

13 Handing over their king (Matthew 25–26)

Tonight's chapters redefine everything we think we know about Jesus' authority:

- In Matthew 25, Jesus explains his kingship with three parables.
- In Matthew 26, he leads us towards his approaching death through his last supper, Gethsemane prayer, betrayal, and condemnation by the high priest.

We'll skip quickly through Chapter 25, since Chapter 26 gives us Jesus' crucial theology on the meaning of the cross.

13.1 The values of the king (Matthew 25)

After confronting the temple over its rejection of his kingship (Matthew 23), Jesus led the disciples to the Mount of Olives. He explained that the temple would fall, and God would make him king (Matthew 24). The Olivet Discourse continues with three more stories about the authority he receives as the king appointed by heaven.

Don't miss the king's arrival (25:1-13)

The first is about a wedding where some guests missed the bridegroom's arrival because they weren't prepared:

Matthew 25:1-13

¹ “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of the group were senseless and five were sensible.

³ “The senseless ones took their lamps without taking their oil. ⁴ The sensible ones took jars of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was taking his time, they all nodded off and fell asleep. ⁶ In the middle of the night, the shout came, ‘Look! The bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

⁷ “Then all the virgins were woken and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The senseless said to the sensible, ‘Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ The sensible ones replied, ‘No way! There would not be enough for us and you. Go find the traders and buy some more for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ While they were gone to make the purchase, the groom arrived and those who were ready went into the wedding with him and the door was closed.

¹¹ Later, the other virgins arrived too. ‘Master, Master, open up to us!’

¹² But he replied, ‘Truth is, I don't know you.’ ¹³ So stay vigilant, since you do not know the day or the hour.”



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01186ml>

The daughters of Jerusalem were expected to recognize their king's special day (compare Song of Solomon 3:9-11). So much planning goes into a royal wedding.

After six centuries of preparation, Israel's heavenly sovereign had given them his anointed ruler. It would be the marriage of the ages, joining heaven and earth. But some who'd waited so long were running out of oil. Some missed the moment.

Jesus calls them *foolish* (verses 2, 3, 8)—distracted from what matters. They hadn't thought through how to prepare for the king's arrival. They were preoccupied with menial business when he turned up. They missed the celebration because they hadn't the sense to prioritize what matters.

Others were *wise*. Recognizing the significance of the moment, they were ready for the king's arrival. They were ready to recognize him and participate in his reign. (Of course, this was after he was raised out of death, ascended on high, and gave his Messianic anointing to his people, as described in Matthew 28 and Acts 1–2).

You'll often hear this parable taught as a call for us to be ready for Jesus' second coming. That's a valid application, though it wasn't the primary message Jesus was conveying to Jerusalem. One day his kingship will be fully here. Every knee will bow to him as king. Every tongue will acknowledge him as Lord of all. Because of God's extreme patience, we've had a long wait for that day—more than 2000 years so far. We need to stay faithful and focused on the coming culmination of his kingship over everyone and everything.

But the story isn't just about the future. It's about being prepared in the present. While heaven's reign is not yet fully here, it is here for the king has come. Wise daughters of the kingdom are living now in preparation for what will be. The union of heaven and earth has begun in him.

The joy of serving our Lord (25:14-30)

“Parable of the talents” is the heading over the next story in some Bibles. A *talent* was not a special ability. It was a large measure of precious metal, silver in this parable (verses 18, 27). A million dollars might be a rough equivalent today.

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ “It's like a person who was going away, so he called those in his service and entrusted his assets to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave \$5 million, to another \$2 million, to another \$1 million—each according to their capacity. Then he set off.

¹⁶ Straightaway, the one with the \$5 million took it and went out and used it to make another five. ¹⁷ Similarly, the one with the \$2 million gained another two. ¹⁸ The one with the \$1 million took it and went out and dug a hole in the dirt, and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ A long time later, the master comes to his staff to settle accounts with them.

²⁰ The one who had received \$5 million came up and produced another five, saying, ‘Master, you entrusted me \$5 million, and look: I gained another \$5 million.’ ²¹ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and reliable servant! You were reliable over a small amount, so I'll trust you with more. Join in your master's enjoyment.’

²² The one with the \$2 million also said, ‘Master, you entrusted me \$2 million, and look: I gained another \$2 million.’ ²³ His master replied, ‘Well done, good and reliable servant! You were reliable over a small amount, so I'll trust you with more. Join in your master's enjoyment.’

