

MATTHEW 26

In Chapters 26-27, the narrative moves quickly to Jesus' death. Throughout, we are given an explanation for: 1) why it happened, 2) how it happened, and most importantly, 3) what it means.

26:1-13 – Preparations for Jesus' Death

Jesus tells the disciples quite clearly that he will be killed in several days. We are also told who it is that is conspiring to kill him. There is no surprise here. The escalation of conflict and confrontation between Jesus and the religious/political establishment in Israel has been growing exponentially, especially now in Jerusalem. Jesus also tells them that his death and the coming of the Passover are not mere coincidence. There is meaning in it. The story that follows also speaks of Jesus' death, but the disciples don't understand it. The woman who pours costly ointment on Jesus is not identified (in other gospels she is named as Mary, sister of Lazarus and Martha who are also residents of Bethany which is just outside Jerusalem), but her action is received by Jesus as an act of love. Jesus' words are not meant to be dismissive of the plight or needs of the poor. Rather, he wants to recognize the woman's actions as a beautiful act of love. Genuine love has an element of extravagance to it. Genuine love doesn't calculate cost or efficiency. It goes all out. Second, by speaking about preparation for his burial, Jesus is already giving hints that his death will happen quickly and there will be no time to prepare his body for burial (as Jewish custom required).

26: 14-25 – Passover and Betrayal

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Was there one particular reason or a whole series of reasons? Was it for the money? Was it because Jesus had been a disappointment to Judas' expectations for the messiah? Was it a ploy to force Jesus to act as messiah in a more militaristic/political sense? We can never know and, perhaps, there is no one reason why.

Nonetheless, this part of the narrative tells us several important things. First, The Chief Priests and Elders need to find a way to arrest Jesus when he is alone, away from the crowd. They need an inside track on his whereabouts at all times. Judas helps provide that information. Second, Jesus sees it coming. He sees Judas' betrayal ahead of time, as he sees the failure of Peter and the others to be there with him and for him in the critical hour.

26: 26-35 – The Last Supper

The last supper provides us with a clear explanation of how Jesus understands his imminent death and how his death is connected to the salvation/liberation of people from what oppresses them most deeply. The Passover meal is important because it commemorates the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery. But slavery to a foreign people is not as deep as slavery within the heart and soul. Israel is enslaved to the power of sin, and even if they believed liberation from the new Egypt (i.e. Rome)

would be the Messiah's job, their ongoing slavery to sin would simply make them as Roman as Rome in their brutality, hatred, hard-heartedness, lack of forgiveness, etc. By refusing to fight, but also refusing to resist arrest and death, Jesus/God allows Israel's slavery to sin to come to the surface. Israel becomes guilty of killing innocence and truth. In the same event, however, they are offered infinite love as forgiveness which can break the hold of sin and truly liberate God's people, and eventually, the world beyond.

And so, the bread and wine of the Passover, representing the means to salvation/liberation, now become the body and blood (life) of Jesus, which becomes the means to a more all-encompassing salvation/liberation.

What needs to be forgiven? There is hatred, betrayal, murder, but also the failure of commitment, courage and nerve, as well as a failure to be faithful, attentive and supportive of a friend. Peter and the others represent such failure and will need forgiveness as much as the rest of Israel. The meaning here is that all are represented, without exception. Sin may be manifest differently, with different effects and consequences. But sin is still sin from which everyone needs salvation/liberation.

26: 36-46 – Gethsemane

Two things are highlighted in this passage in particular. First, the failure of the disciples to really be in tune with Jesus and support him. Are we connected with God in our time of trial? Are we there for someone else? Or are we in denial/asleep? Second, there is Jesus the man, representing all humanity in time of profound trial. Jesus is not relaxed, at peace, unperturbed. No! he is "grieved and agitated." He expresses this grief and agitation by falling to the ground and crying up to God several times. This tells us it wasn't easy to accept what was to happen. He knew what would happen and why it had to happen. He knew it's meaning and it's promise. But he was terrified by it all. His words are basically a back and forth between 1) Is there any other way O God?! and 2) Your will must be served because this is right and the only way. God's will is not Jesus' suffering and death. God's will is for Israel and the world to be saved/liberated. Given their resistance/rejection of Jesus, the only way forward is this way.

26: 47-56 – Jesus is Arrested

Jesus sees the arrest coming and pulls himself together. Judas does what he has planned to do, and Jesus doesn't fight it. The disciples are predictably bewildered by it all. This is not the way things are supposed to turn out, regardless of what Jesus has said. They will find out the hard way. Also, Jesus refuses to fight using force. He has rejected the way of violence. That's been his gospel. The methods of Rome, which are also the methods of the religious/political establishment, are rejected by Jesus/God and will be condemned as a travesty of justice.

26: 57-68 – Jesus before Caiaphas

Caiaphas is the highest official in Israel. It is his job to keep the peace and keep the Romans out of Israel as much as possible, especially during Passover. Keeping the peace is about keeping himself and the Sadducees in power. The charges against Jesus are two-fold. Jesus has threatened the temple. That is a chargeable crime within Israel. Jesus has also spoken in a way to suggest he is the Messiah (a king). This is a threat to Caesar, and therefore, a capital crime against Rome. Rome has to be on side, because without Rome, The Jewish establishment cannot put Jesus to death.

