

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 68, Chapter 20

We began Matthew 20 last week and dealt with the Parable of the Fair Farmer who paid the same amount of money to workers that had labored from dawn to dusk equally as workers that had worked perhaps no more than an hour. The exhausted workers that had worked all day were not happy with the farmer, feeling that it was not a fair arrangement. The farmer responds that it is his vineyard, his money, and he paid the first workers he had hired exactly what he promised he would, and such was his prerogative to do. Further, the order in which the workers were paid was that the ones that were paid to work all day were the last ones to get paid, while the ones who worked only an hour got paid first. The Parable ends with the words: "Thus the last ones will be first and the first last". Since the Parable began: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like...." (in the sense of what the Kingdom can be compared to) then we understand that the purpose of the Parable is to show that "the first shall be last and the last first" is a characteristic of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Since every Parable has a moral...one and only one moral... the moral to this one is that the operation of the Kingdom of Heaven is going to be a true reversal of how we see things happen on earth. This will be especially so regarding societal hierarchy. That is, those who are last on earth in this present age will be first in the Kingdom of Heaven. And those who are first in societal hierarchy in this present age will be last in the Kingdom of Heaven. This reversal will also be reflected in how leaders lead, as we see addressed in later verses of Matthew 20.

I want to address a question that came up after the last lesson so that I can be clear. When in Matthew chapter 19 I spoke of the rich man that wanted eternal

life, and that Yeshua made it plain that one must obey the Law AND follow Him to attain it, I did not intend to imply that there was a required sequence of a seeker of God having to first obey the Law, and only afterwards determining to follow Christ. The context for my remarks was in light of the story of what Christ told the rich young man to do. So no kind of sequence was meant as a some kind of salvation rule. Let's move on and re-read some of Matthew 20.

RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 20:17 - end

Verse 17 opens with: "As Yeshua was going up to Yerushalayim..." Here Jesus begins His final journey to the Holy City where He will celebrate the Passover Festival for the last time. All that Yeshua had been born for was leading Him to this next few days that would change the history of Israel, and of all mankind forever. What I want to highlight here are the words "going up". Jerusalem sits atop a hill with a height of 2500 feet. Yet that is not the highest place in Israel; there are other places with some of them, like Mt. Hermon, that rises to as much as 10,000 feet. Since at the moment Yeshua was in Jericho, which lies some 900 feet below sea level, obviously He was going up in order to arrive in Jerusalem. However, when we read the Bible and look at other ancient Hebrew and Jewish documents, we see that when someone goes to Jerusalem it is always described as going up. As David Stern says in his commentary on this verse, it wouldn't matter if a Hebrew was beginning his journey from Mt. Everest, he would still always be going up when he went to Yerushalayim. This is because the going up had nothing to do with altitude but rather it is meant in a spiritual sense; it is a "high place" spiritually. Even the word used in our time when Jews migrate back to Israel is *aliyah*, which means going up.

This same story is told in Mark 10:32 - 45. Let's read it to see how Mark reports it.

READ MARK 10:32 - 45

You will have noticed several differences between Mark's and Matthew's versions, among which we'll address at least a few as we go along. Perhaps this is a good time to remind you that in the 21st century the current fad among Bible scholars is to say that Matthew copied much of his Gospel from Mark. There is no evidence for this except that in some places Mark's Gospel has more to say about a particular event. In fact, the earliest Church Fathers all agree that Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written. However, the modern Bible scholars dismiss this as these men's common erroneous belief. So the only real proof that

modern Bible academics have to offer is that most of them agree with one another that Mark was first, and so this agreement rises to the level of fact. You know, majority rules. I remind you of this because where there are actual conflicts between Matthew and Mark (and there are precious few), I hold Matthew as the more authoritative.

