

Matthew 16:21–27 ²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. ²² Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.” ²³ He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” ²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? ²⁷ For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct. ²⁸ Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”



James Tissot, *Rétire-toi Satan*, c.1890, Brooklyn Museum, Public Domain

Context. “From that time on” is a type of marker that indicates one storyline is closing and the sacred author is moving to another. But there is also a larger storyline that is beginning to take shape. In the succeeding weeks of Ordinary Time we have heard of mighty deeds as well as what seems to be an initial “sorting out” of those who will or will not commit to discipleship. Perhaps a way to view the context of our readings is outlined here.

Signs of the Kingdom and Messiah

- Healing and Feeding the Crowds (14:13-21)
- Walking on Water (14:22-26)
- Defilement (15:1-20 *but not part of the Sunday gospel sequence*)
- The Canaanite Woman (15:21-28)
- Healing Many People (15:29-39 *but not part of the Sunday gospel sequence*)
- The Pharisees Seek a Sign (16:1-12)

Messiah Revealed and a Community Begins to Form

- Jesus, Messiah; Peter as Rock (16:13-20)

Who Will Follow and What it Means

- **The Cost and Promise of Discipleship** (16:21-28 – *our Sunday gospel*)
- The Transfiguration (17:1-13)
- Discipleship and Faith that Moves Mountains (17:13-20)

“*From that time on*” also marks the turning point of the mission in Galilee and from this point on, Jesus and the disciples are moving towards Judea and the city of Jerusalem. This geographical change coincides with the change in the pattern of Jesus’ activity and teaching. Peter’s declaration in Mt 16:16 that Jesus is the Messiah leads Jesus to immediately begin to describe the messianic mission with the very plain statement that he must suffer, die and be raised again (v.21 – repeated again in 17:22-23). The entire journey towards Jerusalem will be in the growing shadow of the cross. As we move ahead there are few encounters with crowds and few miracles. The attention is on preparing the disciples to understand, live and promote the radically different values of the Kingdom – as well to prepare them for the “sea change” that will begin in Jerusalem and ripple out to the ends of the earth.

If that places it all in a larger context, perhaps the more immediate context is well described by R.T. France. He labels the reading as a “Glimpse Into the Future: Messianic Suffering and Glory” where the “primary emphasis of this first part of the journey narrative is on the declaration that the Messiah must meet with rejection, suffering and death, and that those who follow him must expect to share his fate. But set within this depressing message is a persistent reminder that that is not the end of the story. The prediction of 16:21 includes also resurrection on the third day (cf. also 17:9); those who lose their lives do so in order to gain them (16:25–26); the same Son of Man who is to be killed will ‘come in his Father’s glory’ as judge (16:27), and be seen to be king (16:28). [The Gospel of Matthew, 629]

Commentary

The Suffering Messiah. “*You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do*” (v.23) neatly summarizes the nature of the problem. The way the disciples react to the idea of messianic suffering and “defeat” shows that this concept of Messiahship is going to be very hard to get across. Here, as elsewhere, the mention of resurrection on the third day gets lost. It is apparently so overshadowed by the suffering and death which precedes it that resurrection seems to pass unnoticed.

The source of the opposition which Jesus will meet in Jerusalem is more specifically spelled out by the mention of the three main groups who made up the Sanhedrin: the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. Hereafter Matthew (unlike Mark) will usually mention only the chief priests and the elders. The only other time all three groups will be mentioned together is in their triumph over Jesus on the cross in 27:41.

The nature of the Messiah’s “suffering” is as yet undefined; 20:18-19 will spell it out more fully. The fact that it comes from those who made up the Sanhedrin indicates the official and judicial rejection of Jesus comes from those who had formal responsibility for the life of Israel as the people of God, and so presents us with the paradox of the rejection of Israel’s Messiah by the official leadership of Israel.

