fact that she was an unclean Gentile; her very daughter was possessed of an unclean spirit. But watch her faith, to which our Lord of course generously responded, and gave the word that drove out the demon from her daughter and was a tremendous blessing to this Gentile woman (v. 28).

Not content with that, he came back to the north of Palestine and went up a mountain. In that whole area near to the Gentile border, hundreds and hundreds flocked to him and he healed their sick. 'And they glorified the God of Israel' (v. 31). There would have been no point in Matthew saying that if the people had been Israelites, but these were Gentiles. When they saw the wonders that the blessed Messiah did, these Gentiles glorified the God of Israel and our Lord made them a sumptuous meal.

The sign of Jonah

In chapter 14 we read how the Lord made the Israelites a great banquet in a desolate place, multiplying the loaves and the fishes miraculously to feed them with his royal bounty. But in chapter 16 Matthew points out that our Lord had equal bounty for the Gentiles too, and in his mercy he fed this large crowd of Gentiles by miraculously blessing the bread and the fish. When the Pharisees and Sadducees heard the news, it ought to have been for them a sign of the times. Our Lord gave them one hint. He said, '. . . no sign will be given . . . except the sign of Jonah' (v. 4).

So that we might interpret that right, let's look back to an earlier mention of Jonah. 'But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah"' (12:39). And now he expounds what the sign of Jonah the prophet means. He says, 'For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (v. 40). He's drawing a parallel. In Hebrew counting it was three days and three nights, when the great fish spewed him out on the ground, and he's referring in advance to his crucifixion, his burial, and then his resurrection, a gigantic sign to Israel—witness the happenings on the day of Pentecost.

But this time in chapter 16, he simply says, 'No sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' He doesn't add, 'For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' No, just, 'except the sign of Jonah.' What was particular about the Prophet Jonah? Well, he was one of the very few—perhaps the only one in that sense, who was sent by God as a Jew to evangelize Gentiles. He was sent to the great city of Nineveh, whose wickedness was unparalleled, and yet God had mercy on them. Poor old Jonah didn't enjoy the job, and he explained to God why he ran away from it.

O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:2)

'I feared,' he said, 'that when I'd go there with all my prophetic credentials and preach that in a few days God would judge the city, if they repented you'd forgive them. But then what would come of my preaching? My prophecy wouldn't be fulfilled. So I ran off.'

I suppose there could possibly be preachers who are more concerned with their reputation than with the salvation of the lost, but I don't know about that. Jonah was going to the Gentiles, so now our Lord is emphasizing, 'Look at the great celebration on the mountain where the Gentiles came and I healed them and they glorified the God of Israel.' It was a sign of the times.

Paul preaches to the Gentiles

So that I may try to convince you that I'm not making this up arbitrarily, let me turn to Acts 13. This is a record of a long sermon that Paul the apostle preached in Antioch of Pisidia. Not the other big Antioch, the Antioch in Pisidia.

As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath. And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. (Acts 13:42)

Let's notice who the converts are. They were Gentile people in these sundry cities, who had got tired of their idolatry and all the paraphernalia that went with it. They attended the Jewish synagogue because, as they heard the recitation of the law and the commandments, it seemed to them that this philosophy was far superior to the polytheism enacted by their priests in the temples. To use a technical term that developed in those times, they were *God fearers*, and predominantly among them were women. There was a reason for that, of course. As a woman, you could attend the synagogue and profit from it, or even be converted to Judaism, but for men conversion meant circumcision, and the men were not so keen on the matter.

The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken

by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. (vv. 44–48)

The Jews in the synagogue got angry. Moved with jealousy to see so many Gentiles beginning to attend the synagogue at the preaching of Paul and not of their rabbi, they started to oppose the gospel. Paul now brings to them the seriousness of their attitude. 'We had to preach the gospel first to you; that is the order of Scripture. But now we turn to the Gentiles, for the prophets have said it.'

Salvation to the ends of the earth

Which prophets? The Pharisees and the Sadducees ought to have known that the day would come when Messiah would not only save Jews, but attract thousands upon thousands of Gentiles to faith in the living God of Israel.

This is Messiah speaking prophetically through Isaiah the prophet. Notice the audience he's calling to. It's not now the Jews, it's the coastlands: 'peoples from afar'. When you talk of coastlands, or the isles, in the Old Testament, you're thinking of places and people distant from Palestine: Greeks and Romans and so on. Whether they knew at that time of us eminent Irishmen, I don't know. Anyway, that is the people now being addressed and the Messiah is addressing them.

Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' (49:1–3)

The Messiah is the embodiment of Israel: he is Israel to perfection. But now listen to what Messiah says:

'I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.' And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—[God] says: 'It is too light a thing [too small a thing] that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.' (vv. 4–6)

What a lovely insight this is into the heart of the person of the Lord Jesus. The thought that to be anointed by God just to bring little Israel back to God was too small a task to satisfy him.

You know, when it comes to sewing, I don't take to it easily. I don't know which finger to put the thimble on to stop me pricking my fingers to start with, and then getting the needle threaded is a business. Perverse it is! When I've sewn on a button, for me that's a tremendous achievement. But if you ask a good lady who can do tapestry work and embroidery to sew on buttons, she'd be insulted. She couldn't possibly be satisfied with sewing on buttons; she must be doing all this beautiful big stuff.