On their journey from Jericho to Jerusalem, Christ pulls His 12 Disciples away from the watchful gaze of the crowds to tell them, a 3rd time, that He was going to Jerusalem to be betrayed and to die. He goes into a little more detail this time than He has until now. Why does He tell His disciples, yet again, about His coming death? It was to prepare them but also it was to focus their thinking upon all they had seen and experienced with Him over the last couple of years, what they would soon witness, and how they had been called to follow Him and to be fully devoted to Him. Once again we find Yeshua speaking in the 3rd person about Himself: "The Son of Man will be handed over..." Clearly (at least to us, in hindsight) He is identifying Himself with Daniel's Son of Man that goes to Heaven and sits at the Father's (the Ancient of Days) right hand. Jesus also mentions crucifixion for the first time, that the Gentiles will be complicit in it, and that He will be jeered at and mocked. Since He will be in Jerusalem at Passover when the city is full to overflowing with Jewish pilgrims, obviously the Jews will be His primary audience that jeers and mocks His suffering (although the Roman soldiers will as well). There will be no glorious martyrdom involved: only pain. This Messiah is indeed a man of sorrows and not a victorious military leader as the Jews had hoped for and expected for so very long.

Yeshua repeats that He will be raised from the dead after 3 days. So instead of using the term that indicates the sign of Jonah (as He did earlier) of 3 days **and 3 nights**, He simply says He'll be raised from death on the 3rd day. We need to be careful not to read into these words any kind of intended precision of time in which the minutes between daytime and nighttime, light and darkness, are intended to be noticed.

All to say that Jesus's dire words certainly put a damper on the normally enthusiastic demeanor of the trip to Jerusalem for the annual feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread. We hear not a word of acknowledgement of Yeshua's dramatic statement of His impending death from His Disciples. It's almost as though it went in one ear and out the other; their minds were otherwise occupied with things that interested them more. Even more damning, a couple of Jesus's 12 disciples continue the issue of status raised by Peter and by others among the

inner circle of leadership hierarchy about what happens to their benefit once Christ becomes king. Truly these men are tone-deaf. There is something else we must keep in mind. It is that what Yeshua has been recently explaining about His inevitable fate is simply not taking root in these 12 men; these 12 Disciples that we all hold so high and are so exalted and celebrated in the Church. It is my opinion that what Jesus says to them is so distant from the expectations of a Messiah that they all held since childhood... expectations that had been a central part of Jewish culture for centuries and was only heightened by the occupation of Rome... that what He was saying to them was not fathomable.

While I don't want to take the illustration too far, in the mid-20th century a fellow named Adolf Hitler wrote a book detailing his plan to restore Germany to European respect and domination, and it included his hatred of the Jews and the genocide he determined they were due. Most people that read *Mein Kampf* didn't allow the parts that seemed so monstrous to register in their minds; not even within the bulk of the German Jewish community that would be his target. It is because the human mind often works such that we filter out things that don't fit our preconceptions or our hopes, and we water down things that can not mean what it sounds like it means because it is too severe to contemplate and therefore cannot be real. I suspect this may in some ways describe the 12 Disciples' ability to brush aside Yeshua's description of His imminent death, and their inability to process what it truly means for them and for all humanity.

To add insult to injury, Matthew 20:20 has the mother of the brothers James and John coming to Jesus on their behalf with a request. But Mark 10 offers a different scenario.

^{CJB} **Mark 10:35** ³⁵ *Ya'akov and Yochanan, the sons of Zavdai, came up to him and said, "Rabbi, we would like you to do us a favor."*

So Mark makes no mention of the brothers' mother. It is impossible for us to know which account is the more accurate. Likely the mother was present with her sons, but either way James and John are made to look petty and ignorant of the great Passion drama that is about to unfold in their sight. In Matthew, we must take it as meaning that the mother came to Christ because her sons asked her to be their advocate. These weren't young boys; they would have been too old to have a mother come in and take over their lives in such a way if they weren't on board. So they must have put her up to it, which explains why Jesus responds not to her but directly to James and John instead.

