

## Chapter 82: A Ransom for Many

*Matthew 20:20–28*

As Jesus continues to approach Jerusalem (see Matt. 20:17), it becomes clear that he is coming into his kingdom. Indeed, when he arrives, he will make his kingship plain by his triumphal entry into the city on a donkey (Matt. 21:9). Yet, despite his repeating teachings about the nature of his kingdom, even those closest to him fail to understand the full implications. In this story, then, we see the mother of James and John—two of Jesus’ closest disciples—asking for her sons to remain close to Jesus in his reign. In the course of this conversation, though, Jesus will make clear that to share in Christ’s glory will first require his people to *share in Christ’s sufferings*.

### The Request (Matt. 20:20–21)

Matthew transitions into this new section with the conjunction, “then” (v. 20a). Chronologically, this word does not give much information about how long this story takes place after Jesus’ third foretelling of his death in the previous section, but it suggests that this new story follows closely after the previous one (Matt. 20:17–19).<sup>1</sup> More importantly than time, Matthew is instructing us to see this second story as a “development” of the former story; however, Nolland points out that “what is being related to is not the anticipation of suffering, but the prospect of divine vindication and establishment of Jesus as messianic king.”<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to know how these two disciples could have gone with their mother to pursue an elevated place in Jesus’ kingdom immediately after Jesus had predicted his own suffering and death, and Hagner is right that the conjunction “then” leads readers to find this story “all the more shocking and objectionable.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the two sons of Zebedee (that is, James and John) come with their mother to Jesus to make their request (v. 20b). Although we do not have her name here, Matthew tells us that “the mother of the sons of Zebedee” appears at the cross of Jesus with Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph (Matt. 27:56). Mark, however, lists those same two women (“Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph”) alongside a woman named “Salome” (Mark 15:40). Thus, this woman’s name may be Salome. More intriguingly, John gives us the following list of the women standing at the cross: “[Jesus’] mother, *her sister*, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25). If Mary, the wife of Clopas, is the same Mary as the mother of James (the younger) and Joseph, then the other woman (Jesus’ mother’s sister) may be Salome and/or the mother of the sons of Zebedee.<sup>4</sup> If so, then James and John were Jesus’ cousins,

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<sup>1</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 744.

<sup>2</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 818.

<sup>3</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 578.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 508–09n33.

and this woman making a request of Jesus would be his aunt.<sup>5</sup> Although this information we have on this point is not certain, it is plausible.

As this mother approaches Jesus, she kneels before him as though she were bowing before an ancient Near Eastern king (v. 20c).<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Jesus *is* a king, and the whole Gospel of Matthew is written to bear witness that Jesus is the son of David; however, the picture of this woman kneeling before Jesus does not suggest repentance from sin, but the posture of a woman trying to curry favors from royalty. In contrast to Herod's boastful display of generosity by promising the daughter of Herodias with an oath that he would grant her "whatever she might ask" (Matt. 14:7), Jesus asks this woman to state her request (v. 21a).<sup>7</sup> Her request for James and John to sit at Jesus' right and left side in the kingdom is interesting on two levels. First, her faith is evident in believing that Jesus is a king who will come into his kingdom soon.<sup>8</sup> This would be no different than for a staffer (or the staffer's mother!) on a presidential candidate's campaign ask for a specific role in the president's cabinet, believing that the candidate will carry the election.

Second, Nolland points out that the phrase "one at your right hand and one at your left" (εἷς ἐκ δεξιῶν σου καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἐνωπύμων; *heis ek dexiōn sou kai heis ex enōnumōn*) appears later to describe the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus: "one on the right and one on the left" (εἷς ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ εἷς ἐξ ἐνωπύμων; *heis ek dexiōn kai heis ex enōnumōn*; Matt. 27:38).<sup>9</sup> While the mother of the sons of Zebedee is imagining future glory for her sons with Jesus, the phrase she uses ironically captures a very different scene. Jesus had previously taught that "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4), and, more recently, that "last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16; cf. 19:30), but here that reversal becomes all the more vivid.<sup>10</sup> Those who would seek to be closest to Jesus in the kingdom must be crucified with him by faith.

### The Requirement (Matt. 20:22–23)

It is no wonder, then, that Jesus tells them (Jesus statement and question in v. 22 are both in the plural), "You do not know what you are asking" (v. 22a). They think they are requesting to be associated with Jesus for honor, but they are asking to be associated with Jesus in shame and ignominy. Thus, Jesus asks them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" (v. 22b). At a very general level, the idea of "drinking a cup" in the Old Testament meant "fully undergoing this or that experience, whether favorable (Ps. 16:5; 23:5; 116:13; Jer. 16:7) or unfavorable (Ps. 11:6; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:32; Hab. 2:16)."<sup>11</sup> In the context of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks of his death specifically as the cup he must drink (Matt. 26:39, 42). Yet, he also appoints a "cup" that Paul will later call the "cup of blessing that we bless" (Matt. 26:27; 1 Cor. 10:16). Nolland notes that this connection more closely links this passage with the thieves on the

<sup>5</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 487.

<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 784.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 784–85.

<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 785–86.

<sup>9</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 820.

<sup>10</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 755.

<sup>11</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 746.

cross, and that it blurs the lines between Jesus' suffering and his kingship: "Nowhere else does Matthew develop the idea that Jesus is in a position of kingly rule at the cross, but the importance of messianic categories in the Passion Narrative is suggestive, as are the after-effects of the dying of Jesus, in 27:45–54."<sup>12</sup>

Like Peter when he insists that he will never betray Jesus (Matt. 26:33, 35), the family of Zebedee is overly optimistic in their response: "We are able" (v. 22c).<sup>13</sup> When the time comes, James and John will flee their master with the other disciples (Matt. 26:56). James and John believe that they are ready to step into glorious responsibilities, but they are not prepared for the path of the cross that they must take up to reach that glory.

