

# The Way of the Cross

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     So again, the reading will be from Matthew 20, starting at verse 17 and reading through to the end of the chapter. 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, 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.

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked him for something. And 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.

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.

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.

And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. 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.

[ 1 : 3 0 ]     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. Even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. 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. 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. Okay, well, we're looking at Matthew chapter 20.

And it would be great if you could have that part of the Bible open, because we'll be looking at it closely. But I want to start with a story. We've been, my wife and I, we read books to our kids at night. And one of the books we read to our kids earlier this year was The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien.

[ 2 : 5 0 ]     You may be familiar with the story. Maybe you've read the book or at least seen the movie or movies it is, isn't it? And The Hobbit tells the story of 13 dwarves who are on a quest to the Lonely Mountain, their ancestral home.

Years ago, the dwarves were forced out by the wicked dragon Smorg. And now they're returning and hoping to claim back their treasure from the dragon.

And with the 13 dwarves is a small hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo has been chosen by the wizard Gandalf to be the group's burglar.

And towards the end of the book, the dwarves are setting out on the last leg of their journey from Lake Town, which is kind of like a last remote outpost of civilisation.

And everyone is jubilant. The dwarves have been treated as heroes in Lake Town. They've been fed and housed and pampered in the most delightful and satisfactory fashion, Tolkien writes.

[ 3 : 54 ] They've been provided with boats and rowers and provisions and horses by the good folk of the town, who cheered if any dwarves showed so much as his nose.

And Thorin, the leader of the dwarves, looked and walked as if his kingdom was already regained, and Smorg the dragon chopped up in little pieces.

So chapter 10 of the Hobbit closes with the dwarves departing Lake Town by boat on the final stage of their long journey to the Lonely Mountain, as people sang on the keys and out of windows.

Tolkien tells us that the only person thoroughly unhappy was Bilbo.

See, as the group's burglar, all the expectation of the dwarves rested on his shoulders. He is the one who must sneak into the dragon's lair.

[ 5 : 04 ] He is the one who must confront the foul beast. He is the one who must steal the dragon's treasure. He knows what lies ahead. He knows what lies ahead.

And there's a similar contrast in the passage before us today. As Jesus and his 12 disciples embark on the final stage of their long journey to the mountain of Jerusalem, the mindset of the Saviour and the mindset of his closest followers are miles apart.

We'll come to the disciples shortly. First, let's hear what Jesus says to them to help prepare them for what lies ahead. Look at Matthew chapter 20, verse 17.

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the 12 disciples aside and on the way he said to them, See, we're going up 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'll be raised on the third day. Now notice several things about these verses. First, notice the repetition of the phrase going up to Jerusalem.

[ 6 : 32 ] Verse 17, it's mentioned as part of the narrative. Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. In verse 18, it's repeated again in the words Jesus spoke to his disciples, where he includes them to in the journey.

He says, we are going up to Jerusalem. A journey which Jesus first signalled to his disciples back in chapter 16 was soon to reach its destination.

Now, Jesus says, and the narrative says, going up because travel to Jerusalem did involve an ascent. Jerusalem was 750 metres above sea level.

Jericho, which is where we find Jesus and his disciples in verse 29. Jericho was 250 metres below sea level.

So there's an ascent from the last kind of 28 kilometre stretch from Jericho to Jerusalem involved a significant climb, an ascent. Secondly, notice in these verses that this conversation Jesus had with his disciples was a private conversation.

[ 7 : 46 ] He took the 12 aside on the way. And said to them. It's a private conversation, Jesus and the 12.

Now, while there's a crowd of pilgrims accompanying Jesus on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, these words were for Jesus' closest handpicked disciples alone.

Thirdly, notice the detailed nature of Jesus' prediction. Jesus foretells his betrayal. The Son of Man will be delivered over.

His betrayal to the Jewish leaders, to the chief priests and scribes. He predicts the verdict of the Jewish council. They will condemn him to death.

He predicts the Jews' subsequent act of transferring Jesus into the custody of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. They will deliver him over to the Gentiles.

[ 8 : 50 ] Jesus predicts the cruel treatment he would suffer at the hands of the Roman soldiers, mocked and flogged. And he predicts the exact method of his execution, crucified.

He even predicts his resurrection on the third day. Everything would unfold exactly as Jesus had said. As we see if we follow this story through to Matthew chapters 26 to 28.