²⁴ “The one who received the \$1 million came up said, ‘Master, I knew you—that you are a harsh person who harvests where you didn’t plant, who gathers where you didn’t scatter—²⁵ and out of fear I went out and hid your \$1 million in the dirt. And look: you have what’s yours.’

²⁶ His master replied, ‘Useless and apathetic servant! You were aware that I harvest where I didn’t plant, and I gather where I didn’t scatter?’

²⁷ At least you could have deposited my money with the bankers, so when I came I could have received what’s mine with interest. ²⁸ Take the \$1 million from him and give it to the one who has the \$10 million. ²⁹ For to the one who has, everything will be given, and it will be off the scale. But to the one who does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And expel this unprofitable servant into the distant darkness where there will be regret and remorse.”

To be human is to participate with God in caring for his world (Genesis 1:26-28). That was Israel’s identity too: *the servant of the LORD* (Leviticus 25:55; Isaiah 41:1 etc).

But the third guy didn’t get the memo. He buried the treasure his master gave him, and spent this life doing something else.

A blind and deaf servant isn’t much help (Isaiah 42:18). Isaiah says Israel was no help as God’s servant, so God ended up as the servant to his servant (Isaiah 52:10 – 53:12) That’s the role the Messiah took on for his people (like David in the titles over Psalms 18 & 36).



It comes as no surprise when the anointed king calls his people to live as servants indentured to God. Israel was God’s servant as a result of the Sinai covenant. Humans are God’s servants as a result of creation. Everything we have is entrusted to us, even our lives. We answer to God for how we use what he gave us.

Joie de vivre (the joy of life/living) comes in *entering into the joy of our master*. To bury what we’ve been given and use my life for myself is to miss out on everything. There is no greater joy or fulfilment than participating in what our Lord is doing.

How the king sorts it out (Matthew 25:31-46)

This is Jesus’ final story before he was arrested to face the judgement of the temple and of Pilate. It’s about who is the true judge who resolves all the issues of the world.

Matthew 25:31-33

³¹ “When the son of man enters his splendour and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his splendid throne. ³² The nations will be assembled before him, and he will separate them from one another the way a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will place the sheep to his right and the goats to his left.

This is a courtroom scene, like the court in Daniel 7 where thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat with the multitudes gathered before him. Earth’s eternal sovereign judged the world’s leaders as unworthy to rule, stripping them of

their power. The son of man approached the bench. The heavenly court gave him *authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language served him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed* (Daniel 7:11).

We've seen Jesus doing this. He confronted the fake rulers (23:1-39), declaring that the city under their leadership would fall (24:1-19), assuring them that the son of man would receive the kingship (24:30-51).

That's the same explanation Ezekiel gave for Jerusalem's fall to Babylon. He said God was removing bad shepherds (Ezekiel 34:7-10), so he could install his Davidic king in a new covenant of peace (34:23-25). Ezekiel said God would *judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats* (34:17).

By the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has received this regal authority, but it's bigger than Ezekiel imagined. The kingship of the son of David now extends to *the nations* (verse 32). God's people hoped he would rescue them **from** the nations, but the Messiah is rescuing Israel **and** the nations. When he divides the people of the earth into *sheep and goats*, it's not on ethnic grounds as they expect.

The nations had always troubled Israel, so the problems of God's people could not be resolved unless God brought the nations under his control as well. God needed to strip power from the kingdoms of the earth, and give enduring dominion to the *son of man*, so *all nations and peoples of every language served him* (Daniel 7:14).

When Zechariah spoke of the king returning to Jerusalem on a donkey, he said the Messiah would take the chariots and warhorses from Israel/Judah and *proclaim peace to the nations* (Zechariah 9:9-10). Jesus has repeatedly referred to this book that concludes with God subduing the nations so *the LORD is king over the whole earth* (Zechariah 14:9), so *the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to serve the King, the LORD Almighty* (14:16).

In this final parable in Matthew, the son of man receives kingship over the whole earth. Rarely has he referred to himself as *the king*, but he does in verse 34. His wisdom to sort things out is as legendary as Solomon's (1 Kings 5:7; 10:8-9).

So, how does the wise king instantly recognize the difference between his sheep and his goats?

People have different ideas about how he should judge who is included in his eternal reign and who should not. Some say:

- **On balance:** In popular thought and in many religions, justice is a pair of scales. If the good someone does outweighs the bad, they're good to go.
- **Forgiven:** In much Christian thought, the problem is the gap between our sinfulness and God's holiness. Since God cannot countenance any evil, forgiveness for sins is the only way to be saved. How you receive that forgiveness depends on your tradition. In Catholicism, it involves confession, penance,



and absolution. In Calvinist traditions, forgiveness is given to the elect. In Arminian traditions, forgiveness is received by asking for it (Sinner's Prayer).