The outcome is not left in doubt: Jesus will be killed. We have had a hint of this outcome in 9:15 and 12:40, and we have heard of the plans of the Galilean Pharisees (a different group from those listed here) to do away with him in Mt 12:14. But now the impending death of the Messiah, which will be the focus of so much of the latter part of the gospel, comes also as a divine “necessity.” It is this unthinkable prospect which triggers Peter’s instinctive response in v. 22.

Peter’s Response. *Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.”* Peter’s typically direct and immediate response is not likely his alone.

Just as he spoke for the other disciples in proclaiming Jesus to be the “*Son of the living God*,” the Messiah, now he gives voice to the horror they all share upon hearing Jesus' description of the messianic mission. Given his confession (v.16), Peter may well feel particularly let down by the idea that his Messiah should prove to be anything less than a success. The strong verb “*rebuke*” (used elsewhere for Jesus’ stern commands to the wind and waves, 8:26, and to a demon, 17:18) not only conveys the intensity of Peter’s shock and his boldness in expressing it, but also prepares us for the even more severe language with which Jesus will respond in v. 23. Peter’s words indicate that he regards the prospect Jesus has outlined not as a goal to be fulfilled but as a disaster to be averted; other people might suffer at the hands of the authorities, but certainly not the Messiah. The strong negative conveys that it is not just undesirable but unthinkable.

Jesus’ Rebuke. Jesus “*turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”*” Jesus’ words to Peter are severe. One wonders if even the description of the “*place*” adds to the severity. Whereas Peter had quietly taken Jesus “*aside*,” Jesus now “*turned*” to issue a public reprimand. The opening words directly recall the dismissal of Satan in 4:10, here strengthened by the addition of the words “*behind me*,” to emphasize Jesus’ dissociation of himself from Peter’s ideology. But whereas in temptation in the desert (4:10) the tempter (which is what “*Satan*” means) was the chief demon himself, here it is Jesus’ loyal follower.

The point of the rebuke suggests that behind the human thinking of Peter, Jesus discerns an effort to dissuade him from his ordained course similar to that which Satan himself had made in 4:1–11. Similar to the third temptation in the desert, Peter’s understanding of the Messiah reveals the easier way to power and authority, the gains without the pains. As long as he holds such a view, the “*rock*” on which the church is to be built proves instead to be a stumbling-block. The image offers another rebuke for as long as Peter stands in front of Jesus he is in his way, stopping him from his mission – all because of Peter’s unthinking acceptance of “*human thoughts*.” Peter has expressed only what comes naturally to the human mind when presented with the idea of power and authority which the title “*Messiah*” suggests. But human thoughts are not God’s thoughts (Isa 55:8–9), and if human thoughts are not questioned they can stand in the way of God’s purpose and derail it. In much of the rest of this section of the gospel Jesus will be seen persistently trying to undermine the “*human thoughts*” of the disciples so as to get them to see things from the perspective of the kingdom of heaven

The Scene Changes. “*Then Jesus said to his disciples*” With these words the scene moves from the personal debate with Peter to a general pronouncement about discipleship, the first part of it echoing what Jesus has already said to his disciples in 10:38–39: “*whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” The disciples' first reaction was not the softened “*self-denial*” or “*take up one’s burden*.” They understood the cross as the sign of Roman torture and death: “*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.*” (16:24) These words are about literal death, following the condemned man on his way to execution. Discipleship is a life that puts life and parts of life at risk, with potential martyrdom. It may be legitimate to extrapolate from this principle to a more general demand for disciples to put loyalty to Jesus before their own interests and comfort, but that can be only a secondary application of the passage. Here, Jesus’ words are not to be taken as merely metaphorical. The “*cross*” and the “*losing life*” which he speaks of are literal, and it seems clear from v. 28 that he did expect at least some of his disciples to be killed because of their loyalty to his cause (as indeed they were). Such a demand only makes sense in the context of a firm expectation of life beyond death.

Discipleship and Its Consequences.

