

MATTHEW  
*for*  
EVERYONE

PART 2  
CHAPTERS 16–28

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.  
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE  
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

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*James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone*

*Revelation for Everyone*

*For Christopher Philip Unwin,  
priest and teacher of the faith,  
with gratitude for the love, support and prayers  
of over fifty years*

## CONTENTS

<i>Introduction to the Anniversary Edition</i>	vii	
<i>Introduction</i>	ix	
<i>Map</i>	xi	
Matthew 16.1–12	The Leaven of the Pharisees	1
Matthew 16.13–20	Peter's Declaration of Jesus' Messiahship	3
Matthew 16.21–28	Jesus Predicts His Death	6
Matthew 17.1–8	The Transfiguration	9
Matthew 17.9–13	The Question about Elijah	11
Matthew 17.14–21	Faith That Moves Mountains	14
Matthew 17.22–27	The Temple Tax	16
Matthew 18.1–7	Humility and Danger	18
Matthew 18.8–14	More about the 'Little Ones'	21
Matthew 18.15–20	Reconciliation and Prayer in the Community	23
Matthew 18.21–35	The Challenge of Forgiveness	26
Matthew 19.1–9	The Question about Divorce	29
Matthew 19.10–15	Marriage, Celibacy and Children	32
Matthew 19.16–22	The Rich Young Man	34
Matthew 19.23–30	The First and the Last	36
Matthew 20.1–16	The Workers in the Vineyard	39
Matthew 20.17–28	The Cup He Had to Drink	41
Matthew 20.29–34	The Healing of Two Blind Men	44
Matthew 21.1–11	Jesus Rides into Jerusalem	46
Matthew 21.12–22	The Temple and the Fig Tree	49
Matthew 21.23–32	The Question about John	52
Matthew 21.33–46	The Parable of the Tenants	55
Matthew 22.1–14	The Parable of the Wedding Feast	58
Matthew 22.15–22	Paying Taxes to Caesar	61

## CONTENTS

Matthew 22.23–33	The Question of the Resurrection	63
Matthew 22.34–46	The Great Commandment, and David’s Master	66
Matthew 23.1–12	Warnings against Scribes and Pharisees	69
Matthew 23.13–22	Condemnation of Scribes and Pharisees (1)	72
Matthew 23.23–33	Condemnation of Scribes and Pharisees (2)	75
Matthew 23.34–39	Judgment on Jerusalem and Its Leaders	77
Matthew 24.1–14	The Beginning of the Birth Pangs	80
Matthew 24.15–28	The Desolating Sacrilege	83
Matthew 24.29–35	The Coming of the Son of Man	86
Matthew 24.36–44	The Unexpected Coming	89
Matthew 24.45–51	The Wise and Wicked Slaves	92
Matthew 25.1–13	The Wise and Foolish Girls	94
Matthew 25.14–30	The Parable of the Talents	97
Matthew 25.31–46	The Sheep and the Goats	100
Matthew 26.1–13	Preparations for Jesus’ Death	103
Matthew 26.14–25	Passover and Betrayal	106
Matthew 26.26–35	The Last Supper	109
Matthew 26.36–46	Gethsemane	113
Matthew 26.47–56	Jesus Is Arrested	115
Matthew 26.57–68	Jesus before Caiaphas	118
Matthew 26.69–75	Peter’s Denial	121
Matthew 27.1–10	The Death of Judas	124
Matthew 27.11–26	Jesus and Barabbas Before Pilate	126
Matthew 27.27–38	Jesus Mocked and Crucified	129
Matthew 27.39–44	Jesus Mocked on the Cross	132
Matthew 27.45–56	The Death of God’s Son	135
Matthew 27.57–66	The Burial of Jesus	138
Matthew 28.1–10	The Resurrection of Jesus	141
Matthew 28.11–15	The Priests and the Guards	144
Matthew 28.16–20	The Great Commission	146
<i>Glossary</i>		153
<i>Study/Reflection Guide</i>		167

## INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright  
2022

## INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

## INTRODUCTION

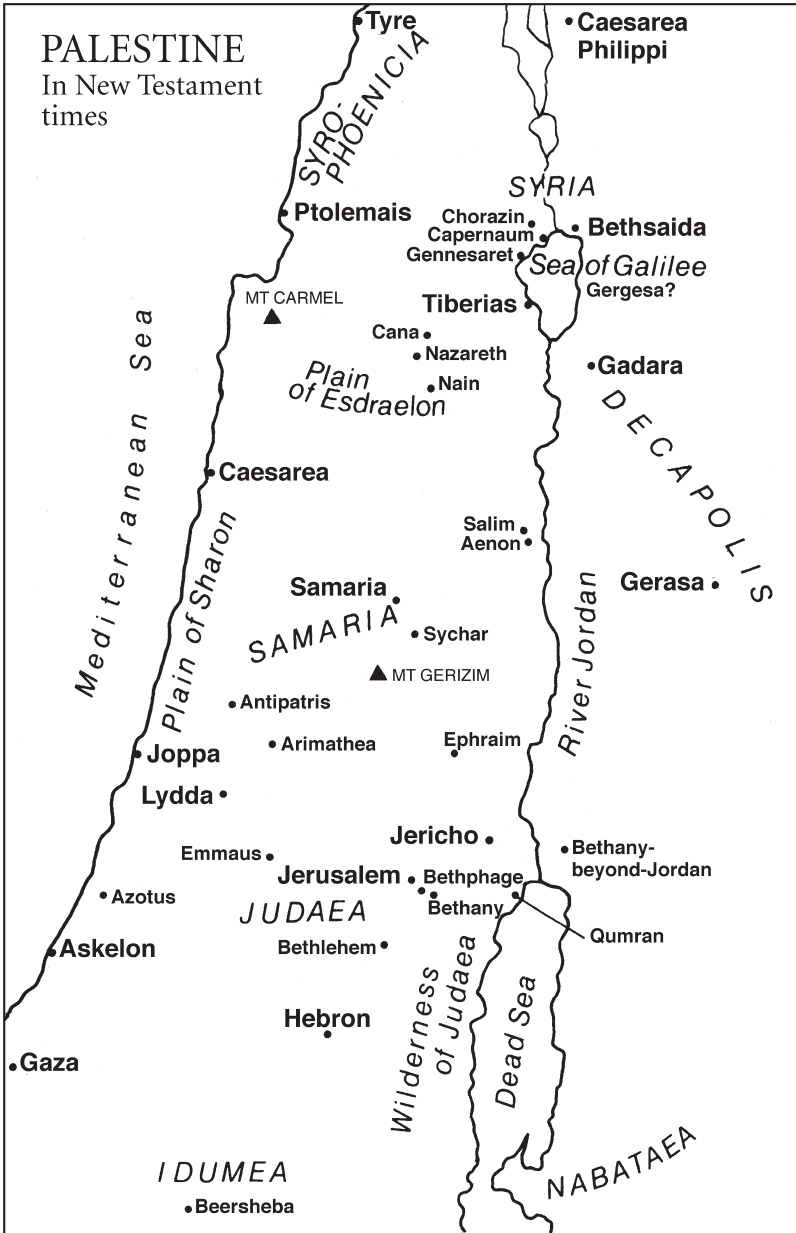
There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus' 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Matthew's gospel presents Jesus in a rich, many-sided way. He appears as the Messiah of Israel, the king who will rule and save the world. He comes before us as the teacher greater even than Moses. And, of course, he is presented as the son of man giving his life for us all. Matthew lays it all out step by step and invites us to learn the wisdom of the gospel message and the new way of life that results from it. So here it is: Matthew for everyone!

Tom Wright







## MATTHEW 16.1–12

### The Leaven of the Pharisees

<sup>1</sup>The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tried to catch him out by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

<sup>2</sup>This was his reply to them: ‘When it’s evening you say, “Sky looks like wine, it’s going to be fine.” <sup>3</sup>And in the morning you say, “Red in the sky, rain by and by.” Well then: you know how to work out the look of the sky, so why can’t you work out the signs of the times? <sup>4</sup>The generation that wants a sign is wicked and corrupt! No sign will be given to it, except the sign of Jonah.’

With that, he left them and went away.

<sup>5</sup>When the disciples crossed over the lake, they forgot to bring any bread. <sup>6</sup>‘Watch out,’ said Jesus to them, ‘and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’

<sup>7</sup>They discussed it with each other. ‘It’s because we didn’t bring any bread,’ they said.