If you're not satisfied, my dear brother, my dear sister, with the work you're doing for the Lord and you're thinking that perhaps you're not doing something big enough, our Lord felt like that. To be God's messenger and bring back little Israel, how could the Son of God, creator of the ends of the earth and the vast galaxies of space, be content with a little work like that?

If we would follow our Lord's attitude of heart, we must have something big enough to do for the Saviour that it can satisfy us. And what was this big work? Says God, 'I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (v. 6).

So, as the Gentiles are coming, it's this prophecy that Paul quotes in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. When the Jews got full of envy Paul says, 'It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles' (Acts 13:46). 'The prophecy is being fulfilled under your very noses. Look at these scores of Gentiles coming.' The ingathering of the Gentiles is a marvellous sign. Does it comfort your heart? If we know history, it ought to.

Signs throughout history pointing to the coming of Messiah

That tiny nation began with one single Abraham and Sarah. Gradually, over many centuries, they were taught the ways of God, as God educated them and got rid of idolatry. By the time our Lord arrived in Palestine, there were no idols in the temple of the Lord anymore; Israel was strictly monotheistic, worshipping one God, which was a very big advance. To have gone to a people who believe in many different gods and say that Jesus is the Son of God, they'd have said, 'Do you mean one of our gods, or do you have a lot of gods of your own? Which god in particular?'

But in Palestine at least, when our Lord was born Israel was totally monotheistic. It now made sense for God to send his Son, and for his Son to be proclaimed as the Son of God. Isaiah the prophet was prophesying that the gospel would first be preached to the Jew, but then the mark of reality would be that it would extend to the Gentiles. The question we ask is, has it happened?

I think I've told you before about my dear Jewish friend in this city. I would say, 'Otto, my dear chap, show me another Jew who has led anywhere near the multimillions of Gentiles to faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'

Can you think of any other Jew who's done it? 'There shall be no sign given to you,' says Christ, 'but the sign of Jonah, the Old Testament prophet, who was sent to preach to Gentiles.' Our Lord had given a foretaste of it; the record is there in chapter 15. Now in chapter 16, he points out to them the signs of the times, which were a pointer to the reality of the messiahship of the Lord Jesus, if they had any sight to see it.

Second lesson for the Pharisees and Sadducees

The disciples came to the other side and had forgotten to bring bread. 'Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees"' (16:6). But you know how it happens, don't you? Well perhaps you don't, but I've known it to happen on a Sunday morning. A visiting preacher of some renown gets up to preach, and there's Mrs O'Farrell in the audience and she's got to entertain the preacher to lunch. As he begins to preach, he happens to use the illustration of potatoes. 'Oh, did I switch the oven on so that the lunch will be ready when we get home? Now did I, or didn't I?' She can't hear a word of the sermon now, worrying about whether she switched the oven on or not.

So it was with the apostles. Our Lord was wanting to teach them a lesson about doctrine, distinguishing false doctrine from the true, and he happened to use the metaphor, 'the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees', that sparked in their minds the fact that they'd forgotten to bring bread. He rebuked them for it, 'O you of little faith . . . Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?' (16:8-9). Where was their faith?

That tells me, if the Lord has intervened to provide for my need once or twice in time past, I ought to count on the fact when next I'm in need that he will provide for me. But I have to confess that's one of my troubles. I get in some difficult plight and wonder what on earth the solution is. I worry and worry and worry, and then, when the Lord comes in and gives the provision, I say, 'Bless the Lord, and now that he's proved himself to me I'll never doubt again.' Wait until the next time it happens; I've not got the logic of faith.

The hymn puts it:

His love in time past forbids me to think
 He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink.
 Each sweet Ebenezer⁹ I have in review
 Confirms his good pleasure to help me quite through.¹⁰

He was not talking about literal bread; he was talking about doctrine. He calls it 'leaven', because we feed on doctrine, don't we? We do need doctrine to feed on. Of course, there is the rest of the stuff, the light cornflakes, and the sweets are nice after the main course, aren't they? But if you're going to have healthy bones you'll need lots of proteins and things; you'll need some doctrines. 'Get your doctrines right,' says Christ. 'Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching [the doctrines] of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (v. 12).

The teaching of the Pharisees

They were very well intentioned people. I cannot now afford to go into their history. Some people think that the very term means *separatists*; that they arose out of the Maccabees' time, when the Maccabees fought for adherence to Scripture in regard particularly to the traditions

⁹ 'Till now the LORD has helped us' (1 Sam 7:12).

¹⁰ John Newton (1725-1807), 'Begone, unbelief, My Saviour is near.'

of circumcision and Scripture and the temple services. But afterwards, the Maccabees themselves grew careless and they appointed a high priest who didn't fulfil the rules of the Old Testament. For that reason, amongst others, the Pharisee sect began insisting on the carrying out of the Old Testament law, which was good and proper in itself, was it not? But then, as they would put it, they put a bridge around the law. By their thousands of rules and regulations they made sure you didn't get within yards of breaking the law. It became a fearful burden upon the people and godliness became a matter of keeping rules and regulations.

Now let's get it straight, there are good rules and regulations. The New Testament warns against slander (2 Cor 12:20) and sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:18). 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal' (Exod 20:13–15). These are God's laws, but the Pharisees had added to them a lot of rules and regulations, such as we thought about last week. Washing of the arms right up to the elbow before you ate, to cleanse your possible defilement from contact with Gentiles, and all that kind of thing. It is so easy to make rule-keeping a substitute for godliness, and yet live daily life in an un-Christian style. Beware of the doctrine of the Pharisees.