- **In church:** In practice, many Christians divide the sheep from the goats on the basis of whether they attend church. This way of thinking goes all the way back to the roots of the ancient church, both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. As early as the third century, the bishop of Carthage declared, "He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother" (Cyprian, *De unit. eccl.* 6). Many still think this way, as if those who don't attend church are not part of Christ's true flock.

Truth is, **our criteria don't work**. In Jesus' story, the sheep and the goats are both confused over how the shepherd has sorted them. He doesn't trust us to judge each other. He explicitly forbids it, since we're likely to destroy each other (Matthew 13:29).

The criterion the king uses to judge his people is profoundly simple. **How we treat the king is evidenced by how we treat the kingdom**. When we don't care for the people in his care, we show that we don't care for him:

Matthew 25:34-46

³⁴ "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from when the world was founded. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you included me, ³⁶ needing clothes and you dressed me, unwell and you took care of me, locked up and you visited me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you a drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and included you, or needing clothes and dressed you? ³⁹ When did we see you unwell or locked up and visited you?'

⁴⁰ "In reply, the king will say to them, 'Truth is, whenever you did it for the least of these my family, you did it for me.'

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on the left, 'Be gone from me, accursed, into the eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels.

⁴² For I was hungry and you did not give me food, I was thirsty and you did not give me a drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not include me, needing clothes and you did not dress me, unwell and locked up and you did not visit me.'

⁴⁴ "Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or needing clothes, or unwell or locked up and did not serve you?'

⁴⁵ "Then he will answer them, 'Truth is, whenever you did not do it for the least of these, you did not do it for me.' ⁴⁶ They will head off into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This is different to how we often imagine the final judgement. It's also different from how the kings of this world evaluate the way you treat them.

If you were given an audience with King Charles, you'd learn the protocol to honour his majesty: how to curtsy or bow, to wait until you're spoken to, the appropriate title to use, what topics are permissible, how and when to back away. Presidents and monarchs expect you to treat them as special. Dishonour their dignity—or even move suddenly—and you may be arrested on suspicion of threatening their power.

Our true king had no bodyguards to take a bullet for him, no palace to keep him safe. The son of man asks only to be treated as human (not as a superior human). Even when animals have places to rest in safety, he's okay with having nothing (8:20). The son of man came not to be served but to serve—to give his life to rescue his people (20:28).

That's an astoundingly low standard for how we treat our king! You can get away with slandering him, calling him evil personified (12:30-32). He even asks the heavenly court for leniency for those who plotted and executed his assassination (Luke 23:34).

But there is one thing the servant king will not tolerate: mistreating the people in his care. If he sees you beating your fellow-servants, abusing his resources by eating and drinking to excess, expect to be dissected and exiled from his kingdom (24:49-51).

The difference between his-flock and not-his-flock is evident in how we treat each other. How we treat those who are hungry, thirsty, excluded, needing clothes, unwell, or locked away—well, the king takes it personally.

Remember how he lived among us? Hungry (Matthew 4:2). Thirsty (John 4:7; 19:28). Excluded (Matthew 27:7). Humiliated (27:35). Shouldering our infirmities (8:17). In captivity (26:48-50). If this is how the king supports the kingdom, this is how the kingdom honours the king.

They say “possession is nine-tenths of the law” in the world's justice system. To the king who brings divine justice, possession is nine-tenths of the problem. If you find that offensive, it's not me you're walking away from (19:21-24).

To embody the kingdom of God is to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before our heavenly sovereign (Micah 6:8). Jesus embodied that truth. He expects his kingdom to embody it too.

Summary: the character of the king

That's the end of Jesus' teaching in Matthew. These final parables of the Olivet Discourse assure us that the son of man does receive the kingship, and he knows how to sort sheep from goats. Jesus is our God-appointed ruler, the hope of the world, the one leader who can and will restore justice to God's earthly realm, the one king who will bring all nations under God's reign.

How? Not by forcing his reign on the world like Caesar did. The God-appointed king faces rejection and crucifixion by those in power. It's as the history-long rebellion against God's authority reaches its worst in the assassination of God's anointed that God raises up his servant-king, giving him all authority, restoring heaven's reign to the earth in him.

Your thoughts?

