

Chapter 66: The Cross and the Things of God

Matthew 16:21–23

After Peter’s momentous confession, Jesus’ words might have led us to believe that we have reached the climax of his story. From one perspective, this is true. Everything Jesus has been doing up to this point has sought to instruct his disciples about his identity as the Christ, the Son of the living God. This point, however, is only the necessary precondition to a much fuller understanding of Jesus’ mission in the world. The church will indeed be built on the rock of Peter’s confession; however, that foundation is not complete without a full understanding of the mission of Christ in the world. While even Peter himself will struggle on what Jesus begins to teach his disciples here, it is nevertheless true that *Christ crucified is the wisdom of God*.

The Wisdom of God (Matt. 16:21)

The prepositional phrase “from that time” (ἀπὸ τότε; *apo tote*) that Matthew uses to transition into v. 21 marks a significant shift in the overall plot of the Gospel. “From that time” onward, Jesus’ trajectory shifts from a general ministry in Galilee and in Gentile territory, so that now Jesus begins his trek down to Jerusalem where he will be crucified.¹ Indeed, this may be the significance of the geographical identification of Caesarea Philippi in Matthew 16:13, so that Jesus’ “most northerly point of his travels” marks the pinnacle of his ministry before beginning his descent to the cross.² That pinnacle coincided with the confession of Peter in the previous passage (Matt. 16:16). If everything in Jesus’ life and ministry that preceded Caesarea Philippi was geared toward revealing Jesus to his disciples as the Christ, the Son of the living God, then everything following Caesarea Philippi is geared toward making his disciples “understand *the redemptive work* Jesus was about to complete.”³

Here, then, Jesus “began” to teach his disciples about all that will lay ahead of him in the southern city of Jerusalem. To be sure, Jesus had already spoken previously about his death and resurrection (Matt. 9:15; 12:39–40; 16:4), but “from that time” onward, Jesus would speak about these events “in plain, unfigurative language.”⁴ Even so, Morris observes that the disciples will struggle so much in trying to make sense of this message that Jesus will need to return to the subject often to *continue* to teach them about what he *begins* here, in a “long, slow process” of educating his disciples about the sufferings that await him (Matt. 17:9, 12, 22–23; 20:18–19, 28; 21:38–39; 26:2).⁵ The problem for the

¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 477.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 628.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 633.

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 653.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 428.

disciples is that Jesus tells them something that comes as an entirely unexpected shock: “Although Jesus is God’s Son and the Messiah, no golden, glorious, refulgent earthly kingdom and grandeur lie ahead but the very opposite.”⁶ Or, as Calvin puts it, Jesus now recognizes the necessity “to inform them that Christ must commence his reign, not with gaudy display, not with the magnificence of riches, not with the loud applause of the world, but with an ignominious death,” because the disciples had “imagined that he would procure for them earthly happiness.”⁷ What lies ahead is not what the disciples believed that they had signed up for, and Jesus begins here to prepare them for the pain that he must endure.

Jesus, then, teaches his disciples that he “must” (δεῖ; *dei*) suffer in Jerusalem. About the significance of this word “must,” Lenski writes, “All that awaits Jesus is a necessity; and while δεῖ is used to express all types of necessity, here it evidently expresses the gracious will and counsel of God in the mission of Jesus. These things ‘must’ take place, and Jesus himself wills that they shall, for without them he could not redeem the world.”⁸ The necessity of these sufferings seems to be the main point of this first lesson, since Jesus blurs the full extent of his sufferings into a simple description: “...that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things....” Hendriksen observes that Jesus “knows that the little group has already received such a shock that it cannot now bear to hear more (cf. John 16:12).”⁹

Still, Jesus identifies two significant points that begin to suggest to the disciples what lies ahead. First, Jesus says that he must go to “Jerusalem.” So far in the Gospel of Matthew, we have observed Jesus withdrawing further and further away from the inquiries and opposition of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, which has led him up to Caesarea Philippi. Now, however, “Jesus tells the disciples that presently he himself will again go away to Jerusalem, to the very capital itself, where the real center of hostility against him had been formed.”¹⁰ Indeed, Matthew had hinted at the danger in Jerusalem in the previous chapter when he told us that the “Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem” to investigate the disciples over their failure to observe the ceremonies of hand-washing (Matt. 15:1). Jesus and his disciples all understand that to go to Jerusalem is to enter the belly of the beast.

Second, Jesus explains that he will suffer these many things “from the elders and chief priests and scribes.” Jesus uses a single article (“the”) to signify that these are not three different groups, but one group.¹¹ Thus, Jesus clearly identifies that he will suffer at the hands of the Sanhedrin, which “was the highest judicial body of the Jewish nation.”¹² Jesus did not envision an accidental death at the hands of overzealous Roman soldiers, but a deliberate miscarriage of justice by the leaders of the Jewish people. This this injustice, Jesus prophesies that he would “be killed, and on the third day be raised” (v. 21).