Jesus' words are very important and full of meaning at this point. He quotes from Daniel. The last battle in Daniel is between the beast and the messiah of God. Clearly Caiaphas is the beast. Daniel speaks about the vindication of the Son of Man. Clearly, Jesus is speaking about his own vindication as God's messiah against Caiaphas and all he represents as leader of Israel. The quote from Psalm 110 (seated at the right hand of power) also adds weight to Jesus authority over against Caiaphas and raises the stakes of the battle between them. The abuse further inflicted on Jesus speaks even more to the "sin" that plagues Israel from the top down (violence is wrong as an operating strategy, and doubly wrong when used against the innocent).

26: 69-75 – Peter's Denial

Peter's failure is no different than that of Judas. They both fail Jesus and contribute to his suffering in a primal way. The difference is that Peter sheds bitter tears over it. Such tears will water the repentance that is the prerequisite to experiencing the abundant love of forgiveness that is the gospel of salvation/deliverance. We will see how this will play out as the narrative continues.

MATTHEW 27

Just like in chapter 26, the pieces of the puzzle are coming together in how and why Jesus is crucified, and what it means.

Several points are emphasized. 1) Jesus' innocence is contrasted with the guilt of everyone else (by a perversion of justice the Lord's servant is killed (Isaiah 53:8)). 2) Jesus' silence (rather than talk back) – "He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth..." (Isaiah 53:7) is only broken by the cry of forsakenness from the cross. This gives further weight to the grave injustice of all that is taking place. The message communicated at the Lord's supper is taken up again. Jesus as God's embodied representative is taking on all this perversion of justice, the evil and sin, the betrayal, the violence and fear of the world upon himself. Without forgiveness, there is no hope. Without hope, death is the final word on life's meaning. We await chapter 28 for the completion of the cross' meaning.

27: 1-10 – The Death of Judas

Judas wants to take back what he has done, but there is no way. He expresses deep remorse. The difference between Judas and Peter is the difference between remorse and repentance. Remorse has no way to express constructively the shame and regret. Repentance is about the difficult journey back to life and to new life past what was before. Judas commits suicide. Peter goes on to become the rock Jesus saw in him from the beginning.

Why is Judas remorseful? Did he hope that the showdown between Jesus and the establishment would have turned out differently? Did he hope that Jesus would have shown a more aggressive messianic side? We cannot know, finally, what has passed through the soul of Judas. Clearly, though, the fact that the temple establishment reject his remorse and turn him away without trying to help him or support him, further condemns the religion they represent. The nail in the coffin of the temple and the final destruction of the temple, has already begun. Jesus overturned the tables to show what would happen in time. Later we will see the temple curtain torn in two. This, too, communicates prophetically the coming destruction.

27: 11-26 – Jesus and Barabbas before Pilate

Pilate is both malicious and cowardly. He wants to stick it to the Jewish religious leaders, but he also wants to appear to put down a messianic pretender. The Jewish leaders want to keep Rome away from them and keep the current arrangement going for the time being. The temporary peace between them can only be maintained by Jesus' condemnation.

The injustice of this kind of peace is revealed glaringly in that the people prefer the release of a notorious thief and troublemaker to Jesus. Pilate, on his part, is supposed to represent Roman justice and he knows that Jesus is innocent while Barabbas is guilty; yet, he consents to the people's wishes. Meanwhile, the release of Barabbas reveals once again that Israel's decision is for violent methods fuelled by hatred as the means to their liberation. "Those who take up the sword will perish by the sword," is Jesus' silent response.

27: 27-38 – Jesus Mocked and Crucified

This whole scene further amplifies the guilt and condemnation of all Israel and Rome in the death of Jesus. The irony is that Jesus is condemned as a would-be Messiah. The truth is that he is, indeed, the messiah. Yet, his kingdom is based on self-giving love, and he refuses to call down legions of angels to defeat his enemies by destroying them. The deeper enemy is sin and death. Only love that refuses to bow down to sin and death, can defeat such an enemy.

27: 39-44 – Jesus Mocked on the Cross

By his silence rather than retaliatory talk back, Jesus takes upon himself the sin of the world - all the hate and spite of the people, the beating, the humiliation of being stripped naked. In Matthew's account, even the thieves beside Jesus join the crowds in the mocking and taunting. There is no relief.

27: 45-56 – The Death of God's Son

Jesus' sense of desolation is so profound that even God is silent in Jesus' soul. This does not mean God is not there. Rather, it means that Jesus cannot feel and know God's presence in that moment. This is human experience at its worse moments. Jesus bears it all in order to be there where life can take us at its worst. But even as Jesus breathes his last and dies, the truth of what he has accomplished is already given us. Before any human being responds, the earth responds. There is an earthquake. The temple curtain is torn which speaks of its condemnation. Jesus has become what the temple has failed to become – the place of God's self-giving love as forgiveness. Matthew's account also offers some strange references to dead people appearing in the city. This is a foretaste of the resurrection of the dead yet to take place.

The role of the women is important. They follow Jesus' body all the way. This tells us that any later stories about Jesus' resurrection being a hoax is less credible. They see exactly how his body is taken down, where it is laid, and how well the tomb is sealed. Nothing less than an act of God can move Jesus' body now.

27: 57-66 – The Burial of Jesus

Joseph of Arimathea is named here as a rich man. In other accounts he is also identified as a Pharisee. Clearly, he is an establishment man who doesn't share the views of the majority of his brethren. He is a disciple of Jesus but in the background, discreetly. His opportunity to do what only he can do comes now. He provides the means and the place for the final great miracle to take place. Already we are introduced to the claim that Jesus' enemies will make against him after the resurrection - his disciples stole the body and claim that he is resurrected. But we know better. He is dead. They also recall that Jesus claimed he would be resurrected. This tells us further that Jesus made this claim to a wider audience than his disciples.