13.2 Betrayal of the king (Matthew 26)

Ask why Jesus died on the cross, and people tell me he died in my place, to forgive me for my sins. Shortly we'll look at the explanation Jesus gave at his last supper, but notice how Matthew introduces the passion narrative, Jesus' looming death.

Matthew 26:1-5

¹ When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ² "You realize that in two days' time it's Passover, and the son of man is handed over to be crucified." ³ Then the high priests and the elders of the people were gathered at the residence of the high priest (the one called Caiaphas) ⁴ and they conspired on how they could surreptitiously arrest Jesus and kill him, ⁵ but they were saying, "Not during the Feast, so as not to cause an uproar among the people."

Jesus' death was premeditated murder, planned at the highest level. The servant of the Most High (the high priest) plotted the murder of God's anointed king (the Christ).

That's what sin looks like. David knew this rebellion against God's kingship well, e.g.: *They conspire against me and plot to take my life* (Psalm 31:13).

An unexpected gift (26:6-13)

Jesus was a king, but he didn't ask for the luxuries that attend royalty. This king inverted power, becoming the servant of everyone in his kingdom. So, his servants thought it was crazy to give the king an extravagant gift:

Matthew 26:6-13

⁶ While Jesus was at Simon the leper's home in Bethany, ⁷ a woman with an alabaster jar of expensive aromatic oil approached him and poured it out over his head where he sat. ⁸ Seeing what she did, his disciples were indignant and said, "What was the point of this waste? ⁹ Couldn't this have been sold for a good sum and given to the poor?"

¹⁰ Jesus realized and said to them, "Why are you causing trouble for the woman? She has done a good deed for me. ¹¹ You always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. ¹² In throwing this perfume over my body, she was preparing for my burial. ¹³ I tell you the truth, wherever this good news is proclaimed throughout the whole world, what she did will be mentioned in memory of her."

What would prompt such a deep display of affection, such an outpouring of great honour? Maybe Jesus had healed Simon the leper (verse 6), or maybe she was a relative of Lazarus (John 12:1-3). Whatever her story, the outpouring of recognition she gave Jesus was remarkable—filling the house with a fragrance fit for a king.

What a contrast to another house just two miles to the west. The scent of death was hanging over the high priest's residence (26:3-4).



An alabaster jar

The disciples treated the woman as wasteful, ignorant of what Jesus wanted. He had asked people to honour him by treating each other well: “*Whenever you did it for the least of these my family, you did it for me*” (25:40).

Jesus came to her defence. Refusing to have her generosity shamed, Jesus explained how much her gift meant to him—far more than any of them realized! In two days, the body she anointed would be dead, shamefully dishonoured with a public execution.

She honoured him. Did some of this regal aroma still cling to Jesus when Judas hugged him in the garden? When the temple guards arrested him? When Herod mocked him as a king? When Pilate questioned him about his kingdom? When Jesus hung between heaven and earth as the rejected king of the Jews and gave up his spirit?

Anointing Jesus turned out to be the most important thing this woman did in her life. While his enemies planned his death and his friends criticized her, she honoured the king with a gift that honoured him.

Do you see what Jesus did here? He received her gift as a memorial of his life. He was about to give his followers a memorial meal (26:17-30). Her gift was a memorial for his life. It was also a memorial of her values and insight: *in memory of her* (v. 13).

Tens of thousands of people met Jesus, and we know nothing of them. This woman is remembered around the world, across the centuries, wherever the good news of King Jesus is proclaimed. She honoured the king at the very moment the world was dividing over him.

People respond to the gospel in ways we don't expect. There are many ways to say, “Jesus is Lord.” Instead of telling people how they must respond, let's look for the unexpected ways our friends and neighbours may be honouring our Lord.

Giving up your king (26:14-16)

Matthew 26:14-16

¹⁴ Then one of the twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the high priests ¹⁵ and said, “What are you willing to give me, and I'll hand him over to you?” They settled on thirty silver coins. ¹⁶ From then, he was looking for the right moment to hand him over.

We often perceive the world as *us* and *them*, good and evil, victims and perpetrators. That lets us rant against the evil other—Adolf Hitler, paedophile priests, politicians who prey on people. Judas shatters our illusion. Judas doesn't let us divide the world into goodies and baddies. Judas is one of us, *one of the twelve* (verse 14).

Somewhere along the line, Judas became disillusioned with Jesus. Maybe he didn't like the way Jesus sent them out with no money, leaving them as vulnerable as sheep among wolves (10:9, 16). Maybe he could see how the conflict was shaping up this week, how Jesus would die as a failed Messiah.