<sup>8</sup>But Jesus knew what they were thinking. ‘You really are a little-faith lot!’ he said. ‘Why are you discussing with each other that you haven’t got any bread? <sup>9</sup>Don’t you understand, even now? Don’t you remember the five loaves and the five thousand, and how many basketsfuls you picked up afterwards? <sup>10</sup>Or the seven loaves and the four thousand, and how many baskets you picked up? <sup>11</sup>Why can’t you see that I wasn’t talking about bread? Watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees!’

<sup>12</sup>Then they understood that he wasn’t telling them to beware of the leaven you get in bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Our generation is bombarded with signs. Drive along a city street, especially at night, and your eyes will be dazzled with signs of all sorts. Some of them are necessary to tell you where to go and where not to go: if you ignore red and green lights you will be in danger. Others are merely for decoration and information, pointing to particular buildings or illuminating them. Many others are designed to catch your imagination – and your money. Advertisements twinkle and flash enticingly until their message has worked its way into your memory.

Part of growing up is learning to distinguish signs that matter, which must be obeyed, from signs that don’t matter, that can (and perhaps should) be ignored. Something of the same puzzle faces us as we read the **gospels**. Sometimes Jesus does things which he himself speaks of as ‘signs’. Particularly in John’s gospel, but also in the others, some of his powerful deeds, especially his healings, are seen as signs of who he is,

signs that the **disciples** at least, and probably others as well, are meant to notice, to ‘read’, to understand.

But when the **Pharisees** and **Sadducees** ask for a sign, something different is going on. (They didn’t normally work together; they must have regarded this as something of an emergency.) Matthew says they were trying to catch him out; it was a test, a trick. Perhaps they were wanting to accuse him again of being in league with the devil (see 12.24–45). Perhaps they were hoping to bring a charge against him that he was a false prophet, using signs and wonders to lead Israel astray, as the scriptures had warned (Deuteronomy 13.1–5). Perhaps Jesus saw their challenge as being like the cynicism of Israel in the wilderness, putting God to the test to see whether he was really among them or not (Exodus 17.1–7). In any case, Jesus refused to comply with the request. He would not perform signs to order, as though he had to pass some kind of test. To do so would be to treat God himself as a kind of circus performer.

Of course, Jesus was doing all sorts of ‘signs’; the gospel story is full of them. And he longed for people to be able to read ‘the signs of the times’: to see the gathering storm clouds in Israel’s national life, to recognize the way in which corrupt leaders, false teachers and people bent on violence were leading the nation towards inevitable disaster, from which only **repentance** and a fresh trust in God’s **kingdom** could save them. The irony was that they were asking him for a sign, but they were blind to the many signs all around them.

So he refused to perform some special sign just for them. His powerful works were done from love, not from a desire to submit his mission to a laboratory test. They weren’t that kind of thing. The only sign he would give such people, as he said before, was the sign of Jonah (12.38–42, where the meaning of this is spelled out). If people watched him with only cynicism and criticism in their hearts, they would see nothing – until the moment when the rumour went around that he had been raised from the dead. That would be the final and devastating sign that God had indeed been with him all along.

The truth of the matter, of course, was that both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in their different ways, held aims, beliefs and hopes which were seriously out of line with those Jesus was offering. Like established political parties that suddenly become aware of a new movement threatening to undermine their support, they are ready to do anything they can to discredit it. But Jesus not only sees through their plot; he has his own warning to give against them.

Like a parent teaching a child not to be led astray by the flashy signs of city advertisements, he warns them of the ‘leaven’ of the Pharisees

and Sadducees. This was puzzling to the disciples, who thought Jesus was referring cryptically to the fact that they'd forgotten to bring any bread with them. It is even more puzzling to us, because unless we have grown up knowing something about Judaism we probably don't know what leaven could stand for.

The point is this. At Passover, one of the greatest Jewish festivals, all leaven had to be cleared out of the house, commemorating the time when the children of Israel left Egypt in such a hurry that they didn't have time to bake leavened bread, and so ate it unleavened. Gradually, 'leaven' became a symbol not for something that makes bread more palatable, but for something that makes it less pure. Warning against the 'leaven' of someone's teaching meant warning against ways in which the true message of God's kingdom could be corrupted, diluted, or (as we say, referring to drink rather than bread), 'watered down'.