The mother proceeds to ask that when Yeshua becomes king, would He promise her that He would make her two sons of the highest rank of leadership within the royal leadership group. That is, it was standard that the person who sat at the king's right hand was of the highest status, and the one to his left the next highest. These were the closest of a king's inner circle. There's a couple of things to glean from this. Since Jesus had told His 12 that He was the Messiah but that they were to keep it a secret, obviously these two sons had blabbed it to their mother. Further, because it was Jewish Tradition (and backed up biblically) that the Messiah would be king of God's Kingdom (which they took to mean a Davidic king of a reborn nation of Israel), then by her believing that Yeshua was the foretold Messiah of course He would soon be made king (after expelling Rome from the Holy Land). This is further proof that the 12 Disciples were still mostly clueless about Christ's mission and what was about to go down. The reason for this is that the Jewish Traditions about a Messiah were still the deeply embedded lens through which these disciples viewed both the office of Messiah and what he would do.

So the Galilean Zavdai family (Zebedee in English Bibles) were seeking positions of high honor that would have drastically elevated their social status and (hopefully) economic well-being from that of mere fishermen that have to fight daily to keep food on the table. In light of what Christ has told them is about to happen to Him, this is a pretty shameful response and it ignores His teaching about the virtue of humility being the primary characteristic of one who hopes to be a member of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So mom steps forward, Jesus says "what do you want ?", she asks for special favor for her 2 sons. Christ says (I paraphrase) 'you folks are so far out in left field you have no idea what you're asking'. He finishes the thought with: "Can you drink the cup I'm about to drink?" Some Bible versions add the words: "...and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Those additional words were never in the Book of Matthew before the 800's A.D. They were added by some later Christian editor, taken from the Book of Mark 10:38 no doubt so that the 2 Gospels would harmonize better. On the other hand, since we don't have a copy of Mark any earlier than from the 4th century, it's entirely possible (probable in my mind) that those words were never in the original Mark, either. Rather my speculation is that they were first added to Mark by a Christian editor in the 3rd or 4th century, and then another 400 or so years later transposed into Matthew. Why do I think that? Because it is such an odd sounding phrase and suggestion; there's too much Christian-eze involved. For the Jews immersion (baptizing) was

one thing only: ritual immersion to combat ritual impurity caused by sin or by being infected with some kind of uncleanness. But that was not what Christianity thought or thinks of immersion (baptizing). Gentile Christians from the 3rd or 4th century onward thought of it more or less the way we do in modern times. That is, baptizing as a Church sanctified ceremony that is part public announcement of one's faith in Jesus accompanied by a symbolic drowning that ends our life of reliance on ourselves and instead we take on a new life with the character of Christ. That certainly is not what is being depicted in this scene with Yeshua and His disciples and so I feel fairly confident that this phrase about baptizing was added a few hundred years later, first to Mark and then in a few more centuries it found its way into Matthew.

But what does Yeshua mean about the disciples drinking the cup that He is about to drink? In some ways, there is an irony going on here. The confused and distracted disciples may think that a glorious banquet to inaugurate their King Yeshua, which of course involves liberal wine drinking, must be what He is referring to. Yet what Yeshua is actually speaking about is a cup full of suffering and death and the disciples are simply oblivious to it. The Bible speaks often about drinking "a cup" that is full of God's wrath and therefore of pain and human suffering.

CJB Jeremiah 25:15 ¹⁵ "For here is what ADONAI the God of Isra'el says to me: 'Take this cup of the wine of fury from my hand, and make all the nations where I am sending you drink it.

CJB Ezekiel 23:32-33 ³² Adonai ELOHIM says: 'You will drink from your sister's cup, a cup both deep and wide, full right up to the brim with scorn and derision, ³³ filling you with drunkenness and sorrow, a cup of horror and devastation- the cup of your sister Shomron.

CJB Isaiah 51:17 *Awake! Awake! Stand up, Yerushalayim! At ADONAI's hand you drank the cup of his fury; you have drained to the dregs the goblet of drunkenness.*

I could go on as there are many more such biblical references, but you get the idea. This is the fearful nature of what Yeshua is talking about here when He speaks of drinking the cup. Often Bible commentators say this is looking ahead to the Christian sacrament of Communion; but that is what happens when we peel away the Jewish context, spiritualize it and make it into a gentile ceremony. The

Disciples respond by saying yes; that they can drink from His cup. Might they have been thinking that He was talking about the Passover ceremonial seder that included drinking cups of wine? That's possible; but even that would have been strictly in a Jewish Passover Feast context. For sure what they were **not** thinking of was their own suffering or martyrdom.