Betrayal is the worst. It has always been a problem for kings, e.g. Psalm 55:1-14. Jesus was in danger not merely from enemies, but from his own.

The covenant meal (26:17-29)

It's Passover week. This is Jesus' final meal:

Matthew 26:17-25

¹⁷ On the first day of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus to ask, "Where would you like us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover meal?" ¹⁸ He said, "Head into the city to that person's place and say to him, 'The Teacher says, 'My time is close. With you I will hold Passover with my disciples.''" ¹⁹ The disciples did as Jesus directed them, and prepared the Passover.

²⁰ When evening came, he was seated with the twelve. ²¹ As he ate with them, he said, "Truly, I tell you, that one of you will hand me over."

²² They were deeply distressed and each one started saying, "Surely not me, Master?"

²³ Jesus replied, "The one dipping his hand in the dish with me will hand me over. ²⁴ Certainly the son of man exits life in the way it has been written about him, but what disaster befalls the person through whom the son of man is handed over; it would be good for him to have never been born."

²⁵ Judas (the one who hands him over) responded, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?"

Jesus said, "It's as you said."

Passover celebrated God delivering his people from the tyranny of human rulers and from death. Mark mentions the Passover lamb (Mark 14:12), as does Paul (1 Corinthians 5:7). But Jesus compares his last supper not to the Passover meal (Exodus 12) but to **the covenant meal** (Exodus 24). This is *the new covenant in my blood* (Luke 22:20).

Matthew 26:26-29

²⁶ As he ate with them, Jesus took some bread and offered a blessing. He broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take and eat: this is my body."

²⁷ Taking a cup and offering thanks, he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is **my blood of the covenant** being poured out for many for cancellation of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, from this moment I will not drink the vine's produce with you until the day when I drink it with you anew in my Father's kingdom."

The phrase *blood of the covenant* comes from Exodus 24. Accepting the terms of the covenant (Exodus 21–23) established Israel as a nation under God's sovereignty. God invited them into his Sinai palace for a meal to celebrate the covenant relationship:

Exodus 24:3–11 (NIV)

³ When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." ... ⁸ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is **the blood of the covenant** that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

⁹ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up ¹⁰ and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.

¹¹ But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Sprinkling blood on God's people marked them as committed to the LORD and the laws he established for his nation.

The nation fell in 586 BC. God promised to restore them, establishing a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 34:25; etc). Zechariah said that when the king came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the restoration would recall *the blood of the covenant* from Exodus 24 that freed God's nation from oppression to other powers:

Zechariah 9:9–11 (NIV)

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ...

¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

Jesus knows he's about to be crucified. His bloodshed establishes the new covenant. The violence perpetrated against God's anointed is the worst covenant violation ever. But God doesn't walk away; God establishes a new covenant through this event. The bloodshed of his Son—giving his life for his people—founds a new covenant between heaven and earth, a covenant that establishes divine kingship for all humanity.

That is Jesus' atonement theology, his understanding of how humanity is reconciled to God. He gave it to them as a meal, rather than a theology lesson.

When the shepherd is struck down (26:30-35)

Matthew 26:30–35

³⁰ And having sung, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be felled in me tonight, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' [Zechariah 13:7]

³² But after I have been raised up, I will lead you to Galilee."

³³ Peter answered him, "Even if they're all felled in you, I will never be felled!"

³⁴ Jesus affirmed, "I tell you the truth: this night—before the rooster crows—three times you will disown me."

³⁵ Peter says to him, "Even if I have to die with you, I will not disown you!" And the other disciples said the same."

Verse 30 (with the parallel in Mark 14:26) is the only record of Jesus and his disciples singing. Is singing the main way to worship? Or do we need to reimagine worship?

In verse 31, Jesus continues with another reference to Zechariah. The last good, God-appointed king before the exile was Josiah. (The final three were appointed by Egypt and Babylon). Zechariah laments that God had authorized the demise of the good king, resulting in the tragic scattering of God's people in exile:

Zechariah 13:7 (NIV)

⁷ “Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the LORD Almighty. “**Strike the shepherd**, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.”

Now it's happening again. Jesus is the LORD's anointed, close to God's heart, the shepherd of God's flock. Yet God has authorized for his shepherd to be struck down. His flock will either fall with him or be scattered without him.

Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for the disillusionment they will feel when they see him struck down. They can't imagine it.

Praying in the dark with no answer (26:36-46)

Every fibre of Jesus' being wanted to run. If he stayed, he would not last twenty-four hours. Grief, anxiety, debilitating distress was killing him.