Bring the whole scene forward two thousand years, and we face the question for ourselves. What are the 'signs of the times' in our own day? Where are leaders and teachers, official and unofficial, leading people astray? What are the true signs of God's work in our midst? How can we learn to tell the difference, in our moral and spiritual life together, between the signs we must observe and those we would do better to ignore?

## MATTHEW 16.13–20

### Peter's Declaration of Jesus' Messiahship

<sup>13</sup>Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi. There he put this question to his disciples: 'Who do people say that the son of man is?'

<sup>14</sup>'John the Baptist', they replied. 'Others say Elijah. Others say Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.'

<sup>15</sup>'What about you?' he asked them. 'Who do you say I am?'

<sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered.

'You're the Messiah', he said. 'You're the son of the living God!'

<sup>17</sup>'God's blessing on you, Simon, son of John!' answered Jesus. 'Flesh and blood didn't reveal that to you; it was my father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I've got something to tell you, too: you are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell won't overpower it.

<sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you tie up on earth will have been tied up in heaven, and whatever you untie on earth will have been untied in heaven.'

<sup>20</sup>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The Tibetan Buddhists believe in the transmigration of **souls**. When someone dies, they suppose that the soul of that person goes immediately into a different body, the body of a child born at the same instant.

This belief becomes vitally important when their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, dies. A search is made for a boy born at the moment when the great leader died; and that boy is taken away and brought up as the new leader. Everybody, including the person himself, knows from the very beginning that he is the new Dalai Lama. It sounds very strange to modern Western ears. We prize highly the right of every person to freedom of choice about their future. Even hereditary monarchs can abdicate. But the Dalai Lama has no choice; and there is no question about who he is.

In Judaism it was very different. Many Jews of Jesus' day believed (and many Jews today still believe this) that God would send an anointed king who would be the spearhead of the movement that would free Israel from oppression and bring justice and peace to the world at last. Nobody knew when or where this anointed king would be born, though many believed he would be a true descendant of King David. God had made wonderful promises about his future family. Some would have pointed to the prophecy of Micah 5.1–3 (which Matthew quotes in chapter 2) as indicating that the coming king should be born in Bethlehem. And the word for 'anointed king' in the Jewish languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, was the word we normally pronounce as '**Messiah**'.

What would the Messiah be like? How would people tell he had arrived? Nobody knew exactly, but there were many theories. Many saw him as a warrior king who would defeat the pagan hordes and establish Israel's freedom. Many saw him as one who would purge the **Temple** and establish true worship. Everybody who believed in such a coming king knew that he would fulfil Israel's scriptures, and bring God's **kingdom** into being at last, on earth as it was in **heaven**. But nobody had a very clear idea of what all this would look like on the ground. In the first century there were several would-be Messiahs who came and went, attracting followers who were quickly dispersed when their leader was caught by the authorities. One thing was certain. To be known as a would-be Messiah was to attract attention from the authorities, and almost certainly hostility.

So when Jesus wanted to put the question to his followers he took them well away from their normal sphere of activity. Caesarea Philippi is in the far north of the land of Israel, well outside the territory of Herod Antipas, a good two days' walk from the sea of Galilee. Even the form of his question, here in Matthew's **gospel** at least, is oblique: 'Who do people say the **son of man** is?', that is, 'Who do people say that this person here, in other words (but without saying it) I myself,

am?' Jesus must have known the answer he would get, but he wanted the **disciples** to say it out loud.

The disciples report the general reaction – which tells us a good deal about the way Jesus was perceived by the people at large. Not 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'; not the cosy, comforting friend of little children; rather, like one of the wild prophets of recent or of ancient times, who had stood up and spoken God's word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious kings. Jesus was acting as a prophet: not simply 'one who foretells the future', but one who was God's mouthpiece against injustice and wickedness in high places.

But within that prophetic ministry there lay hidden another dimension, and Jesus believed – otherwise he would scarcely have asked the question – that his followers had grasped this secret. He was not just God's mouthpiece. He was God's Messiah. He was not just speaking God's word against the wicked rulers of the time. He was God's king, who would supplant them. That was indeed the conclusion they had reached, and Peter takes on the role of spokesman: 'You're the Messiah,' he says. 'You're the son of the living God.'

