

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew 20. I hope you all had a good 4th of July! This summer I'm working my way through Rick Atkinson's book *The Fate of the Day*. It's the second of his three-volume history of the Revolutionary War. Volume one is called *The British are Coming* and volume three is still forthcoming. As our nation hits its 250th anniversary, I found myself drawn to learn a little more about this foundational moment in history, and it turns out there is more to learn than I could have imagined! I'm realizing my understanding about our nation's founding was minimal. I knew about Lexington and Concord, about the Declaration of Independence, and Washington crossing the Delaware. After that, I knew we won, and I knew France had something to do with it, but Atkinson is teaching me a ton!

His writing is incredibly detailed, so much so that at times I've found myself wishing I had the Cliff Notes to keep the major parts of the story organized in my mind. Do you remember Cliff Notes? They might still exist, although I'm sure they'll be replaced by AI summaries. But Cliff Notes were little yellow and black books that summarized much longer books, providing an overview of the story or the author's argument in a nice, bite-size format. Cliff Notes were no substitute for reading the actual book, but they were very good at capturing the major points. And our passage today is sort of like Cliff Notes for the Gospel of Matthew.

Like Atkinson's Revolutionary War Trilogy, Matthew is a book of history—and it is history at its best—told with accurate attention to detail and packaged as a compelling story. There's a lot that happens in this story, which is why we've been making our way through this book since 2022! But our passage this morning reminds us of three central themes. In these verses, Matthew highlights:

- Jesus's unexpected path to glory,
- Jesus's unparalleled act of service, and
- Jesus's unreserved mercy for all.

If you want to know what Matthew is all about—if you want to know what Jesus's life and ministry are all about—these three themes offer a good summary. So, let's work our way through these verses, taking those headings one at a time, and see what they mean for us. We'll begin with...

1. Jesus's unexpected path to glory

Look at verse 17: *And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem" (Matthew 20:17-18).*

I've titled our series in Matthew, "The Promise Fulfilled," because Matthew is determined to show us that every promise of God finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and we'll see that once again in just a moment. But I've also said that if I was to give this section of Matthew a separate title, it would be, "The Journey to Jerusalem." Because, since Matthew 16, Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem knowing full well what awaits him there. Look at verses 18-19. Jesus says, we are going to Jerusalem, *"And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day" (Matthew 20:18-19).*

This is the third time in Matthew that Jesus has predicted his death and resurrection. This is also the most specific, including the most details. Jesus knows that he will be delivered over to the religious leaders—betrayed by one of his own disciples—and condemned to death. He

knows the kind of death he will die—the cruelest execution in the Roman Empire’s arsenal—death by crucifixion. And he knows that after all the suffering he will rise again.

Now, most of us are very familiar with this, so it doesn’t surprise us. But it would have surprised Jesus’s disciples, especially given the way Jesus describes himself in verse 18. He refers to himself as the Son of Man. That is not simply a reference to his humanity, it is a reference to a key Old Testament prophecy. In Daniel chapter 7, the prophet says, *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed* (Daniel 7:13-14).

This vision of the glorious Son of Man became a key text that shaped Israel’s expectations about the Messiah. The Messiah would come to conquer and rule over the nations forever! And notice: Daniel 7 says absolutely nothing about the Son of Man being killed. But Jesus does! Jesus speaks about his resurrection glory, but he also speaks about the path he will take to get there—the path of suffering. For many in the 1st century, including the disciples, this was very surprising. But in hindsight, it shouldn’t have been surprising. Because the Scriptures foretold it.

Daniel 7 is one passage that points forward to the Messiah, but there are others. And Jesus knew them well. And many point not only to the Messiah’s glory, but also to the Messiah’s suffering. For example, Isaiah 53 speaks about God’s suffering servant crushed for his people’s iniquities. Psalm 22 speaks of God’s anointed king, crying out in agony, pierced in his hands and his feet. After he rose again, Luke tells us how he spoke with two of his disciples, who were perplexed by his suffering. *And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself* (Luke 24:25-27).

Jesus fulfills every promise of God. Every promise about the Messiah, including his path through suffering into glory. Now, here’s a fascinating thought with an important application... How did Jesus know that he would suffer, die, and rise again in Jerusalem? Surely because the Spirit revealed this to him. But how did the Spirit reveal this to him? Through the Scriptures! Jesus saw his path to glory in the pages of God’s Word.