One friend had turned traitor. The others didn't understand, asleep while he faced the darkest night of his life. He felt like running, but he spent his last moments of freedom facing the Father who had authorized his death.

Matthew 26:36-46

³⁶ Then Jesus accompanies them to a space called Gethsemane, and says to his followers, “Sit here while I've gone over there so I can pray.”

³⁷ Taking Peter and Zebedee's two sons, he started to feel distressed and anxious. ³⁸ Then he says to them, “My inner self is being crushed to death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

³⁹ And going a little further, he fell face-down, praying these words: “My Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass me by. Not as I want; but as you do.”



Gethsemane at night

⁴⁰ Returning to his followers, he finds them asleep and says to Peter, “So, weren't you able to keep watch with me for an hour? ⁴¹ Keep watch and pray so you don't succumb to the pressure. Well intentioned, but physically inept!”

⁴² Going off again for a second time, he prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this to pass me by without drinking it, let it be what you want.”

⁴³ Coming back, he found them asleep, for they couldn't keep their eyes open. ⁴⁴ Dismissing them again, he went and prayed the same thing again, a third time.

⁴⁵ Then he comes to his followers and says to them, “Keep sleeping! Have the rest of your nap! Look: the hour has arrived. The son of man is being handed over to sinners' hands. ⁴⁶ Rouse yourselves so we can get away! Look: the one who is handing me over has arrived!”

Facedown in the dirt in abject submission, Jesus prayed,
My Father, if it's possible, let the cup pass me by (26:39).

Why was God handing him a deadly chalice? It was tearing him apart as he prayed,
If it's what you want, I'll take it.

Silence.

His Father had proclaimed, *This is my son, the one I love, the one who pleases me (3:17 and 17:5)*. But tonight there's no word, no alternative to his looming death.

It feels incredible that God refuses to fight evil. We want God to side with the righteous and destroy the wicked. God offends our idea of justice when he leaves a good man to die while the killers remain in power.

Truth is, it's always been like this. Ever since Cain killed Abel (mentioned in 23:35).

Like Josiah, like God's fallen nation, God's anointed will be struck down. God did not intervene. It felt like the son is been handed a poisoned chalice.

Tonight his friends are no help. They reckoned they could drink the cup with him (20:22), but they're sleeping. Oblivious to the danger. Unaware of his anguish.

I guess they'd learned to feel safe with Jesus since that time when he fell asleep in the boat while they were terrified of the storm (8:24). Tonight he's horrified, and they're sleeping.

Tonight they're not safe. He tells them to *keep watch*, like guards on a city wall (compare 2 Esdras 17:3) or soldiers anticipating an attack (1 Maccabees 12:27). *Well intentioned, but physically inept*—that's a very mild rebuke from a king to a sleeping watchman (verse 41).

Every muscle in his body must have felt like running to save himself, and them. Jesus turns back to his Father, *If it is not possible for this to pass me by without drinking it, let it be what you want.* He waits in the stony silence. No word.

He turns back to his friends. They're asleep. He needs them to keep watch, but they can't keep their eyes open. This is what his Father expects him to die for?

He turns back to his Father with the same request. No one stands up for him, God or human. He feels alone, abandoned by God (27:46), with people who don't care, frozen out between heaven and earth. The witless sleepers are startled by his sardonic irony: *Keep sleeping! Take the rest of your nap!* (verse 45)

There's no rest tonight. The sleeping watchmen have failed their king, and it's an inside job: *Look: the hour has arrived. The son of man is being handed over to sinners' hands. Rouse yourselves so we can get away! Look: the one who is handing me over has arrived!* (verses 45-46).

God had promised to sort out the injustice one day. He said he would take the kingdom from the beastly rulers and give it to someone more human, *one like a son of man* (Daniel 7). This night was not that day. This night, evil reigned; injustice ruled; the world was running amok. His friends abandoned him and his Father did not rescue him. It would be three more days before that day dawned.

Why did Jesus have to die? (26:47-56)

Fight or flight? Many kings have faced that choice. In a field just outside his capital, the true king rejected both options. Neither brings peace to a divided world.

If you don't **flee** and you don't **fight**, you could **die**.
Not very attractive, but it is an option: stay and die.

Instead of taking **flight**, Jesus stayed in Gethsemane, consulting the architect of history. He triple-checked with his Father for any other alternatives (26:36-46). When the crowd arrived with swords and clubs, he rejected the **fight** option too.