What, though, is the source of this knowledge? Many commentators have identified passages in

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 634.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 2:299.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 634.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 654.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 634.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 428.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 635.

the Old Testament the foretell of the death and resurrection of Jesus. While there are more passages that foretell or foreshadow the innocent suffering of God's Messiah, there are at least a few that suggest resurrection. Nevertheless, we should observe that Matthew does not say that Jesus shows his disciples these things from the Scriptures. That would likely have been part of his presentation, but Carson makes an important point about Jesus' knowledge of the sufferings that awaited him:

These approaches seek to make some part of Jesus' passion predictions historically credible through some historical antecedent on which Jesus allegedly based his predictions. While this is not wrong, it is too restrictive for dealing with one who claims exclusive and intimate knowledge of the Father (11:27). Is it reasonable to think that Jesus could have predicted the details of his passion only if he read about them somewhere? This is not to question the applicability of some of the OT allusions to him; it is rather to question the historical reductionism of some gospel research.¹³

To suffer and die is the full purpose of what the Father sent the Son into the world to accomplish. By whatever means Jesus came to understand this mission, he now begins to communicate that mission to his disciples.

The Temptation of Jesus (Matt. 16:22)

In the previous passage, Jesus could not have bestowed more honor on Peter in his reaction to Peter's confession (Matt. 16:17–19). Thus, we have high expectations when Peter emerges on behalf of the disciples again here (v. 22). First, Matthew tells us that Peter "took him aside," apparently to speak to Jesus privately. In doing so, Peter separates Jesus from the disciples, which is reminiscent of the way that the Spirit led Jesus "into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matt. 4:1).¹⁴ There also, Jesus had to face a temptation to sidestep his Messianic mission. Next, Matthew tells us that Peter "began" to rebuke Jesus, with the same word that appeared in the previous verse to describe how Jesus "began" to teach his disciples.¹⁵ As for the rebuke itself, it is instructive to remember that Satan himself began the temptation of Jesus with a question that dripped with sneering reproach: "If you are the Son of God..." (Matt. 4:3). There, Satan challenged Jesus to sin on the basis of his identity, and Peter is doing much the same. On the basis of his accurate confession of Jesus' identity, Peter now believes that he may challenge Jesus' understanding of the redemptive work that his Father has given him to do.

Then, whereas Jesus had taught about what "must" happen, Peter invokes God's mercy to forbid what Jesus suggests in two ways. First, the phrase translated "Far be it from you" reflects a word that means "mercy," and Hendriksen captures the sense of the phrase well: "'Mercy on thee, Lord,' is about as literal a translation as is possible in English. Peter meant, 'May God be merciful to thee, for

¹³ Carson, "Matthew," 428.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 638.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 638.

this must not, shall not happen.”¹⁶ This perhaps reflects the second temptation of Jesus, where Satan urged Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to test the mercy of God to keep his feet from striking against a stone (Matt. 4:6). Second, Peter uses a strong, double-negative (“no, not”) to urge strenuously against Jesus’ teaching in a way that “conveys that it is not just undesirable but unthinkable.”¹⁷ This idea echoes the third temptation of Jesus, where Satan offered the Lord all the kingdoms of the earth in exchange for bowing down to him. In other words, Satan promised that if Jesus would only bow down to him, the cross would “no, not” need to happen.

Again, for Jesus, his sufferings are what “must” happen—and, as Jesus will continue to explain, they *must* happen because of God’s mercy for guilty sinners.¹⁸ For Peter, however, God’s mercy must “no, not” let these sufferings happen to Jesus. We should observe that Peter’s words are presented as a straightforward parody of what Jesus teaches. This presentation of a parody, then, illustrates what Jesus warns Peter about in the next verse in the contrast between setting one’s mind on the things of man instead of the things of God (v. 23). Both are drawing conclusions about what “must” happen based on their own understanding. While Jesus’ understanding is based on God’s plan, however, Peter’s understanding is merely human.

How, then, should we evaluate Peter’s actions here? On the one hand, it is clear that Peter had good intentions to try to protect Jesus. On the other hand, Matthew presents this scene in starkly negative terms as a repetition of Satan’s temptation of Jesus, especially in the conclusion to this scene in the next verse. As Carson writes, “Peter’s strong will and warm heart linked to his ignorance produce a shocking bit of arrogance. He confesses that Jesus is the Messiah and then speaks in a way that implies he knows more of God’s will than the Messiah himself.”¹⁹ Blomberg observes that “This dialogue contrasts sharply with Peter’s praiseworthy confession in vv. 16–19. One could scarcely imagine a more complete about-face.”²⁰ Calvin puts this bluntly, writing, “so completely are men hurried on and driven headlong by inconsiderate zeal, that they do not hesitate to pass judgment on God himself, according to their own fancy...here we learn what estimation in the sight of God belongs to what are called good intentions. So deeply is pride rooted in the hearts of men, that they think wrong is done them, and complain, if God does not comply with every thing that they consider to be right.”²¹

¹⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 655.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 634.