In response, Jesus assures them that they will drink his cup, but that their request is not his to grant, since those positions are "for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (v. 23). By this statement, Jesus teaches two things. First, Jesus teaches that some will sit in higher places of authority than others in the kingdom, and second, that those positions have been fixed by God's own eternal decree.<sup>14</sup>

Whenever Jesus explains that the Father does something that he cannot do, we must keep in mind the ancient principles of interpreting Jesus' many statements, according to the biblical contrast given in Philippians 2:6–7. Sometimes, Jesus speaks in the form of God, and other times, Jesus speaks in the form of a servant.<sup>15</sup> As God, the eternal Son participated in the divine decree with the Father and the Holy Spirit, since the external works of the Trinity are indivisible. But, by willingly taking upon himself the form of a servant however, Jesus did not make use of his divine privileges during his estate of humiliation, so that he sometimes denies his authority to do certain divine things (as here), or even his possession of certain aspects of divine knowledge (Matt. 24:36). Those in power are often tempted to grant favors in order to demonstrate their power, but Jesus (in the form of a servant) is perfectly contempt to submissively defer the appointment of these positions to his Father.

## The Resemblance (Matt. 20:24–28)

Unsurprisingly, the other ten disciples are furious when they hear what James and John have done (v. 24). Lenski has a wonderful observation on human nature at this point: "The ten prove themselves no better than the two. Many feel wronged by the success of others when similar success on their part appears quite without wrong to them."<sup>16</sup> In other words, while I may feel justified in seeking out a promotion, thinking about all the hard work that I do, I may be incensed to learn that someone else has asked for that same promotion. How deceitful is the human heart!

Again in the midst of conflict and confusion, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach his disciples an important lesson. First, Jesus points to the standard manner of leadership and authority in the world: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them" (v. 25). The words for "lord it over" and "exercise authority over" both begin with the

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<sup>12</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 820–21.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:421.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:422.

<sup>15</sup> On this distinction, see Augustine, *On the Trinity (De Trinitate)*, Book 1, Chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 790.

prefix *κατα* (*kata*), which means “down.”<sup>17</sup> At a minimum, this carries the idea of hierarchy, so that those in authority are *over* those who are under that authority. At most, these words could suggest a kind of abusive use of authority. Nolland is probably best in weighing the translation options: “While abuse of power may not be in the semantic range, pressure and control certainly are. The power realities are very evident as some dominate and others are dominated.”<sup>18</sup>

Second, Jesus insists that his disciples must not act in this way (v. 26a). Rather, “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” (vv. 26b–28). We should remember that the “Son of Man” in Daniel 7:14 is the figure who receives all “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples *should serve him*.” Yet, while Jesus has repeatedly told his disciples that he *must* die, here he tells his disciples *why* he must die: to serve others by giving his life as their ransom.<sup>19</sup> The Scriptures talk about the death of Christ in a variety of ways, and some Christians (especially Origen) have isolated this statement to suggest that Jesus died in order to pay a ransom to the devil, who held us hostage. Nolland notes, though, that the word for *ransom* “is used in secular sources primarily of manumission of slaves and release of prisoners of war, but also of an offering to a god to gain release from a curse, an omen, or a state of servitude brought on by one’s offences.”<sup>20</sup> The “ransom” is not paid to Satan, our hostage-taker, but to God as Jesus offers himself as an atoning sacrifice for sins.

All of this was foretold in the prophet Isaiah, who speaks extensively of the innocent suffering of the Lord’s Servant, and writes that “Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make *many* accounted to be righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will give him a portion with the *many*, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of *many*, and makes intercession for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:11–12).<sup>21</sup> The Lord Jesus came to be numbered with the transgressors on his right and left hand, so that by his suffering, he could bring many to glory.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does “then” connect this passage with what has come before (v. 20)? What has Jesus been teaching about his mission and the nature of his kingdom in the immediately surrounding context? What kind of a backdrop does this context form around the question posed by the mother of the sons of Zebedee? Why do you think that James and John permitted their mother to make this request after all that Jesus had predicted about his sufferings?
2. What is the significance of the connection between the phrase “one at your right hand and one at your left” that appears here and to describe the thieves at the cross (v. 21; Matt. 27:38)? Why do you

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<sup>17</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 759–60.

<sup>18</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 822.

<sup>19</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 755.

<sup>20</sup> Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 824.

<sup>21</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 490.

think Jesus tells them that they do not know what they are asking (v. 22)? What does Jesus mean when he asks them whether they are able to drink from the cup that Jesus drinks (v. 22)? How would you have responded to this question?

3. Why do you think that the other ten disciples were indignant by this (v. 24)? Have you ever been the one requesting a privilege? Have you ever been the one indignant at someone else who requested a privilege? How did your heart evaluate each request? Why do you think that all of us are so eager to “lord over” and to “exercise authority over” others, yet so indignant at the authority that others have over us (v. 25)?

4. If the Son of Man was given “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples should serve him” (Dan. 7:14), why does Jesus here say that the Son of Man “came not to be served but to serve” (v. 28)? What does it mean that Christ “gave his life as a ransom for many” (v. 28)? How does Jesus allude to Isaiah 53:11–12 by this statement? What is the significance of that Old Testament prophecy to inform the nature of Jesus’ work and his kingdom?