Matthew 26:47-56

⁴⁷ While Jesus was still speaking, Judas (one of the twelve) arrived. With him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, sent from the ruling priests and elders of the people. ⁴⁸ The one handing him over gave them a sign: "The person I greet is the one. Arrest him." ⁴⁹ Directly approaching Jesus, he said, "Pleased to see you, rabbi!" and hugged him.

⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Comrade, what are you here for?" Then they came and grabbed hold of Jesus and arrested him.

⁵¹ And look, one of those with Jesus reached out his hand, drew his sword, and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear.

⁵² Then Jesus says to him, "Put your sword back in its place. For all who take up a sword will destroy themselves with the sword. ⁵³ Don't you understand I could call on my Father and he will support me with more than a dozen regiments of angels? ⁵⁴ But how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?"

⁵⁵ That was the moment Jesus said to the crowds, "You came out with swords and clubs to capture me as if I was a terrorist? I was sitting in the temple, teaching every day, and you didn't arrest me. ⁵⁶ This whole thing happened in fulfilment of the prophetic Scriptures." Then his disciples left him and fled.

Matthew doesn't name the disciple who unsheathed a dagger. Peter sees no option but to fight for his king. He swings his sword. The high priest's servant sees it coming and drops his head to one side. The blow aimed at the neck slices off the ear.

The king orders, "*Put your sword back in its place! All who take the sword will destroy themselves with the sword.*" What astounding insight! It's not just that those who rely on weapons for survival probably won't. The very act of choosing weapons to kill people will destroy our own humanity.²¹

Ask returning soldiers who've seen conflict whether Jesus is right. Long after the battle is over, they're still losing friends on the spectrum from shellshock to suicide. War destroys more than the enemy.

But what sort of option is **stay and die**? Is that what the Scriptures required of him (verse 54)? It's not what previous kings chose. The whole idea of a king was to lead

²¹ The verb (ἀπολοῦνται) is future indicative middle.

Israel into battle (1 Samuel 8:20). It's what David did so well (2 Samuel 22:38-41). Israel understood God as a warrior king (Deuteronomy 32:39-42).

So what did Jesus have in mind when he described his arrest as *how the Scriptures would be fulfilled* (verse 56)? One example Jesus referred to repeatedly is the story of Zechariah 9–14. The king returns in peace, yet is pierced by the nations. The divinely appointed shepherd is struck down, yet rises to lead his people into the day of the Lord. That's how the reign of God is re-established over Israel and the nations.

So, Jesus rejected fight and flight, choosing to stay and die. The history of the world—for Israel and the nations—was falling and rising in our king.

“Tell us if you are the anointed ruler” (26:57–68)

Why did the high priest and his council condemn Jesus to death?

Matthew 26:57-68

⁵⁷ Those who captured Jesus led him off to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scholars and elders were assembled. ⁵⁸ Peter was following him from a distance until they reached the courtyard of the high priest. Coming in, he took a seat with the servants to see how it would end.

⁵⁹ The high priests and the whole Sanhedrin were seeking malicious witnesses against Jesus so they could put him to death, ⁶⁰ and they hadn't found any, even though many malicious witnesses came forward.

⁶¹ Eventually two came forward and said, “He said, ‘I can demolish God's temple and build it in three days.’”

⁶² The high priest rose and said to him, “You have no answer for the testimony these bring against you?” ⁶³ Jesus remained silent.

The high priest said to him, “By the living God, I command you to tell us whether you claim to be the anointed ruler, the son of God!”

⁶⁴ Jesus says to him, “You said it. All I have to say to you all is this: from this moment you will see the son of man seated by the right hand of Power and arriving with the support of the clouds of heaven.”

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his garments and said, “He blasphemed! What further need is there for witnesses? Here! Now! Did you hear the blasphemy? ⁶⁶ What do you think?”

They answered, “He deserves death!”

⁶⁷ Then they spat in his face and punched him. And those who struck him said, ⁶⁸ “Hey, anointed ruler, show us your prophetic powers! Who was it that hit you?”

The high priest was not asking if Jesus was the second person of the trinity. His question was, “Do you claim to be our God-anointed ruler (the *christos*), the son representing God's reign on earth (like David)?”

When Peter made that declaration (16:16 discussed on pages 103f), Jesus responded with joy. The high priest does not have this revelation. Jesus remains silent (verse 63).

Again, we're witnessing the conflict between temple and king.