Every detail would be just as Jesus foretold. And while Jesus knew he would be raised to life, his words here emphasize his suffering.

All the things that must take place culminating in his death. His mind was set on what he must do. On the extreme trial that lay ahead for him.

The way to Jerusalem was the way of the cross. And that terrible purpose weighed on Jesus.

[ 9 : 56 ] And it's for this that he sought to prepare his disciples. As he gathered them in on the way and spoke privately to them. He told them what must take place. That's the private conversation he had with them.

But soon after, two of the twelve approached Jesus for another private conversation. Or rather they approached him with a request.

A request that shows their minds were in a very different place to the mind of Jesus. Actually in the first instance, the request was made by their mother.

Look at verse 20. Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee. That's James and John. The mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons.

And kneeling before him, she asked him for something. And he said to her, what do you want? And she said to him, say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one on your right hand and one on your left, in your kingdom.

[ 11 : 13 ] Now there's an almost comical ring of truth to this scene. I wonder, did the sons, James and John, put their mother up to this?

Or was it the other way around? Now my mum's here, here with us this morning, so I need to be careful what I say.

But I can imagine my mum doing something like this. She's an amazing woman, God bless her. But my mum has two sons.

And there is no doubt about it that she is our biggest fan. So maybe it took a mother's ambition to egg on her boys to make this bold and brazen request of Jesus.

Whatever the case, Jesus treats the petition as coming from all three of them. So in verse 21, he speaks to the mother directly.

[ 12 : 21 ] What do you want? And the you there in the Greek text is singular. What do you want? He speaks to her. But then in verse 22 and 23, he addresses the sons.

The you in verse 22 and 23 is plural. Perhaps he's speaking to all three of them, but I think particularly to the two men. Now to their credit, they clearly had a lot of faith in Jesus.

They have full confidence that Jesus is the king and that his kingdom is coming. They know the outcome. They believe that Jesus will be vindicated.

Their request here assumes Jesus' ultimate triumph and reign. And James and John want the positions of greatest honour in Jesus' kingdom.

The seats at his right and left. And that's what they're asking for. The positions of greatest honour. It's a bit like politicians jockeying for ministerial positions before the election has even taken place.

- [ 13 : 32 ] Perhaps James and John are attempting this backroom dealing specifically in an attempt to get ahead of other disciples.

Perhaps Peter and Andrew. They want to get their claim in first. But rather than immediately give a straight answer, Jesus challenges their question and challenges the ignorance behind their question.

Verse 22. Jesus answered, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?

Jesus says to them, You don't understand. Now Jesus' cup here will find a couple of echoes later in Matthew. We might think of the cup that Jesus offers his disciples at the Last Supper.

When he says, Drink of it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

- [ 14 : 44 ] Jesus. But Jesus' question here in verse 22 is not so much about the cup Jesus offers, but the cup Jesus himself was about to drink.

Can you drink the cup? Can you drink the cup? Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?

This is the cup about which Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. My Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.

Now, of course, the two cups are connected. Jesus can only offer the one cup because he himself drank the other.

But when Jesus asks, Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? He is asking James and John, Can you share in my sufferings?

- [ 15 : 52 ] Are you able to do what I am about to do? Notice the question is not about their willingness. He doesn't ask them, Will you drink the cup?

It's about their ability. Are you able to drink the cup? James and John confidently assert the affirmative. Verse 22, We are able, they answered.

An answer that betrays just how fundamentally they understood both the nature and the depth of Jesus' sufferings. Now, as events would unfold at the crucial time, James and John, like the rest of the disciples, would prove both unable and unwilling to drink the cup.

When the chain of sufferings which Jesus foretold in verses just here, which Jesus foretold, when the chain of sufferings began with Judas' betrayal of Jesus, like the rest of the disciples, James and John would desert Jesus and flee.

They couldn't drink the cup. They wouldn't drink the cup. Surprisingly, though, rather than continue to challenge James and John's underestimation of Jesus' sufferings, Jesus changes his approach in verse 23.

- [ 17 : 16 ] He said to them, There is a sense, Jesus says, there is a sense in which James and John would drink Jesus' cup.

There is a sense in which they would share in his sufferings. James, in time, would be put to death by the sword at the command of Herod Agrippa.

In his later years, John would be exiled to the Isle of Patmos because of the testimony of Jesus. But Jesus could not grant the places at his right and left.