It's important to be clear that at this stage the phrase '**son of God**' did not mean 'the second person of the Trinity'. There was no thought yet that the coming king would himself be divine – though some of the things Jesus was doing and saying must already have made the disciples very puzzled, with a perplexity that would only be resolved when, after his **resurrection**, they came to believe that he had all along been even more intimately associated with Israel's one God than they had ever imagined. No: the phrase 'son of God' was a biblical phrase, indicating that the king stood in a particular relation to God, adopted to be his special representative (see, for instance, 2 Samuel 7.14; Psalm 2.7).

Very soon after Jesus' resurrection, his followers came to believe that the same phrase had a whole other layer of meaning that nobody had hitherto imagined. But it's important, if we are to understand the present passage, that we don't read into it more than is there. What Peter and the others were saying was: you are the true king. You're the one Israel has been waiting for. You are God's adopted son, the one of whom the Psalms and prophets had spoken.

They knew it was risky. With this, they were not only signing on to be part of a prophetic movement that challenged existing authorities in God's name; they were signing on for a royal challenge. Jesus was the true king! That meant that Herod – and even faraway Caesar – had better look out. And as for the Temple authorities . . .

To begin with it looked as though Jesus was simply endorsing their dreams. If Peter had declared that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus had a word for Peter as well. The name 'Peter', or, in his native Aramaic,

‘Cephas’, means ‘rock’ or ‘stone’. If Peter was prepared to say that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus was prepared to say that, with this allegiance, Peter would himself be the foundation for his new building. Just as God gave Abram the name Abraham, indicating that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17.5), so now Jesus gives Simon the new name Peter, the Rock.

Furthermore, just as in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told a story about a wise man building a house on the rock (7.24), so now Jesus himself declares that he’s going to do just that. Here, as there, we are meant to imagine in the background the great city, Jerusalem, built on the rocky heights of Mount Zion. In some Jewish traditions, the Temple in Jerusalem was the place where heaven and earth met, and where the gates of the underworld as well were to be found. Jesus is declaring that he is reconstructing this centrepiece of God’s world.

Jesus isn’t going to build an actual city, or an actual Temple. He is going to build a community, consisting of all those who give allegiance to him as God’s anointed king. And this movement, this community, starts then and there, at Caesarea Philippi, with Peter’s declaration.

For the moment this must remain deadly secret. If it were to leak out it could be deadly indeed. But to those who agree with Peter that Jesus of Nazareth really is God’s Messiah, this promise is made: that, through this allegiance, they will become the people through whom the living God will put the world to rights, bringing heaven and earth into their new state of justice and peace. Peter, with this declaration of **faith**, will be the starting point of this community. Peter has much to learn, and many failures to overcome – including one in the very next passage. But even this is part of the process. Jesus’ new community, after all, will consist simply of forgiven sinners.

## MATTHEW 16.21–28

### Jesus Predicts His Death

<sup>21</sup>From then on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he would have to go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised on the third day.

<sup>22</sup>Peter took him and began to tell him off. ‘Certainly not, Master!’ he said. ‘That’s never, ever going to happen to you!’

<sup>23</sup>Jesus turned on Peter. ‘Get behind me, satan!’ he said. ‘You’re trying to trip me up! You’re coming at this from a human point of view, not from God’s point of view!’

<sup>24</sup>Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone wants to come after me, they must give themselves up, and pick up their cross, and follow me.’



<sup>25</sup>Yes: if someone wants to save their life, they must lose it; and if anyone loses their life for my sake they will find it. <sup>26</sup>What use will it be, otherwise, if you win the whole world but forfeit your true life? What will you give to get your life back? <sup>27</sup>You see, the son of man is going to “come in the glory of his father with his angels”, and then “he will reward everyone for the work they have done”. <sup>28</sup>I’m telling you the truth: some of those standing here will not taste death until they see “the son of man coming in his kingdom”.

When Lewis Carroll had become famous through his story *Alice in Wonderland*, he decided to follow it up with a second book in which both he and his readers would need to learn how to think inside out. In *Alice through the Looking Glass* he created a mirror-image world. In order to get somewhere in that world, you discover it’s no good trying to walk towards it; you’ll look up presently and find you’re further away than ever. In order to get there, you must set off in what seems the opposite direction. It takes a sustained mental effort to imagine all the ordinary activities of life working as in a mirror. If you’ve ever tried to cut your own hair, or trim your own beard, while looking in a mirror, you will know how difficult it is.