In the Old Testament, the temple had authority to take a life to save the people. Phinehas (Aaron's grandson) fended off a plague by killing a disobedient Israelite (Numbers 25:5-9). He was judged to have done right (Psalm 106:28-31). So there was a precedent in Judaism to kill when necessary to save the people (Sirach 45:23; 1 Maccabees 2:26, 54; Jubilees 14:6; 31:23). As John 11:50 explains, that's what Caiaphas was thinking: *"It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."*

Jesus' response is not to deny his kingship but to affirm that God will give him the kingship regardless of what Caiaphas does. The high priest holds the power of death, but God will take the power from the beasts and give to the son of man, supported by heaven's authority (phrases from Daniel 7).

That's how God's anointed king was condemned by God's anointed high priest.

Even Peter denies Jesus' authority (26:69-75)

The disciples have no idea what to do when Jesus is arrested by another authority. They're terrified of even those who have little power:

Matthew 26:69-75

⁶⁹ Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and one of the servant girls approached him saying, "And you were with Jesus the Galilean."

⁷⁰ He denied it before them all saying, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

⁷¹ As he went out the gate, another one saw him and said, "Hey, this guy was with Jesus from Nazareth."

⁷² Again he denied it, swearing, "I do not know the man."

⁷³ A bit later, some who were standing around said to Peter, "You really are one of them. Your phrases give you away."

⁷⁴ Then he started calling down curses and swearing, "I do not know the man!" Right then the rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ And Peter recalled Jesus' statement, "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." Peter went outside and cried bitterly.

Peter was the first to acknowledge Jesus' authority (16:16). Jesus blessed him but knew that Peter had no idea of the conflict ahead (16:21).

Peter's denial began when he said, *"No Lord! This will never happen to you!"* (16:22) Denying that Jesus would die at the hands of the Jerusalem leaders placed Peter on the enemy's side (16:23). Peter could not understand taking up his cross to follow his king to death in order to save the realm (16:24-28). Once Jesus' took away his sword (26:51-52), Peter had no idea what to do.

Others in the last 2000 years have found the way Jesus uses his authority just as confusing.

13.3 Conclusion

How do you understand the cross after hearing the way Jesus approached it in these two chapters? How does Matthew's Gospel reshape your gospel?

There is nothing in these chapters about God demanding a blood sacrifice as if somebody had to die before he could be satisfied. That's a pagan view of God.²² Matthew depicts the death of Jesus as the rulers of this world rejecting God's kingship and assassinating God's anointed. What do you think?

For more detail on Matthew 25–26, see:

Mat 25:1-13	Missing the wedding (Matthew 25:1-13)
Mat 25:14-30	The joy of serving (Matthew 25:14-30)
Mat 25:31-33	The king who sorts it out (Matthew 25:31-33)
Mat 25:34-46	How the king evaluates his people (Matthew 25:34-46)
Mat 25:40	Who are "my brothers?" (Matthew 25:40)
Mat 25:45	Refugees
Mat 26:1-5	Why did Jesus die? (Matthew 26:1-5)
Mat 26:6-13	The unexpected gift (Matthew 26:4-13)
Mat 26:14-16	Giving up your king (Matthew 26:14-16)
Mat 26:17-29	My blood of the covenant (Matthew 26:28)
Mat 26:20-29	Identity in community
Mat 26:29-31	With you in my Father's kingdom (Matthew 26:29)
Mat 26:30	What did Jesus sing? (Matthew 26:30)
Mat 26:31	Strike the shepherd (Zechariah 13:7-9)
Mat 26:31-35	Unjustly struck down (Matthew 26:31-35)
Mat 26:36-46	Dark night without answers (Matthew 26:36-46)+
Mat 26:47-56	Why did Jesus have to die? (Matthew 26:47-56)
Mat 26:57-68	"Tell us if you are the anointed ruler" (Matthew 26:57–68)
Mat 26:59-66	Why was Jesus accused of blasphemy? (Matthew 26:59–66)
Mat 26:69-75	When the last man falls (Matthew 26:69-75)

The links are from <https://allenbrowne.blog/scriptureindex/>

In preparation for next week, read the final two chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

²² Tom Wright, on page 147 of *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (SPCK, 2016), says this: "In much popular modern Christian thought we have made a three-layered mistake. We have *Platonized* our eschatology (substituting 'souls going to heaven' for the promised new creation) and have therefore *moralized* our anthropology (substituting a qualifying examination of moral performance for the biblical notion of the human vocation), with the result that we have *paganized* our soteriology, our understanding of 'salvation' (substituting the idea of 'God killing Jesus to satisfy his wrath' for the genuinely biblical notions we are about to explore)."