The teaching of the Sadducees

They were at the other extreme; they wouldn't have 'the tradition of the elders' (15:2). They said that Scripture was enough and they wouldn't submit to all these endless rules and regulations invented by the Pharisees. If I were to dare to say such a thing, I would have said that the Pharisees were our dear friends the Roman Catholics, and the Sadducees were Protestants. 'Give us simply Scripture,' they said, and they wouldn't have all the traditions. Yes, but it was the Sadducees who developed modernism; and there were long years when Roman Catholics were more faithful to Scripture than many Protestants. In my youth, it was in the Protestant theological faculties of divinity that you would meet extreme forms of modernism.

According to Acts, Sadducees didn't believe in angel or spirit. They didn't believe in resurrection, they believed that when this life is done that's that; there is no 'life to come'. You will remember it was the Sadducees who came to Christ. They thought themselves very clever, able to argue doctrines.

Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.' (Matt 22:24–28)

Of course, it was a made-up yarn, and a silly argument to be sure. They thought they had won an argument that proved there's no resurrection. Wouldn't it be a sorry world, in which there's no resurrection and no final judgment? It would mean that the vast millions of people who have lived and died on this earth without any justice, cruelly treated, persecuted, have no hope of justice ever. And that was only one of the things they believed. Our Lord called upon that situation to say that there is such a thing as resurrection (vv. 29–32).

How would you prove it from the Old Testament, because our Lord himself hadn't died yet? We Christians talk about the evidence of his resurrection, and rightly so. Why we don't preach it more often in our sermons to the world, I haven't got round to understanding yet. We talk about the atonement; why don't we preach the resurrection, our hope for a hopeless world? But anyway our Lord said to them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God' (v. 29). In the resurrection men and women shall be as angels; they neither marry nor are given in marriage. Notice, it's not they *can't* marry, but they *don't*. There's no need to perpetuate the race up there, no need for a generation; they are as the angels of God. But then he added evidence: 'have you not read what was said to you by God: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"?' (vv. 31–32). God had said it in answer to Moses' enquiry.

'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I to say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'. And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you."' (Exod 3:13–14).

It was in that context of God identifying himself. 'Who is this God?' — 'He's the God of Abraham.' But, according to the Pharisees, Abraham is dead and gone these thousands of years and crumbled to dust. Yet God says, 'I am the God of Abraham' (Matt 22:32).

'What do you mean, "I *am* the God of Abraham"?'

"I AM WHO I AM." I am the God of Abraham.'

'You mean you *were* the God of Abraham.'

'No, I *am* the God of Abraham.'

You see, when God sets up a relationship between himself and one of his redeemed people, that relationship is like God—eternal. What's your name? June Smith or something, and you're a believer? God defines himself by you. 'I *am* the God of June Smith.' The relationship is eternal.

What if I went to God and said to him, 'Excuse me, Lord, but did you know Abraham?'

I get asked questions, not quite like that, but sometimes I go to a place and they say, 'Did you know Spurgeon?'

'What do you mean, "Did I know Spurgeon?" I might look it, but I'm not that old! Spurgeon died before I was born.'

If you went to God and said, 'Did you know Abraham?', God would say, 'What do you mean, *did* I know him? I know him. Here he is.'

Marvellous, isn't it? He defines himself by his redeemed people. The relationship lasts eternally. That is the second lesson, therefore, provided by the Pharisees and the Sadducees

Peter's confession of the Christhood and deity of the Lord Jesus

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him,

'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.' (Matt 16:13-17)

First, we notice the place where our Lord saw fit to raise the question: 'Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi . . .'. If you have ever done a tour of Israel, you were probably taken up to a place called Baniyas, right in the north of the country, where you would have been shown a rock face with an old niche that once had a pagan statue in it. Otherwise it's said to be a beautiful spot in some people's eyes by the fact that the grass is green and little rivulets come that are part of the source of the Jordan River.

But of course that doesn't give us the impression of what it was in the days of Christ. Herod Philip had been granted it as part of his dominion and had built a palace and a temple with four pillars to it, and a sizeable city up there, so it wasn't a wild and secret place. The point of it was, it was right on the border with the Gentiles.

It was there that our Lord challenged his apostles to say who they thought he was, as distinct from the opinion of the crowds. Peter confessed the Lord Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God'. It was no accident that our Lord should ask for that confession there, on the border of Israel and the Gentiles, was it? In light of the coming history that we've already talked about, it was in the plan of God that some Jews accepted him as the Son of God, and myriads of Gentiles. To this present day, the great stumbling block with Israel is the deity of the Lord Jesus.

Peter confessed him, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,' and as we saw at the beginning of these studies, our Lord commended him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (v. 17). We observed that this wasn't the first time Peter had met the Lord Jesus.

It wasn't that one day he woke up and God said in his ear, 'Peter!'

And Peter said, 'Yes, Lord, I'm listening.'

And God said, 'Jesus is the Christ, my Son.'

And Peter said, 'If you say so, Lord, I believe it. But who is this Jesus?'