That was the prerogative of God the Father, who had prepared those places for the ones he chose. Now, what do we make of this? What are we to make of this? If Jesus is thinking of his future kingdom, and he speaks of these places at his right and left, if Jesus is speaking of his future kingdom, we might remember his words in chapter 20, verse 16, the last will be first and the first will be last.

And so, when we get there, expect to be surprised. Those granted, these places of proximity to Jesus may well be among the most obscure of believers.

[ 18 : 51 ] Names we've never heard. The last will be first. Then again, when later in Matthew's gospel, we do hear of one on Jesus' right and one on Jesus' left, it wouldn't be the two brothers, but rather two rebels and thieves crucified next to Jesus, who joined in with the crowd in heaping insults on him.

In any case, while in one sense, James and John would drink Jesus' cup, at the crucial time, they could not and would not. It was given to Jesus alone and he alone could drink it.

There was no other way. With that, the private conversation between the sons of Zebedee and Jesus comes to an end.

But for the two brothers, there's an awkward postscript. You know, like the backroom dealings of politicians leaked to the press, James and John's private maneuvering soon become known.

And with all the subsequent self-righteous moral outrage we might expect in Crikey or in the Daily Telegraph, we have the response of the others in verse 24.

[ 20 : 16 ] And when the ten heard of it, they were indignant at the two brothers. They're indignant. No. Who are they to ask Jesus for these positions?

But Jesus used this as an opportunity for a lesson for all of them on true greatness, verse 25. But Jesus called to them and said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles, the nations, lorded over them and their great ones exercise authority over them.

That's the way of the world, Jesus says. The way of the world is to pursue power and to seek honour and to exalt in authority and position and to delight in being first.

That's the way of the world. The great ones of the world are the rich and the famous and those with power and sway and influence. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Rupert Murdoch, Taylor Swift, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, people who can buy whatever they want, people who get to define the narrative and shape the world, people who can control what others do, people who can control what others think.

They're the great ones, surely, in our world. But Jesus completely overturns that way of thinking, the way we naturally think about greatness. Verse 26, Jesus says, it shall not be so among you.

[ 21 : 52 ] But whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. And even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. And the way of the cross is the way of humility, the way of loneliness, the way of service, the way of placing others before yourself.

When Jesus died on the cross, he did so to give his life as a ransom for many. One for many.

The language of many here is not to suggest a limit in Christ's death, many rather than all, but rather is an allusion to Isaiah chapter 53.

Isaiah chapter 53 is a prophecy about the suffering servant, the servant of the Lord. And we read in Isaiah 53, my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities.

[ 23 : 11 ] Therefore, I will give him a portion among the great because he poured out his life unto death for he bore the sin of many.

Jesus is the greatest in the kingdom of God because he did what no other could do. He gave his life as a ransom, his life in exchange for ours.

He bore the sin of many. He suffered the penalty for our sins. He suffered the wrath of God in our place. That's the cup he drank which we cannot drink.

Indeed, that was the purpose of his sacrifice. That is the cup that he drank so that we would not drink it.

he suffered in our place the righteous for the unrighteous, the son of man for the sons and daughters of men. To quote an old hymn, I wonder if any of you will recognise it.

[ 24 : 19 ] It's one of my favourites. death and the curse were in our cup our cup. O Christ t'was full for thee but thou hast drained the last dark drop tis empty now for me that bitter cup love drank it up now blessings draft for me.

You cannot drink the cup. You don't need to drink the cup. He drained it for you. You cannot drink the cup and yet you will drink the cup.

That's Jesus' word to James and John, the sons of Zebedee. For although we could not go to the cross, Jesus nevertheless calls us to carry our cross.

We could not offer Christ's sacrifice but he does call us to imitate his sacrifice. See, the way of the cross is both a way Jesus must walk alone and a way in which we follow.

And if you want greatness then let Jesus show you what true greatness is. true greatness is found in accolades and status and riches and honour and power.

[ 25 : 53 ] True greatness is found in humble costly acts of service of others. True greatness is found in kind words spoken to the lonely.

It's found in hospitality offered to a stranger. nature. It's found in patience shown to a difficult child. It's found in loving care offered to the sick and ageing.

That's where true greatness is found. We cannot be the saviour but we are like our saviour when we live for others and not for ourselves.