Yeshua responds to the Disciple's saying that they can drink from His cup by saying that they will. Of course, we have a double meaning going on here. While they are thinking He means the ceremonial Passover cup or perhaps as part of His inauguration as king, He is meaning it metaphorically as the cup of pain and suffering that He is going to experience. And since Yeshua is mainly talking to James and John, then He is saying that they are going to experience pain and suffering, which they both eventually did but in different ways. John, likely the writer of the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John as well as the Book of Revelation, suffered a great deal but died a natural death in his 90's so far as we know. James died a martyr's death a few years after Christ, in 44 A.D. To be clear: this James is not the James that was the brother of Jesus, nor likely was he the one who wrote the Book of James. It is all but certain that the Book of James was written by Yeshua's brother James (whose name wasn't really James but rather it was Jacob).

Yeshua continues to say that it really isn't up to Him to determine who occupies the places of honor among the Jesus movement or the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather He once again defers to His Father. This was not in the sense of deference for the sake of etiquette, but rather because a clear hierarchy of divine authority is laid out throughout all the Gospel accounts beginning with God the Father as the head, and Yeshua as His subordinate. But naturally as verse 24 states, the other disciples were furious at what James and John were attempting to do. As a group the Disciples had already been down this road at least once before in the "who is the greatest" debate and now up it pops again. Were they outraged at the timing of a such a request... coming immediately following Yeshua telling them He's going to die a horrific death? No. It was because James and John approached Jesus wanting to be given special honor and position that would naturally put them in authority over the other 10, should Jesus have granted it.

Given that Yeshua has taught them how the Kingdom of Heaven is going to operate in reverse compared to the present world systems, He shows patience and gives them an example of why it is wrong to wrestle for status among

themselves. He tells them to notice how gentile rulers rule. First, you have the powerful who lord it over their people. And then you have even more powerful rulers who rule over the rulers. It's dog eat dog accompanied by never ending power struggles. These gentile rulers rule with an iron fist and they don't do it for the benefit of the people they rule over but for themselves. In a short phrase that I think best describes the mode of how Christ says that gentiles rule is that they are power hungry. So it must be that in the Kingdom of Heaven ruling and rulers will behave in an opposite manner because they harbor an opposite mindset. In the Kingdom the one who wants to lead must do so as a servant to the others. This is a reflection of the quality Yeshua earlier said that all who want to be members...and leaders... of the Kingdom must display: humility.

^{CJB} **Matthew 18:1** *At that moment the talmidim came to Yeshua and asked, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?"² He called a child to him, stood him among them,³ and said, "Yes! I tell you that unless you change and become like little children, you won't even enter the Kingdom of Heaven!⁴ So the greatest in the Kingdom is whoever makes himself as humble as this child.*

Back to Matthew 20:26. The mention of the leader being a slave or servant to others isn't meant in terms of a purchased slave that has minimal rights. Rather it means someone who serves others, and in this case the nature of the service is voluntary. To finish the thought Jesus circles back to the words He used to complete His Fair Farmer Parable when He said that the first shall be last and the last first. He says: "...whoever wants to be first must be your servant."

In verse 28 Yeshua further fleshes out who He is and what His current purpose is and how the two connect.

²⁸ ***For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve- and to give his life as a ransom for many.***"

One of things He is saying is: 'be like Me'. 'Use Me as your role model'. But then He also adds the element that the reason and purpose for His existence and His death is to be a "ransom for many". As Believers, Christians or Messianics, most of us think we have a pretty good handle on what this means. However it is less cut and dried than you might think.