It wasn't like that. Peter had walked and travelled with Christ, listened to him preaching, offered him his boat as a pulpit, experienced the miraculous draught of fishes, he had been sent out as a missionary for him, and had come back with wonderful tales of the power of Christ over demons, and so forth. It was with that evidence in front of him that God then revealed the significance of the evidence, and Peter came to see that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

If we want the great assurance in our hearts of the deity of the Lord Jesus, don't suppose it's going to be a revelation that you weren't thinking about, had never thought about, and suddenly it will strike you like a bolt from the blue.

Start by reading the evidence, listen to the words of Christ in Scripture. Read what he did, read the story of his resurrection and the marvels of the triumphs of the gospel, and let God himself reveal to you the significance of the evidence. Then Christ went on to say,

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever

you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (vv. 18–19)

How are we to understand these verses? Unless you are coming absolutely new to the history of Christianity, it is almost impossible to answer the question without first coping with the claims that have been made all down history on this particular verse. Our Lord said, 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (v. 18). For some centuries the Roman Catholic Church has claimed as follows. Peter eventually went to Rome and became the first bishop of Rome; he had the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and those keys were then transmitted by him to the subsequent bishops of Rome, who have inherited this authority that was given to Peter.

It is upon Peter that the church is founded, and all subsequent bishops of Rome hold the *See*¹¹ of Peter. When they're teaching officially as the bishop of Rome, what they teach is infallible. It used to be that if you disagreed with that, there was no hope for you but the *Lake of Fire*. It's not true. It just isn't true. 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' is not true solely of Peter; the same authority is given to the church at large.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matt 18:15–18)

The seriousness of church government

You can see from the context that this is not just true of Peter, the supposed bishop of Rome (there's doubt historically about that too, and all subsequent bishops of Rome); this is true of churches in general. And when a church solemnly comes to a position over what you may call *church discipline*, the authority to exercise it is given to the church as a whole when they are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Let's look at this case in Corinth: 'It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife' (1 Cor 5:1). When it came to sexual matters, Greeks took a lot of shocking. As you'll notice from the Epistles, you would even have to tell Greek Christians, when they were first converted, that sexual immorality is sinful. Greeks wouldn't have known that, but they did have certain taboos. A man should not take his father's wife; even if the father was now dead, it was such a horrible thing to a Greek. It would be an absolute scandal, and here was the

¹¹ The Holy See is the name given to the government of the Roman Catholic Church, which is led by the pope as the bishop of Rome. As such, the Holy See's authority extends over Catholics throughout the world. Since 1929 it has resided in Vatican City. (Britannica.com)

church at Corinth allowing it in a man who professed to be a brother, a believer. They were arrogant about it, as though it was a sign of their Christian freedom. Oh dear, sometimes we hear that lovely word 'freedom' trotted out now in justification of all kinds of sexual immorality. 'People are free,' they say.

If a man who is called a Christian, a brother, is guilty of certain outlandish sins, Paul calls upon the [local] church to exercise serious discipline (vv. 11-13).

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgement on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord . . . Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. (vv. 3-5, 7)

When Luther discovered the doctrine of justification by faith, great, godly, heroic man that he was, he preached it and defied the Emperor of Europe, who was the Emperor of Spain at the time. Some historians record that he had much sympathy with Christians who said that the church of God is not coterminous with the state; every local church is a coming together of genuine believers who are not perfect, but those who are seeking to live godly lives. If people were publicly notorious and sinful in their behaviour, then they should not be accepted, unless they repent and show signs that they are believers. Or if they're already in the church, they should be dealt with for the sake of Christ. So it's not narrow-mindedness.

Paul appeals to the Old Testament institution of Passover (see Exod 12). On the night the people were redeemed from the wrath of God by the blood of the Passover lamb, and for days afterwards, they had to eat unleavened bread. You couldn't have the one without the other. Paul urges it on them here, 'For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (1 Cor 5:7-8).

Luther was inclined to go along with it, except of course that some of the German princes who had defended him were notoriously immoral and they were allowed into the church. It is for the gospel's sake, not only narrow-mindedness, that church discipline of this kind is necessary. Notice that it's not only about sexual matters. If anybody is shown to be covetous, guilty of greed—that is, making money by doubtful means so that it becomes a scandal amongst people in general—it calls for church discipline (v. 11).

I've quoted the passage not to preach a sermon on church discipline but simply to point out that the authority given to Peter, the binding and the loosing, does not establish him or the subsequent bishops of Rome as something preeminent amongst Christians. This was an authority given by our Lord to the church in general, as you see from Matthew 18 and from 1 Corinthians 5.

What the Lord Jesus meant by the other things that he said, we shall have to leave until next week. I want to set you a question to be thought about in the meantime. Does anybody here claim to have a soul? I shall be asking next week, because the passage invites us to do it—

what is your soul? What is it, and where do you keep it? If I were to ask you, is your soul saved? I hope you'd say, 'Yes, it is.' Then I would have to ask the question twice over. 'Now, this saved soul of yours, where do you keep it, and what is it, now that you've got it?' Next week, God willing, we are to hear about the possibility of losing our souls. Our Lord's statement is at first problematic, 'He that loves his soul shall lose it. He that loses his soul for my sake shall keep it' (see Matt 16:25). Is it true that the way to keep your soul is to lose it?