Author Mark Jones writes, “If you could read a book about your life before the events happened, imagine the curiosity, anxiety, and hope that would fill your soul. But what about reading a book not only about your life, but also about your death, even down to the minutest details? Such a book might fill you not simply with anxiety, but with dread and terror. On the other hand, the prospect of future life after death, as well as of the highest possible glory that can be communicated to someone, might cause you to read with passionate interest. Jesus was in such a position.”¹

That is a fascinating thought. And here’s the important application: read the Bible like Jesus. Read it all: the glorious parts, and the hard parts too! And you will see that God has a wonderful future for his Messiah, and for all his people, but the path into that future is marked by many

¹ Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ*, 85.

trials. Jesus never promised that following him would be easy. And God's word never promises that God's people will experience perfect peace and prosperity in this life, but he does promise to bring us to glory. And the way to glory is open because of...

2. Jesus's unparalleled act of service

Let's pick up the story in verse 20: *Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something* (Matthew 20:20).

The sons of Zebedee are the disciples James and John, two fishermen who left their boat and their father to follow Jesus in Matthew chapter 4. Apparently, their mom is among the group following Jesus too, and she's got a request. So, she kneels before Jesus. *And, verse 21, he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom"* (Matthew 20:21).

Clearly, this woman thinks very highly of Jesus. She believes that Jesus is a king who will soon reign in glory, and that's a commendable display of faith. She's also a mom—who wants the best for her boys—so, she asks Jesus if James and Johnny can please have nice positions in the kingdom. This is understandable. But, as one commentator says, it is "incredibly badly timed." Jesus just told his disciples that he is going to be mocked, beaten, and killed. And now two of them, through their mom, are asking for personal favors. It comes across a bit insensitive. But along with the lack of tact, there's a lack of understanding behind this request, which is why Jesus responds the way he does.

Verse 22: *Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able"* (Matthew 20:22). In the Bible, the image of a cup can refer to a cup of blessing, but it can also refer to a cup of suffering and sorrow. For example, in Isaiah 51, the prophet speaks of people drinking a cup full of devastation, destruction, famine, and sword. Clearly, it is a cup of suffering Jesus has in mind here. And he says to James and John, who must have been right there when their mom asked Jesus her question, "You don't know what you're asking... are you sure you want to follow me on the path to glory that leads through suffering?" And in their zeal, they say, "Yes!"

Verse 23: *He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father"* (Matthew 20:23). James and John did drink their own cups of suffering for Jesus's sake. James was martyred in Acts 12. John was exiled to the prison Island of Patmos by the time he wrote Revelation. But as for standing at Jesus's right and left when he took his place as king... well, Jesus says, that's for those whom it has been prepared. And though we cannot say for sure, it's possible those the Father prepared were the two criminals crucified on Jesus's right and left as he entered the glory of his kingdom through his suffering. Whoever the Father prepared, the other disciples are frustrated by this whole exchange.

Verse 24: *And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers* (Matthew 20:24). We've seen this before in Matthew. The disciples are vying for position, concerned about their personal status. It's very common, very human, but it's not what Jesus wants for his kingdom. Look at verses 25-27: *But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave..."* (Matthew 20:25-27). Jesus is saying, "My kingdom

operates differently than the kingdoms of this world. In this world, people strive for greatness by aiming high and are called great when they gain power over others." "But in my kingdom," Jesus says, "the way to strive for greatness is to aim low. And I will call you great when you serve others." "Because this is the example I myself am leaving you." Verse 28: *...even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matthew 20:28).

Here is the ministry of Jesus in a nutshell. He is the Son of Man... the glorious one with all power and authority... the Son of God. But he came, he stepped into human flesh and into this fallen world, not to be served but to serve. And in Jerusalem, at the cross, he performed an unparalleled act of service. He gave his life as a ransom for many! Friends, this brings us right to the heart of the gospel. Jesus came into this world to pay a ransom, a price paid to secure someone's release. Now, we often think of ransoms demanded by bad guys, who then receive the payment. But here the point is not *who* Jesus paid. The point is *what* Jesus paid. This ransom cost him his life. And who did Jesus set free through his death? The many! All his people!