What Jesus is now asking of his **disciples** is that they learn to think in a similar inside-out way. To begin with, they find it completely impossible. Peter, speaking for them all, has just told Jesus that as far as they’re concerned he is not just a prophet, he’s God’s anointed king, the **Messiah**. Their natural next move would be to sit down and plan their strategy: if he’s the king, and if his people are going to be like the house built on the rock, then they must figure out how to get rid of the present kings and **priests** who are ruling Israel (or, more accurately, misruling it).

The obvious solution would be this: march on Jerusalem, pick up supporters on the way, choose your moment, say your prayers, fight a surprise battle, take over the **Temple**, and install Jesus as king. That’s how God’s **kingdom** will come! That’s how ‘the **son of man**’ will be exalted in his kingdom! That, we may be sure, was something like what they had in mind.

Jesus’ proposal is a through-the-looking-glass version of this. Yes, we’ll be going to Jerusalem. Yes, the **kingdom of God** is coming, coming soon now. Yes, the son of man will be exalted as king, dispensing justice to the world. But the way to this kingdom is by the exact opposite road to the one the disciples – and especially Peter – have in mind. It will involve suffering and death. Jesus will indeed confront the rulers and authorities, the chief priests and **legal experts**, in Jerusalem; but they, not he, will appear to win the battle. He will then be raised from

the dead, so Jesus says; but neither Peter nor the others can figure out for the moment what he might mean by this.

All they know is that he is talking nonsense, dangerous nonsense. Not for the last time in the story (see 26.69–75) Peter blunders in with both feet. The ‘rock’ on whom Jesus said he would build his church turns out, for the moment, to be shifting sand. We can feel the house tottering, ready to fall, before it’s even been built. Jesus uses for Peter words he’s used before for the archenemy, the **satan** itself (4.10). The passage contains a dire warning for all those called to any office or vocation in God’s church: the one to whom some of the greatest promises and commissions were made is the one who earned the sharpest rebuke.

Like Paul in his letters, Jesus insists that God thinks differently from how we mortals think. God sees everything inside out; or, perhaps we should say, God sees everything the right way round, whereas we see everything inside out. Paul again: we see at the moment in a puzzling mirror, but eventually we shall see the way God sees (1 Corinthians 13.12).

Once that is clear, the call goes out to follow Jesus, a call which rings down the centuries like a great bell in a distant church, calling us from whatever we’re doing. Imagine the bell echoing through the streets of your town: pick up your cross and follow me, pick up your cross and follow me. Imagine its sound resonating through shops and offices, through schoolrooms and hospital wards, through bustling tenements and lonely apartments: pick up your cross and follow me. Imagine people coming out of their doors to see where the noise is coming from, to listen to this great bell; and there, walking ahead of them, is Jesus, a compelling and mysterious figure. Pick up your cross and follow me.

Following him will cost everything and give everything. There are no half measures on this journey. It’s going to be like learning to swim: if you keep your foot on the bottom of the pool you’ll never work out how to do it. You have to lose your life to find it. What’s the use of keeping your feet on the bottom when the water gets too deep? You have the choice: swim or drown. Apparent safety, walking on the bottom, isn’t an option any longer.

To those who followed him at the time, Jesus made astonishing claims about what was going to happen in their own lifetime. Many people have been puzzled by these claims, for the simple reason that they have failed to see the significance of what happens at the end of the story. The phrases about ‘the son of man coming in his kingdom’ and the like are not about what we call the ‘second coming’ of Jesus. They are about his *vindication*, following his suffering. They are fulfilled when he rises from the dead and is granted ‘all authority in **heaven** and on earth’ (28.18).

MATTHEW 17.1–8 The Transfiguration

To those who follow him today, Jesus makes equally large promises. He is already the risen and exalted Lord of the world. We don't have to wait, as they did, for his vindication. It's already happened. It remains true that to follow him we have to learn to think inside out, in looking-glass fashion: what the world counts as great is foolishness, and what the world counts folly is the true wisdom. Cling on to your life and you'll lose it; give everything you've got to following Jesus, including life itself, and you'll win it. In every generation there are, it seems, a few people who are prepared to take Jesus seriously, at his word. What would it be like if you were one of them?

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