You can see what difficulties I'm in already, can't you? I propose the question to you for the next session, so that we can go with the minimum of time to consider our Lord's words in this connection, and what he means. What is the soul, and if you've got one, where do you keep it? But all that for next week. Let it not disturb your slumbers for tonight.

Let's just give thanks to God for his word.

Our Father, we thank thee for these lovely records of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. We thank thee for opening our eyes to see his wisdom and his grace. We thank thee for the witness of history. We thank thee for him, who was dead and buried and is risen again to sit at thy right hand in glory. We thank thee, Father, with all our hearts, for that union between ourselves and thee, which our blessed Lord has effected. So give us hearts that we may live for thee, that we may trust thee in all life's exigencies and be used to spend our lives, as best we can, for the glory of our Lord in this age and in that which is to come.

So we thank thee for Christian fellowship and for the refreshments provided for us now. Bless our conversation together, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One Soul and Two Kingdoms

Chapter 17

Before we read the passage for this evening, we have a little preliminary thinking to do. At the end of our session last week I raised the question of what the Bible means by the term 'soul'. I asked those who were present if they had a soul, and, as far as I could see, most people admitted that they did. Then I asked them to be ready to tell me where they kept it and what it was like. I suspected that some, if not all of them, would say, 'My soul is saved.' I hope every one of us can say that before God. But when we do, we should remember that our Lord informed us that the way to keep the soul is to lose it, which sounds a little bit contradictory.

First of all, I'd like us to think about what the New Testament means by the term, which in the Greek language is *psuché*. You already know that bit of Greek; you pronounce it every time you say the word 'psychology', which is the science of the *psyche*, the soul. But in Greek it has a number of connotations, different shades of meaning.

Let me illustrate that for you, first by asking you to read with me in Matthew's Gospel.

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's *life* are dead.' (2:19–20)

'... for those who sought the child's ... are dead' — what did they seek? The Greek word here is our word *psyche*, surely translated rightly as 'life'. They sought the young child's life — they were intent on killing him if they possibly could. So *psyche* here refers to one's physical life.

So then let's look at the third Epistle by John. This is the writing of 'The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth' (v. 1).

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your *soul*. (v. 2)

'I pray that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your ...', and here we meet our word again, 'as it goes well with your *psyche*'. So what does it mean here? In Matthew 2 it means physical life, but here it stands in contrast to one's physical life and physical health. By praying 'that you may be in good health,' presumably he means physically. 'As it goes well with your soul' — what would you say that means? His emotional health, perhaps?

And then there is Ephesians 6 that we ought to consider at this stage. Paul is talking to servants, perhaps also slaves, but household servants anyway, telling them that they should work well for their masters.

not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the *heart*. (Eph 6:6)

'As servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the . . .'; lo and behold, that's our word *psyche* again. This is very near our English, when we say 'put your heart and soul into it'. What do you mean when you put your soul into something? Is that the same soul that you were telling me was saved just now? Anyway, I've provoked you to do some thinking on what is meant by this term 'psyche', and in particular when it is translated 'life' or 'soul'. It now becomes very important, operatively, in the passage that we are to begin to study in Matthew 16.

We saw last week how, being challenged by Christ, Peter answered on behalf of all the other apostles, and came out with the great confession, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'; and how Christ congratulated him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (see vv. 16–17). And then our Lord announced that he would use Peter and his confession as the foundation upon which he would build his church. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul remarks that the church is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone' (Eph 2:20). Our Lord told Peter, likewise, that he would give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and was shown to exercise the power of the keys on the day of Pentecost, when he was the first of the apostles to preach the gospel to the Jews and tell them how they might enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 2). And then again, he was the apostle officially appointed to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, and was the instrument under God of leading Cornelius, the Gentile, to faith in the Lord Jesus (Acts 10).

The saving and losing of one's psyche

From that time Jesus began to show them how he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life [*psyche*] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul [*psyche*]?" (Matt 16:22–26).

How would you translate it here? 'What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeit his . . .'? My translation says 'life' and others read 'soul': 'Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?'

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here, who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (vv. 27–28)

Now I suspect I have a duty to let you all know what my personal belief is, when it comes to the human constitution. There are those who teach that we are simply nothing more than matter. Professor John Polkinghorne of Cambridge, who believes in our blessed Lord, and believes in the physical resurrection of believers when the Lord comes again, nevertheless, being a mathematical physicist, he holds that humans are nothing but physics, and many evangelicals, to my knowledge, who used to hold differently, have now abandoned belief in the soul and have gone round to that view. There are others who say that humans are bipartite, that is, made up of two things, body and soul: the soul is immortal, whereas the body is subject to death.

It is a very interesting thing that Scripture does teach that death is not the end of everything. We will live on. But the phrase *the immortal soul* is nowhere found in holy Scripture. It came into Christian theology from the Greek philosopher, Plato, who wrote a great dialogue with Socrates on the immortality of the soul. Plato and Socrates believed the soul was immortal, and from their writings it has come into Christian theology to express the idea that the soul lives on after physical death.

That of course is true: death isn't the end. In answer to the dying thief's request, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom', our Lord said, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:42-43). He didn't just say, 'today your soul will be with me in Paradise'; he said, 'today *you* will be with me in Paradise.' The real you. I like that myself; I don't somehow warm to a notion of being a disembodied soul. Apart from my preferences, let's hear what is said elsewhere.