The use of the term ransom in the Greek is ***lutron***. It presents the idea of a

deliverance by means of a payment, and in the Roman world it mostly concerned a bondservant paying his way out of his servitude or a prisoner of war being bought out of his captivity for a price. In the Hebrew world it more spoke of things like paying the half-shekel Temple tax, or the price paid for the firstborn to buy him back from God, or in the time of Moses it could mean paying money as an alternative to having one's life taken from him if he has killed someone. In Leviticus 25:26 the concept even extended to property that could be bought back from a debt holder.

We must not let the Greek language of the Gospel accounts lead us into thinking that the Jews, Christ and His Disciples were thinking in Greek and Roman terms. Rather what is being spoken is dealing in Hebrew terms inside a Hebrew culture; so we must think about the meaning of ransom more as we would in the purpose of the Levitical **asham** sacrifice. That is, as something based on the Torah... the Law of Moses... as a ritual payment of appeasement to God for the commission of a sin. No doubt Christians usually refer to Christ's execution on a cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and thus the thought is that no further sacrifice is needed (as with animals on the altar). And, I think that is correct to a point. However too much we think of the word "sacrifice" in terms of a selfless act of our giving up something we want or need in exchange for someone else benefiting from it. Like perhaps as parents we forgo a needed vacation and instead use the money to pay for something our child dearly wants or needs. However, this isn't the Hebrew sense of the word "sacrifice" or "ransom". For them it was more literal and spiritually oriented. It had to do with complying with the Law of Moses usually by means of providing an innocent animal to be burned upon the Temple altar to deal with their sin.

The **asham** sacrificial offering is what I prefer to call in English the Reparation Offering because a God worshipper is paying reparations to appease God because of a sin they committed against Him. It has to do with misbehavior; things we do wrong in God's eyes and thus we must pay a price to compensate Him for that. The good news was that the compensation required was an animal whose life substituted for the life of the sinner. The really interesting thing about the **asham** sacrifice is that by doing this particular kind of sacrifice the result is the forgiveness of the trespass... the sin. So this is the sense we ought to take what Yeshua meant when He said that He would give His life as a ransom for many. His life was being given as payment of reparations as the **asham** sacrifice for many... the payment owed to God for our misbehavior, our sin... on behalf of all those who trust in Christ's ability to do so.

All of what we're been reading and I've been teaching seems to very clearly point to Yeshua's interpretation and use of Isaiah 53 (Isaiah being the Prophet He quoted and paraphrased the most). Isaiah 53 is one of the most dramatic portrayals of why we need a Savior, and what our Savior would endure, that exists in the Bible. Turn to that chapter in your Bibles and follow along with me.

READ ISAIAH 53 all

Certainly not every question we might think to ask is answered in Yeshua's pronouncement of His death and resurrection. As Davies and Allison point out, Matthew doesn't so far explain just exactly what the condition of "the many" is that they need Christ's sacrifice. Or who are the many? Why is the payment of a ransom necessary, especially since the Law of Moses proposed a sacrificial system of animals that was in full operation in Christ's era? To whom is the ransom paid? Some Early Christian writers and Fathers like John of Damascus said the ransom was paid to God. Others like Origen and Gregory said it was paid to Satan. Was this forgiveness offered through the death of Yeshua effective for people immediately, or only at the time of the Great Judgment?

In our day we look back at Yeshua's sacrifice and think on these questions that come out of it in our prayerful reflections. However for the people of Yeshua's time, such sacrifice was not about mental reflections of its spiritual meaning but rather ritual sacrifice was a required behavior of the Law of Moses that insisted upon personal action and participation. They did it because they were supposed to do it as observant Jews. And one has to wonder: who actually gained the most? Those like us who can sit back, read the historical Bible, and joyfully reflect on the spiritual meaning of Christ's act and what it's done for us? Or those Hebrews who had to deal with a journey to the Temple, the costs involved, and the smelly and bloody ordeal of the death of an animal that characterizes the true and terrible nature of sacrifice?