Imagine a dark dungeon deep inside a mighty fortress. The dungeon is full of captives who are locked behind iron bars with no way out. Then one day, the guards toss another prisoner inside. He's been beaten. He's bloody. He's dead. But astonishingly, the man gets up, looks at the captives, and tells them, "Follow me." Then he kicks open the prison doors and leads them to freedom. That is what Jesus has done for us! This is his unparalleled act of service. He gave his life as a ransom for many—for you and for me!

Now, someone might say, "I don't need to be set free! There's no one holding me captive." But as the Scriptures will tell you, apart from Christ, we are all slaves to sin. In this slavery, we live with a kind of freedom—free from God as we ignore him and rebel against him. But Calvin calls that freedom a "wretched liberty." And in the end, it only leads to death. So, Jesus served us, and he gave his life for us, paying the ransom that would release us. Not into unfettered autonomy, but into the glorious bondage of life under God's authority. And this is where true freedom is found! A fish is only free when it is bound to the water. A bird is only free when it is bound to the air. And we are only truly free when we are bound to God. Walking according to his will is not an oppressive burden—it is a liberating blessing. And that's the blessing Jesus's brings us.

So, believe in him. Leave the dungeon of your sin and serve him. And if you think, "but I'm not worthy..." Notice third...

3. Jesus's unreserved mercy for all

Verse 29: *And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him* (Matthew 20:29).

Jericho is one of the last major stops before Jerusalem. It's almost time for the Passover, so many people are traveling to the city, and a great crowd has formed around Jesus. This is the crowd that will accompany him and shout his praises during the triumphal entry which we'll look at next week. But before Jesus gets there, Matthew wants us to see one more miracle. Verses 30-31: *And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!"* (Matthew 20:30-31).

In Mark and Luke, we learn that these blind men were beggars. That's why they're sitting on the roadside with all the people traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. This was an ideal time to ask for charity. But these men hear that Jesus is passing by, and they want more than charity, they want mercy and they want a miracle! So, they cry out, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" Think of what they believe! They believe that Jesus is Lord. So, they at least believe he is a man of great authority, perhaps even divine authority. They believe he is the Son of David, the long-awaited king to come from David's line, the Messiah. They believe that he will have mercy on them, blind beggars on the side of the road. And they are absolutely right!

Verses 32-34: *And stopping, Jesus called them and said, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him (Matthew 20:32-34).* Jesus is at the front a great crowd, growing in enthusiasm, ready to burst into Jerusalem and proclaim him as king. Surely two blind beggars are beneath his status, unworthy of his time and attention... no! Jesus stops. Presumably, the whole crowd stops with him. And he attends to the needs to these two men. He asks them what they want. He takes pity upon them and opens their eyes. And he gains two more disciples as they recover their sight and follow him.

Friend, here's the takeaway: Jesus has unreserved mercy for all. It doesn't matter how insignificant you feel, it doesn't matter how unworthy you feel, if you will cry out to him and ask for mercy he will answer you. And when he does, follow him.

Conclusion

Here is the book of Matthew in miniature, the ministry of Jesus in summary form, here are the Cliff Notes. Matthew shows us Jesus's unexpected path to glory. He left his eternal home in heaven to dwell among us. He suffered at the hands of sinful men. He died. But then he rose! And right now, he reigns at the right hand of the Father. He is the one prophesied in Daniel 7, the one with all-surpassing glory and an everlasting dominion. And one day we will be there with him, the Bible even says we will reign with him, but we must take his path. For Jesus—and for his disciples—glory comes on the other side of suffering. Stay with him now—no matter how hard it may be—and you will be with him forever.

This is all possible because of Jesus's unparalleled act of service. This glorious Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. In a moment we'll come around the Lord's Table, and remember, and rejoice, at his sacrifice. He gave his life, he shed his blood, to release us from sin's captivity and bring us to God! So, do you want to be great in his kingdom? Become like him. Serve. Sacrifice. And for all the ways you fall short, remember his unreserved mercy. He stopped a massive crowd to serve two blind beggars. No one is beneath him... no one is too lowly for him... he has pity on the weak. He will have pity on you. Cry to him. Trust in him. And follow him.