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? ²⁷ For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.

What was so uplifting and positive at the point of Peter’s declaration at Caesarea Philippi has moved to the very stark “*take up his cross.*” The prediction of Jesus’ death hovers ever nearby, but in the context of his ultimate vindication and glory, as judge and king in the presence of his Father and the angels. To speak of the Son of Man’s coming is an echo of the language of Dan 7:13–14 (similarly in 10:23) with the added themes of glory, angels, judgment and seeing. The words are then a prediction of the vindication and enthronement of the Son of Man after his suffering and death, and it will occur while some of those present are still alive.

One’s Life. In the earlier Matthean reference to “*taking up one’s cross*” (10:38-39) there was a simple contrast between “finding” and “losing” one’s *psyche* (life, soul). The first part of v.25 speaks not of “finding” life but “*wishing*” to save one’s life, again emphasizing the volitional aspect already expressed in v. 24, “*Whoever wishes to come after me....*” A clear choice is thus offered between self-preservation at all costs and the risky business of following Jesus. But the self that is preserved by such a “safe” option is not worth preserving, since the true self is lost. By contrast, the loss of *psychē* (in the sense of physical life) is the way to find *psychē* (soul), the essence of the true life which transcends death. Loss of life as such is no gain; it is life lost out of loyalty to Jesus which ensures that true life is gained.

The word-play continues in v.26. The prospect of gaining “*the whole world*” echoes closely the third temptation in 4:8–10, and the means there proposed, the worship of Satan, would indeed result in the loss of the *psychē*. In our context, that is echoed into the situation where someone has succeeded not only in remaining alive but also in attaining everything this world has to offer (the word translated “gain” is normally associated with economic acquisition; cf. 25:16–17, 20, 22), and who yet is ultimately the loser. The loss of that person’s true *psychē* is described as a “*forfeit,*” a term which often implies a judicial punishment or fine; the term is perhaps intended to make the reader think of the judgment of God which determines the person’s ultimate destiny.

In the second rhetorical question the metaphor of “*exchange*” perhaps continues that of “*forfeit:*” once the *psychē* has been forfeited there is nothing which can buy it back or persuade the judge to rescind the penalty. But that is probably to look for too much precision in proverbial language. The saying (perhaps modeled on Ps 49:7–9) simply underlines the supreme importance of the *psychē*; nothing else compares with its value.

One’s Motivation. The opening word “for” connects the judgment scene of v.27 with all the text regarding the disciple’s steadfastness and commitment to follow Jesus: it is worth remaining faithful even to the loss of earthly life because there is an ultimate judgment to come, and on the outcome of that judgment the enjoyment of true life will depend.

The imagery within this single verse echoes Daniel 7:9-10, the scene of judgment at the throne of the Ancient of Days. As well it points to Daniel 7:14 where the Son of Man receives “*dominion, glory, and kingship*” over all nations. It perhaps relies upon the eschatological coming of God and “*all the holy ones*” in Zechariah 14:5. But in this fusion the OT roles of judge and king are merged – roles once ascribed to God, and now more pointedly ascribed to Jesus.

As judge, he will “*he will repay everyone according to his conduct.*” The whole clause closely echoes Ps 62:12 (cf. Prov 24:12), which speaks of God’s universal judgment; again language appropriate to God himself is transferred to the glorified Son of Man. “*Repay*” is used for divine rewards in 6:4, 6,

and 18, and here too the primary emphasis in context is probably on the reward for steadfastness even to the point of martyrdom, the reward which results in finding one's *psychē*. But the term is no less applicable to punishment for refusing to follow Jesus, and a judgment of every person "*according to his conduct*" must be expected to envisage either reward or punishment, as will be spelled out more fully in 25:31–46. This saying is thus not only an encouragement to the faithful, but also a warning to those whose loyalty may be wavering. "*Conduct*" is a broad term, but in the present context the focus is not on lifestyle in general, but on whether or not they have maintained their commitment to Jesus in the face of persecution. A more focused perspective on the basis of final judgment will be provided in 25:31–46 (separation of the sheep and goats).

