

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWENTY-SIX

While weaving into one chapter His answers concerning the destruction of the temple, which happened in AD 70, and the events surrounding His return and the end of history as we know it, Jesus had failed to reply to the question His disciples desperately wanted answered, ‘when?’. He did not have the date revealed to Him by His Father because we do not need to know. We can be certain that He will return but in the meantime we have work to do. All people and language groups must hear the gospel first. Chapter 24 ended with a story about two slaves. One was evil because, thinking he had plenty of time before his master came, he abused his fellow slaves. The other was faithful because, having no idea when his master would return, he got on with the job.

In chapter 25, Jesus told three more stories about His return, all making the same point in different ways. What matters about His return is not the date but what we are doing with today. The first scene was another wedding. We have seen previously in chapter 22 that the bridegroom was Jesus.(Rev.21) In neither story had the bride, the church, yet appeared. The last story concerned the guest, this one was about the bridesmaids who in Jewish weddings escorted the bridegroom to the waiting bride. It turned out to be a midnight wedding as Jesus’ return for the church will be at one of the darkest moments of history. The bridesmaids’ job was to provide light in a dark world.(Matt.5:14) Their lamps needed oil as our spirits need the Holy Spirit to enable us to show the light of Jesus.(Prov.20:27; John 9:5) Five had already received Him into their lives and were ready. The other five saw no hurry and were taken by surprise. They had assumed they could share the oil of the wise five. We cannot live on the spiritual life of family or friends. We cannot buy the Holy Spirit as they set out to do. Only God can give us His Spirit. Everyone was taken by surprise when the big moment came, as the whole human race will be taken unawares when Jesus returns. The fool, according to Ps.14:1, says there is no God even though he knows there is. The wise, in Prov.1:5, are hungry to know Him better. So the first question for today in the light of Jesus’ return is ‘do we know Him?’. If we do not come to know Him the consequence by our own choice will be that we are shut out of heaven.(25:1-13)

The second parable asked the question, ‘what have we done with what has been entrusted to us?’. The talent was a gold weight, about 30kg, with a present day value of one and a half a million dollars. It was not a skill although the number entrusted to each servant depended on his ability. We talk today, in English, of a ‘talent’ for music, art, sport or public speaking but this is an entirely different meaning. Repeatedly the New Testament pictured the grace of God which has been lavished upon us as believers as spiritual ‘riches’.(Eph.2:7; 3:8, Matt.6:20) The more we know of His goodness and are willing and able to put to use, the more the Lord will entrust to us. We use the grace of God when we pour out His love on others so that they too discover how rich they are in Him. The slave entrusted with only one talent never put it to use because of his view of the master. He thought of him as being mean and ungracious. Our view of grace begins with our view of God.

The reward of the first two slaves was two-fold, first joy and then responsibility. Joy, ‘chara’ in Greek, springs from our confidence in the grace, ‘charis’, of God. Both were rewarded with the same joy. Joy does not come in degrees. The hardened criminal who trusted the Lord in his final moment would have no less joy than the long time man of God. The difference, it seems, will be in responsibility. Enjoying and sharing the grace of God is a training for tasks in eternity. In a parallel story in Lk.19:11-27 the reward of the faithful servants was described as authority over different numbers of cities. These stories give us just the tiniest glimpse of what may lie ahead in ‘the new heavens and the new earth’.(II Pet.3:13) Heaven will not be just sitting on a cloud playing a harp all day long! The consequence of choosing an ungracious god, despite the evidence of the gospel, will be an eternity of darkness and terrible regret at the realisation of what we refused.(25:14-30)

The third story looked at the same question from the view point of eternity and the final judgement of all nations. It looked back on life on earth and explored the consequence of the earlier two choices, first of receiving the Spirit into our lives and second of discovering the riches of His grace which can be enjoyed and passed on to others. How would grace passed on look in practice? Would it simply be smiling happily as we preach the gospel to the world? The division of mankind into sheep and goats was just the revelation of the choices already made on earth by the wise and foolish virgins, and the faithful and worthless slaves. The 'sheep' would have demonstrated eternal life and boundless grace on earth in their care of the needy. In the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner they would have seen the Lord Jesus. They have seen need as a wonderful opportunity for grace, a time to be able to show how much we love the Lord who has loved us so well. They would not be saved by these good works but the works would be the natural outflow of the stream of God's grace. Those on the other hand who chose to live in the dark, unprepared to welcome the coming of Jesus, with a hard, ungracious god have seen the needy as a threat to their own comfort and time. In this final story the nature of hell was spelled out even more graphically as eternal fire and punishment with only the Devil and his angels as company. Again it was still a choice now, not God's revenge. Being 'accursed' was the choice not to be 'blessed'.(5:3-12; 25:31-46)

In chapter 26 the talking was almost over and the final act in the drama was about to be played out.

26:1-16 Q.1 What steps were being taken in the plot to kill the King? How did the chief priests overcome the obstacle to carrying out their plot? What motivated Judas to betray Jesus?(Jn.12:6) How did the story of the woman pouring out perfume contrast with Judas' behaviour? Was this the same story as recorded in Luke 7 and John 12? If not, what can we learn from these 3 events?

26:17-25 Q.2 How in this section did Jesus respond to the kindness of a friend and the treachery of an enemy? Why did Jesus not directly accuse Judas of what he was planning? What can we learn from His example?

26:26-29 Q.3 What was the significance of the bread which Jesus took and broke?(Exod.12:15-20) What new meaning did He give to the Exodus story? What would have shocked His disciples about being told to drink His blood?(Lev.17:14)

26:30-46 Q.4 What special importance did the Mount of Olives have in scripture?(Zech.14:4; Acts 1:12) How many other prophecies in Zech.9-14 were fulfilled in the few days leading up to the crucifixion? What can we learn from Peter's promise not to fail Jesus, the Lord's warning and its subsequent fulfilment? What was the first way in which Peter failed Jesus? How do we do the same? What was Jesus actually asking in His prayer? Was He hoping to avoid the cross? If not what else could His words have meant?

26:47-56 Q.5 What can we learn from Judas' greeting of Jesus and Jesus' response to him? What was the next way in which Peter failed Jesus?(Jn.18:10,11) How would Peter have felt when Jesus healed the slave? What kind of sword did Jesus intend His disciples to carry?(Lk.22:36-38) What was the third way Peter failed Jesus?

26:57-68 Q.6 What were the two charges eventually laid against Jesus? Why was He silent in the face of the first one but responded to the second? How can we learn from His example? On which charge was He condemned and why?

26:69-75 Q.7 How was Jesus' warning to Peter finally fulfilled? What motive eventually led Peter to deny Jesus? How at this point in his life did Jesus get through to Peter and with what result? How does He do the same with us?