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. (Phil 1:23-24)

Notice Paul's phrase, 'My desire is to depart and be with Christ.' I shall be with Christ—not simply, my soul will be with Christ; *I* shall be with Christ.

Paul's classic statement on this matter is in 2 Corinthians 5.

We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (vv. 6-8)

Paul uses the illustration of, say, a businessman, who has to go away from home on business. As long as he's away, he's not at home. When he comes back, he's at home. The Greek has special words for this. And so Paul says, 'While we're in the body, we are not at home with the Lord; but absent from the body, we are with the Lord.' The phrase is still consistent: not, our soul is with the Lord; *we* are with the Lord. That is the terminology of the New Testament.

There are those who say that a human is tripartite. That is, three parts. Who knows, perhaps you are more complicated than you think you are! Those who say that a human is merely two parts say that the things that are said about the soul in the Bible are equally said about the spirit of a person, and therefore *soul* and *spirit* are alternative words for the same thing.

I doubt it myself. There are words and phrases in the New Testament where you cannot possibly substitute soul for spirit. Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, 'God is . . .'. What is God? God is *soul*? No, 'God is *spirit*, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:24). Hebrews talks of 'the spirits of the righteous made perfect' (Heb 12:23).

Just in case you might be wondering for the rest of this session what I believe myself, as I seem to have got it all so complicated, yes, I do believe a human is three parts. If you say to me, 'My soul is saved,' well, hallelujah for that. If you've trusted in Christ, yes, your soul is saved. But I come back to my question, what is your soul? Is it some sort of shadowy you? It is part of your life, isn't it? 'Psyche' does mean *life*, and if your soul is part of you, it has a time element in it. You were born with a soul, you've had the soul for sixty-seven years or something, and it's the same soul. You can't keep it in a box; you have to *spend* it. You have to spend your life, and it's not just your physical life, is it? When you work for the Lord and you 'put your heart and your soul into it', what does that mean?

You say, 'That means business, putting everything you've got into it. All your energies, your time, your talent, your ingenuity.'

Yes, it's funny that, because you have to spend it. Your love is part of your soul, and when you serve the Lord out of your soul, you do it out of love: an outpouring of your love for the Lord. You have to spend your love; you can't keep it in a box. Therefore, it becomes of vast importance what you spend it on.

A difficulty for Peter

Perhaps that's enough said to begin to indicate why Peter found it so shocking when the Lord Jesus, whom Peter had just confessed to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, 'began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised' (Matt 16:21).

'No, no,' says Peter, 'you really need to get that kind of idea out of your head, Lord. You're not going to be rejected. If you get that idea into your head, you'll be a failure. You want to learn the power of positive thinking. You want to say to yourself, "I'm going to Jerusalem, I shall be a success and everybody will accept me."'

Our Lord rebuked him, and said to Peter in the gorgeous language of the Authorized Version, '. . . thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.' Or, 'For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man' (v. 23). In other words, 'There's something very wrong with your thinking, Peter.'

I can understand Peter, can't you? He'd come to believe in the Lord a year-and-a-half ago. At the Lord's call, he had abandoned his work, left his nets and, whether it's commendable or not, he'd even left his wife behind, travelled with the Lord, and gone on preaching tours for Christ. He'd put his energy into it, his time and his money. He'd invested a whole lot of his very soul in Christ and his work, and if Christ was going to be rejected, then, as far as Peter could see, everything he'd invested in Christ was going down the drain, lost.

'No, no,' he said to Christ, 'you must get that idea out of your head. Of course you're going to be a success.'

So our Lord had to tell him and his fellow apostles these basic principles. 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his . . .' — translate it 'life' here, if you wish — 'will lose it' — but you might as well translate it 'soul' (vv. 24–25). 'For whoever would save his soul will lose it, but whoever loses his soul — his life — for my sake will find it.' If you translate it 'life', then you think perhaps in terms of the martyrs who laid down their lives for Christ's sake, and if, in loyalty to him, they lay their lives down, theirs shall nonetheless be a life eternal. But it's true in the sense of soul, isn't it?

I want to keep my love for myself; I want to spend it on myself. Spend my energy in my own interest, my career for my own interest, and I hesitate to obey the call of Christ, to spend it for him. Not to abandon my career, but to spend my career for him; to spend my love, my energies, my time, my talent, to invest it in him. If we do it, as far as the world counts it, we've wasted our time.

If some friend asks you tomorrow, with a superior voice, 'And how did you spend the evening? Did you go to a beautiful show? No, you didn't? Well perhaps you prefer an orchestra? Oh, you didn't go to that either. Well, what did you do?'

'I went to a prayer meeting.'

'What a waste of time.'

As the world counts it, you've lost it. But our Lord says, 'If you're prepared to lose your life, your soul, for my sake, you shall find it. For what shall a man be profited if he gains the whole world and loses his life, his soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' That must surely have been a conundrum and difficult for the apostles to understand. How can you make sense of it?

The Mount of Transfiguration

So the Lord in his mercy gave them a vision of the coming of the Son of Man. Listen to our Lord's introductory words, 'For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done' (16:27). And then he says, 'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' (v. 28).

What he was going to show them in the vision was this. There are two worlds; there are two *ages*, to use the biblical term. If you live simply for this age, what you have invested in this age is finally lost. If you invest your life in that other age, you keep it. When our Lord pointed out, 'there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,' I suggest to you that he was referring to the experience he would give them after six days on the Mount of Transfiguration.