Reflections

Eugene Boring [*The Gospel of Matthew* in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 351-53] had a particularly good reflection following his treatment of our Gospel narrative. Rather than summarize it, it is perhaps best to simply let the author speak for himself.

The function of this scene is to make an important theological claim about Jesus: His death occurred as part of God's plan of salvation. "While the narrative function of the three passion announcements is to prepare the disciples, their theological purpose is to assure the readers, first that Jesus' violent death is not a meaningless accident of history but is part of God's plan, and, second, that Jesus was not a hapless victim but a knowing [and willing] partner in the divine strategy." [here quoting Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, 232]

The Christian life called for is not a reflection of, let alone the baptism and blessing of, the egocentric culture, but its polar opposite. Self-denial is not part of our culture's image of the "good life." But neither is the Matthean Jesus' call for denying oneself to be understood as asceticism or as self-hate. Just as Jesus' call to discipleship is not a joining in the cultural infatuation with self-esteem, neither is it the opposite. Nor is the self-denial to which Jesus calls the opposite of self-fulfillment. Just giving up things will not make one Christian; it will only make one empty. What is difficult for our culture to understand, indeed what it cannot understand on its own terms, is an orientation to one's life that is not focused on self at all, either as self-esteem or self-abasement, as self-fulfillment or self-emptying.

This call to discipleship is based on faith in Christ and confidence in the future victory of God; it is not a matter merely of high human ideals or noble principles. That is, the life called for here is not based on a reasoned conclusion about how things are, inferred from observation or general principles, but on faith that something has happened that makes everything different. To believe in Jesus as the Christ and to live accordingly means to reorient one's life toward the good news that God has acted decisively and ultimately in Jesus, not that Jesus has some good advice on how to Live (by what criteria could such advice he judged to be good?). The call to discipleship here expressed is based on the past and future revelatory act of God. The call to discipleship of vv. 24-26 is inseparably related to the confession in v. 16 and to the expectation in vv. 27-28, all bound together with Jesus' self-proclamation as Son of Man in vv. 13 and 28. The christological confession of v 16 is not abstract doctrine about the "person" of Jesus, but is realized only as it leads to the life called for in vv. 24-26.

This call to discipleship is a matter of confession, which means declaring one's faith in Jesus as the Christ, as God's definitive act of revelation and salvation. The word used to mean "confession" (*martyrion*; Matt 8:4; 10:18; 24:14) also means "martyrdom," in the sense of witness. The giving of one's life is presented as an act of testimony to a truth bigger than oneself. Its result may be literal martyrdom, as had happened in Matthew's church and in every generation since, and continues today. But it may also mean the daily giving of oneself

away in commitment to Christ (so Luke 9:23 explicitly). While many readers of this commentary will no longer live in a situation such as Matthew's in which the result of authentic Christian confession can be literal martyrdom, the call to give one's life as a testimony to the truth of the gospel is no less real. Orientation toward God, revealed in Christ as the Lord of one's life, rather than idolatrous self-orientation, is the decisive, crucial difference.

This call to discipleship is a matter of community. This is not an individualistic ethic of the solitary "I," but is the ethic of the community of disciples that confesses Jesus to be the Christ and lives toward the full coming of the kingdom of God for which it prays, accompanied by the presence of Christ during its time of mission.

The meaning of discipleship is learned along the way. The disciples in this story have been disciples for some time, called personally by Jesus (4:18-22; 9:9; 10:2-4), sent by him to preach and heal (10:5-8). They now learn the meaning and cost of discipleship, which cannot be explained in advance but must be learned en route. Many sensitive Christians may have wondered about the integrity of their own Christian life, since they "didn't know what they were doing" when they "joined the church." Neither did the Matthean disciples, who only learn in 16:21-28 what following Christ means, and who will yet falter and fail before the story is over. There is encouragement here for Christians who are concerned about past lapses (with more sure to come) and who are sure they do not understand as much as they should about the Christian life, just as there is warning for Christians who are sure that they do understand and have no need to change their present conceptions of the way things are.