¹⁸ “To this day, all who fail to see the damning power of sin are blind to the true necessity of the cross. They see in Christ crucified (since he was, indeed, crucified) nothing but a noble martyrdom, a sacrifice only in this sense and reject ‘the blood theology’ of the gospel, the sacrifice which involves substitution, redemption by the blood of God’s Son, and the cleansing of the soul from guilty by faith in this sacrificial blood. Thus they need no essential Son in their theology, and his resurrection may be regarded as a myth. Like Peter, they would have a kingship without the Messianic priesthood. But the very thing for which Peter started to rebuke Jesus afterward became the kernel, yea, the Alpha and the Omega, of his apostolic preaching.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 639.)

¹⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 429.

²⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 259.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:301.

The Mindset of Man (Matt. 16:23)

At this point, Jesus “turned” to speak to Peter (v. 23). Jesus’ turning “heightens the power of the scene”²² by describing Jesus as facing Peter “squarely.”²³ When Jesus speaks, the words are devastating: “Get behind me, Satan!” (v. 23). Although translated differently in English, there is a strong correlation to what Jesus said when he rebuked Satan in the temptation in the wilderness and here.²⁴ After the third temptation, Jesus said, “Be gone, Satan!” (“Υπαγε, Σατανᾶ; *Hupage, Satana*; Matt. 4:10). Here, Jesus simply adds “behind me” to the exact same phrase: “Υπαγε ὀπίσω μου, Σατανᾶ (*Hupage opisō mou, Satana*). Jesus is not simply speaking with rhetorical flourish, but he is equating Peter’s insistence that Jesus not suffer these things with Satan’s temptation to gain the kingdoms of the world apart from the cross by bowing down to him.²⁵

Next, Jesus tells Peter, “You are a hindrance (σκάνδαλον; *skandalon*) to me.” This word for “hindrance” is the idea of a “stumbling block,” and Carson observes that “A few moments earlier, Jesus had called Peter a rock. Now he calls him a different kind of ‘rock,’ a *skandalon*....The notion of a suffering Messiah, misunderstood by Peter so that he became a stumbling block to Jesus, itself becomes, after the resurrection, a stumbling block to other Jews (1Co 1:23).”²⁶ At this moment, Peter is not speaking as the rock on which Christ will build his church, but as a rock that seeks to situate himself between Jesus and the cross, to thwart the Messiah from what “must” happen for the salvation of the world.²⁷ Whatever we make of Jesus’ words to Peter in the previous section, we must interpret those in light of Jesus’ words to Peter here in this section.

Finally, Jesus tells Peter, “For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” As Osborne observes, “Peter’s mind-set is not framed by God’s perspective but by the purely human expectations of Israel’s messianic hopes.”²⁸ Peter does not intend to oppose God’s mission, but that is the effect of his opposition to Jesus’ sufferings.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the phrase “from that time” (v. 21) transition into an important new part of the Gospel of Matthew? What has Jesus been seeking to teach his disciples up to this point? What does Jesus “begin” to teach his disciples now? Why was Jesus’ identity a necessary precursor to understanding his redemptive work? Why is Jesus’ redemptive work of suffering, dying, and rising from the dead a divine necessity?
2. What do you think led Peter to take Jesus aside and rebuke him in v. 22? How does Matthew

²² Osborne, *Matthew*, 636.

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 640.

²⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 655.

²⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 635.

²⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 429.

²⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 635.

²⁸ Osborne, *Matthew*, 636.

portray this scene as a repetition of the temptation narrative in Matthew 4? Where do we see a repetition of the first temptation, where Satan challenged Jesus' identity? Where do we see a repetition of the second temptation, where Satan appealed to God's mercy toward Jesus? Where do we see the third temptation, where the cross never needed to happen?

3. How does Jesus repeat his rebuke of Satan to Peter? Do you think that Jesus spoke too harshly with Peter? Why or why not? What should we make of the "rock" of Matthew 16:18 now being described as a "stumbling block" (ESV: "hindrance"; v. 23)? How do we understand these two consecutive evaluations of Peter together? What are the things of God? What are the things of man?

4. Where are you tempted to believe that your greatest problems consist in avoiding suffering? Why is Peter's rebuke of Jesus' message of the necessity of the cross attractive to this day? Where do you seek to avoid the suffering required by following in the footsteps of Jesus by taking up your own cross (Matt. 16:24)? What part of this short passage speaks to you to teach you how to follow him faithfully, even through great suffering?