I ought to pause, I suppose, because many serious Bible students would say I'm not correct there. The chances are that the majority say that I'm not correct, but let me argue the case.

'It couldn't possibly refer to what they saw six days later,' they say.

Why couldn't it?

'Well, listen to what the Lord is saying: "There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom", and you say that was only six days later.'

What would you think if I said there are some of you sitting here tonight who shall not taste death until you see next Saturday week? You would say, 'That's a very funny statement, isn't it? Are we all so ill and so old that there are some of us who'll not taste death before we see the end of next week?'

So they say, 'Our Lord could not possibly have been referring to the experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. Perhaps he was referring to the coming of the kingdom of God on the day of Pentecost or something like that, and they would live to see it.'

I personally think that, in the vision he gave them on the Mount of Transfiguration, our Lord was referring to the coming of the kingdom of God. When they came down from the mountain, he told them not to tell the vision to anyone.

So then, what did they see? The story of the transfiguration is told us three times over in the Gospels and once in the Epistles, in 2 Peter 1. Each of the Gospels has a different emphasis, as it tells the same story.

Matthew's version of it is that what they saw was the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, for our Lord had just announced, 'For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father' (16:27). Now they were given a vision of it. Come with me up that mountain.

'Jesus . . . led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light' (17:1–2). Just as the planets all go around the sun, so they saw our Lord as the centre of the whole universe, his face shining with unearthly glory. It's what it will be like when the Lord comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels—the *epiphany*, the manifestation of our blessed Lord in glory. Oh, what a sight it will be. By calling it a *vision*, it was not meant to indicate that it's an insubstantial thing. What they saw was a foreview of that coming great reality.

'Oh look, there's Moses and Elijah. How could they both be there at once? Moses lived centuries before Elijah, didn't he?'

Yes, and there was another interesting thing about those two gentlemen. The one died and was buried, though nobody knew where he was buried; the other went to heaven without dying. Now the centuries are obliterated, and in the coming kingdom of God, Moses and Elijah stand together.

Peter began to enjoy this. 'Lord,' he said, 'it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents. One for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah' (see 17:4). It was a well meant but inappropriate suggestion, and as he said it a bright cloud overshadowed them. They didn't need to be told what it was. It was not a rain cloud; it was the cloud betokening the very presence of almighty God, such as came down when Moses erected the tabernacle. It filled the tabernacle so that the priests were unable to go in. Out of the cloud of the divine presence, there came a voice, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him' (v. 5).

Conflicting voices

It set up a contrast, didn't it? Down there, the Pharisees were saying to Peter, 'Look here, don't be a fool, investing your life, your soul, your talents, your time, your energies in this Jesus. We don't like your Jesus, and if he's not careful we're going to have him crucified. Don't listen

to him.' And up here was this voice, out of the cloud, saying, 'Peter, this is my beloved Son; listen to him.'

We still hear those two conflicting voices, don't we? The world says, 'Live for this age, live for your own soul.' The voice of almighty God says, 'This is my Son; listen to him.' You can't do both.

This then is the lesson that our Lord taught Peter when he made his sad mistake and told the Lord, 'No, indeed, Lord, you're not going to be rejected; you're going to be a great success. You must abandon those ideas of being crucified and thrown out.' Our Lord used the occasion to teach Peter the question of the saving and losing of the soul, of the life.

A difference in emphasis in the writing of the apostles

Now let me turn aside and point out an interesting fact about the apostles. When you come to Paul's writings, he will not talk to you about *the saving of the soul*. Largely he will talk about *being justified by faith*. It's a marvellous part of the gospel, isn't it? 'Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5:1).

When you come to the writings of John, he will very rarely talk to you about being justified by faith. He will say that when you believe in Christ, Christ can give you *eternal life*. For that, you must be *born again* of course, but the result of being born again is to have eternal life (see John 3). Paul believes in it; it's just that he doesn't emphasize that part of salvation like John does.

And what do you suppose Peter talks about? Shall we have a look?

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, *the salvation of your souls*. (1 Pet 1:6–9)

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart. (1:22)

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of *your souls*. (2:25)

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will *entrust their souls* to a faithful Creator while doing good. (4:19)

It's surely no wonder that, when Peter comes to write his letter, the aspect of salvation he gives prominent emphasis to is not so much justification by faith or eternal life, though he believes in both of them, but *the salvation of the soul*, salvation of the life. Watch how he does it. Now he says, 'Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God' (1:22–23).

I sometimes feel like saying to Peter, 'You tell me to love my brothers and sisters. Peter, do you happen to know my brothers and sisters? I've got friends who aren't Christians and they're delightful souls; very colourful and very gifted and I find it easy to love them. But my brothers and sisters are difficult. Why should I spend my love on them?'

Peter says, 'Well, this is the reason: "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." They're going to last eternally, and every bit of love and energy I spend on them, I shall keep it unto life eternal. Whereas, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass." The flowers are beautiful, but they fade and are gone. In the wrong sense of the term 'world', what I spend on the world is lost. I won't get it back.'

That's an example therefore of how Peter talks to us about the use of our souls, and how we should wisely spend our love.