Notes

Matthew 16:21 *From that time Jesus began to show*: The use of *deiknyrni* ("show") for verbal communication is unusual, but perhaps emphasizes that this is an important new revelation (as in Acts 10:28; 1 Cor 12:31; Rev 1:1), making plain what previously only been hinted at in 9:15 and 12:40.

Matthew 16:21 *must*: The rejection and death of the Messiah are presented as "necessary." The basis of that necessity will begin to emerge in 20:28, where it is grounded in a clear allusion to the prophetic model of God's servant who suffers for the sins of the people. The OT basis for Jesus' belief that he must suffer and die is most probably to be found in the theme of the suffering and death of God's faithful servants: see Pss 22 and 69, Zech 9-14, and above all in the suffering of the servant of Yahweh in Isa 52:13-53:12. This same "necessity" will again appear when Jesus is handed over as the divine action.

Matthew 16:21 *must go to Jerusalem*: The compound verb *apelthein-kai* indicates a radical departure to a new and more threatening environment (cf. 16:4). It is more literally, "go away" but in the Greek it does not suggest, as the English translation might, that he would go without the disciples.

Matthew 16:21 *be raised*: Matthew regularly uses the passive verb "be raised" (*egeiromai*) to refer to Jesus' resurrection, rather than the more active *anistemi* ("rise"). The two verbs seem to be used interchangeably for Jesus' resurrection in the NT generally, so that any attempt to draw a theological distinction between them is implausible. That Jesus "was raised" by the power of God is not to be set over against his "rising" victorious. But the passive formulation perhaps encourages us to see in this event God's vindication of his faithful Messiah.

Matthew 16:21 *on the third day*: a nonliteral hearing might be supported by the phrase "the third day," if the disciples understood it against the background of Hos 6:2, where Israel corporately

expresses its hope that “on the third day God will raise us up that we may live before him.” It may, however, be misleading to focus on “the third day” when seeking the OT background for Jesus’ expectation of resurrection, since the focus in NT references to “the third day” is not on an OT text but on the fact recorded in the gospels of Jesus’ actual time of lying in the tomb.

Matthew 16:22 *God forbid*: *hileōs soi Kyrie ou* is idiomatic and literally “God be gracious to you.” It is contextually translated as “God forbid.”

Matthew 16:23 *behind me*: Some commentators have taken “behind me” as a directive to take the place of a disciple, behind the teacher, following rather than trying to direct. But the entire context of Jesus’ words make such an understanding a bit of a stretch.

Matthew 16:23 *stumbling block*: The Greek *skandalon* pointing to another attribute of a rock in the encounter with humanity.

Matthew 16:24 *deny*: to deny someone is to disown him (see Matthew 10:33; 26:34–35) and to deny oneself is to disown oneself as the center of one’s existence.

Matthew 16:25 *life*: the *psychē* refers to the animating principal of one’s existence. In Greek thought this “life force” is associated with every existing thing. A person has a *psychē* appropriate to it; as does a rock – but clearly there is a difference. The Christian appropriation of the word *psychē* limits the understanding to “soul” - not something we would attribute to rocks.

Matthew 16:26 *gain*: the word *kerdēsē* is associated with business and economic activity.

Matthew 16:26 *forfeit*: the word *zēmioō* is one associated with injury, the loss of life, and in some of St. Paul’s writing it is associated with punishment

Matthew 16:27 *conduct*: The word *praxin* means “activity, action, deed” Other modern translation prefer “what has been done” rather than “conduct.” Certainly both are appropriate, but perhaps “conduct” points to a broader way of life than any individual or accumulated acts within the life.

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