Before we move on to the next section of Matthew chapter 20 I'd like you to consider this. In this and earlier chapters we have uncovered a series of things that Christ says to His Disciples that reveals who He is and what He's going to do. He is going to be a king over God's Kingdom, He is going to drink from a cup of pain and suffering, He is going to die on a Roman execution stake with both Jew and gentile involvement, that He came to be a servant to people for their benefit and not to lord it over them like a gentile dictator, and that He is going to voluntarily sacrifice His own life for a greater good... for the many. These things

were said in different contexts, in both the simple literal sense (***P'shat***) and in a deeper hint sense (***Remez***), and some of His actions would affect some people's lives right away and others at a future time (just how much future was ambiguous). Thus extracting meaning can necessarily be challenging and has led to scores if not hundreds of Christian doctrines that attempt to fit this complex puzzle together.

But Matthew had an expectation of his Jewish readers to put these pieces of information together in light of their own Hebrew history and according to what the holy book they had possessed for many centuries, the ***Tanakh*** (the Old Testament), told them. Matthew anticipated that these Jewish Believers would be able to make the intricate but sometimes blurry connections on their own that more often than not defy a Christian layperson (even a Bible scholar) to make. So Matthew didn't go out of his way to make those connections or to analyze them for His Jewish audience. Much too often Christian Bible teachers and ordained Pastors will quickly drift from the inspired words of the Gospels and instead find ways to redirect the meaning of those inspired words that is alluding them into allegories that make for good storytelling and rousing sermons, but don't necessarily reflect the original intent of what is trying to be communicated. Only when we endeavor to understand the Bible... Old and New Testaments... in its various historical settings can it be properly understood.

The final event of chapter 20 again involves a Jesus miracle healing. We're told that as Jesus, His disciples and a crowd that had been following Him left Jericho to begin their steep climb up to Jerusalem, 2 blind men that were sitting on the trail shouted out to Yeshua to get His attention. These blind men were not sitting there as travelers resting on their way to the Passover Festival but rather as beggars sitting in a strategic location; a highly traveled road. The blind, among those with other kinds of disabilities, usually had only one way to survive and that was through begging. In a scene reminiscent of an earlier encounter of Yeshua with the blind, they yelled out "Son of David, have pity on us". The pity they sought was that this widely known miracle healer would heal them of their blindness. It bears repeating that the moniker of "Son of David" was not meant in a messianic way but rather it was invoking the name and spirit of Solomon (David's son) that tradition said was also a miracle healer. It also bears repeating that until only the last couple of chapters, Matthew has fashioned His vision of Jesus as primarily a miracle healer and a purveyor of great wisdom. Only recently has Matthew added the role of Messiah and what that entails to the list of Christ's traits and purposes.

The crowd is said to have scolded the blind beggars for shouting out as they did, viewing them as an annoyance. But the beggars responded defiantly by shouting out even louder. In His typical concern for the underprivileged and the disabled He asked what they wanted from Him. They said, "Lord, open our eyes". Now, it is certainly tempting for Believers to allegorize this short phrase and give it a highly charged spiritual meaning. First, to think that by saying "lord" that the blind men are calling Jesus lord in the sense that Christians do today is incorrect. Rather, for them lord was like saying "sir"; it was a title of respect and not of divinity. Second, by saying "open our eyes" they meant it entirely literally. They didn't want to be blind anymore. It was a physical eye opening they sought, not a spiritual one. Unfortunately so often this passage is said to mean that the blind men were spiritually blind and that's what Yeshua healed them of.

Even so, Yeshua leaned down, touched their eyes and they were instantly healed so that they could see. In response, we're told they followed Him. Again, we must be cautious not to read something into that statement that is probably not meant. Following Him was nearly certainly meant literally just as it has been thus far in Matthew's Gospel. We're in no way told that (as with His overture to the rich man to sell everything and follow Him) that part of healing these 2 blind men was afterward Him reaching out and saying "follow Me". Very likely it was because Yeshua was on His way to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival that they followed, and they were excited to be able to join in this festival perhaps for the first time in years... or ever.

Next week we will open chapter 21 and learn about what is known best as The Triumphal Entry.