An illustration

I imagine it's like a young child of four or five, and Uncle Sam sent him \$50 for his birthday, as uncles do from America. So Mother has the job of going down to the toyshop to help the child spend the \$50. Now there's a thing at the front of the toyshop window, it's all beautiful colours, and the child is keen on that. Mother can see that it's made of cheap plastic and the child's only got to sit down on top of it and stumble and it will be broken to pieces, so she tries to urge the child not to spend it on that. 'Spend it on this over here.' But 'this over here' is a good, substantial toy that's painted a sort of brown colour. It doesn't look attractive. 'Spend it on that,' she says, 'for it's going to last and will give you enormous satisfaction.'

Says Peter, 'When you were unconverted you didn't know how to develop yourselves for the best, "you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"' (1 Pet 2:25). That's how sheep are, you know. They need a shepherd to stand beside them, to bring out all their qualities and so forth. That's a lovely thing. I have to spend my soul; I can't keep it. My love, my time, my energy, my career, I have to choose what I'm going to spend it on. I have beside me the Shepherd and Overseer of my soul, and he's saying, 'Don't spend your soul on that; it's not going to last. Spend it on this; it's going to last for ever.' That's the lesson therefore, of the transfiguration in Matthew.

The healing of the epileptic son

And when our Lord came down the mountain, there came a father, pleading with him to heal his son.

And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.' And Jesus answered, 'O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.' And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. (Matt 17:14-18)

Notice the particular illness from which the lad was suffering. It's Matthew who tells us that it was epilepsy. The Greek word *seléniazomai*, which the Latin translates as lunatic, means *moonstruck*. The ancients had the notion that the moon could affect your brain, and then it came to be used for mental disorder. So this lad was epileptic and his brain wasn't altogether under control. He didn't intend to destroy himself, but the result was that he would fall into the fire, or he would fall into the water and nearly drown.

As we read the story I think we feel Peter nudging us in the ribs, and he says, 'Do you remember what our Lord said to me before I went up the mountain? He said, "you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"' (16:23). With that mindset, Peter was in danger of suffering eternal loss (v. 26).

So the exhortation of the passage reminds us to 'climb the mountain', and God, by his Spirit, will make real to us the vision of the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, when 'he will repay each person according to what he has done' (v. 27).

Paul's exhortation to Timothy

Writing from prison, very soon to be executed, Paul says to Timothy, 'all who are in Asia turned away from me' (2 Tim 1:15). I wonder why they did it? That great church at Ephesus, where Paul spent three years systematically teaching the word of God, why had they so soon turned from Paul? Did they think perhaps that he was an extremist, going up to Jerusalem and then to Rome to witness for the Lord? A sadder note is this: 'Demas, in love with this present [age], has deserted me' (4:10).

'But as for you, . . .', says Paul to Timothy, 'Fight the good fight of the faith' (1 Tim 6:11–12). 'I'm going in for the crown, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all those who have *loved his appearing*' (see 2 Tim 4:6–8).

God help us to keep our eyes on that appearing, to see the Lord Jesus as the centre of the universe, his face shining as the sun, coming to reward his faithful servants and to execute the judgments of God on a sinful world. What motivation have we got to do it?

The temple tax and who had to pay it

The end of Matthew 17 tells us a small story, which we thought about on a previous night. Let's think about it again as we close. When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax said to Peter, 'Does your teacher pay the tax?' and Peter said, 'Yes, of course he pays the tax.'

This was a tax that probably originated when the tabernacle was built and God said that everybody recorded in the census lists should pay half a shekel as a ransom for his life [soul], and the money should be put to the upkeep of the tabernacle (see Exod 30:11–16). As the years went by, it was extended and made among the Jews into a yearly contribution to the temple, so that when they came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher pay the tax?' it was a tax for the temple that originally had been the ransom money.

When he was come into the house, our Lord said to Peter, 'Peter, tell me this, from whom do kings of the earth take taxes? From their children, their sons and daughters, or from strangers?' And Peter said, 'From strangers, of course, not their sons and daughters.' Jesus

said, 'Then the sons are free; they don't have to pay tax' (see vv. 25–26). Our Lord didn't have to pay tax to keep the temple going, it was his Father's house. He didn't have to pay any ransom money, for he never needed to be redeemed.

But if he had refused to pay the temple tax, the crowd wouldn't have understood, and they could be stumbled. So he said: 'However, not to give offence to them, go to the lake and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself' (v. 27).

What right has Christ to govern and guide how I spend my soul? He bought it, didn't he? Didn't he pay the ransom money to buy my soul? As the one who bought and paid for it, he now comes graciously by our side to guide our spending. May God help us to understand and put into practice the lessons that we are taught here.

Shall we pray.

Lord, these are serious lessons, but along with them thou dost show us glorious things. We thank thee, blessed Lord Jesus, for the certain hope that one day we shall see thee descend from the sky, coming for us in the glory of the Father and with thy holy angels. We bless thee for the assurance that we shall see thee; we shall be with thee and like thee, for we shall see thee as thou art.

Help us, however, deliberately to serve thee and seek thy grace and constant guidance so that we may spend our redeemed souls for thee, for thine interests, for thy people, and for thy purposes in this world. Whatever loss it may involve, we thank thee, Lord, that it shall be compensated one thousand times and more, over and again, in thy coming kingdom. Hence make that coming kingdom a reality in our hearts, we pray, and give us the grace to invest our souls accordingly. We ask it for thy name's sake. Amen.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.