Let me share with you again a story which many of us will remember. It's the story of a woman by the name of KD Lusam.

On the 28th of March an earthquake struck the nation of Myanmar with its epicentre near the Mandalay region.

[ 27 : 04 ] And about 30 miles south of Mandalay in Keauks is a preschool the bright kids preschool the two story building.

The older children studied in the upper floor and the younger children were in the ground floor classroom. And when the earthquake struck the building collapsed and the upper story the upper floor fell onto the lower story.

The children in the upper room survived but most of the children in the lower classroom the younger ones perished. 26 died that day in that school.

And among the others on the ground floor when the earthquake occurred was a Christian teacher KD Lusam the daughter of a local pastor.

And she went as the building started she didn't flee but rather she quickly gathered three children under her arms and as the debris fell used her body to shield them from the impact.

[ 28 : 19 ] All were alive when the rescue team arrived and the teacher with her last breath she told the rescuers to prioritise the children get them out first and they were rescued alive and then later in the afternoon the rescue team finally reached the teacher and she was barely breathing and she lost her life.

Sadly one of the three children also later died. God calls few of us to acts of service as dramatic or as final as that godly teacher's giving her life for the children in her care.

But however humble and small the acts of service God may call us to be may our lives echo the life and death of our saviour who gave his life as a ransom for many. We are not called to count our glories we are called to carry our cross that's the first request made of Jesus on the way to Jerusalem in the final stage of the journey.

There's a second request in the final verses of chapter 20. verse 29 to 34.

And as they went out of Jericho a great crowd followed them 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 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 now we might notice some echoes in this second request of echoes of the first request now like the first request those making the second request recognize Jesus as the king they call him Lord son of David son of the great king David David's promised son they recognize

[ 31 : 07 ] Jesus as the promised king but where the first request was encouraged by a mother the second request is discouraged by a crowd the crowd rebuked them telling them to be silent now just think about that for a moment the large crowd are we're specifically told in verse 29 the this great crowd are following Jesus that's who the crowd are these are people who are drawn to Jesus in some sense at least they believe in Jesus they recognize Jesus as a teacher they recognize Jesus as someone to follow beyond that they no doubt knew that Jesus can heal people many of them would have witnessed!

it some of them would have experienced it they had been healed by Jesus Jesus had even healed two blind men before earlier in Matthew's gospel and here is this crowd following Jesus telling these two blind men to be quiet how consumed that crowd must have been in their own following of Jesus to try and shush these two blind men how little regard they had for these other two blind by the side of the road but Jesus doesn't silence them in verse 32 as he did with James and John Jesus asked the question what do you want what do you want me to do for you he doesn't see these two as insignificant he doesn't see them as beneath his attention he doesn't see them as too lowly to notice he doesn't see them as a bother or as a nuisance or unwelcome he draws out their request what do you want me to do for you verse 33 they said to him

Lord let our eyes be opened their request is not for glory it's not for honour it's not to be placed above others it's just to be restored to be made whole to be able to see in verse 34 Jesus in pity in his compassion he touched their eyes and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him notice their following of Jesus comes after the mercy of Jesus the compassion of Jesus before you can follow Jesus you need to be forgiven by Jesus before you can serve like Jesus you need to be saved by Jesus before you can drink the cup you need to receive the cup but all who call out to Jesus for mercy he will not turn away none who cry out to him will he silence his compassion is sufficient for all brothers sisters what do you want from

Jesus what do you want Jesus to do for you do you want greatness we'll let Jesus show you what true greatness is do you want mercy we'll know that Jesus will not turn you away he will welcome all who come to him the way of Jesus is the way of the cross and the way of the cross is the way of humility and mercy thanks be to God will you join with me in prayer heavenly father we thank you for our saviour the lord jesus christ who has done for us what we could not do we thank you that he paid the ransom for our sins that he drank the cup of your wrath that he died in our place as your servant and to serve us thank you father for our saviour we thank you for his compassion we thank you for his mercy and we thank you for his example thank you that in your son you've shown us what true greatness is we confess before you that too often we want to be first or we strive after things that will serve our own interests but lord when we behold

Jesus or when we think of that faithful teacher in the school in Myanmar who gave her life for the children when we think of such examples of true humility and service we do want to be like them that is what we desire so take away from us every selfish ambition and inclination and grow us in humility and lead us in acts of compassion and service of others this we pray in Jesus name Amen