

*Genesis 22; Matthew 21; Nehemiah 11; Acts 21*



THE DRAMATIC POWER of the testing of Abraham by the offering of Isaac (*Gen. 22*) is well known. The very terseness of the account calls forth our wonder. When he tells his servant that *we* (22:5—i.e., both Abraham and Isaac) will come back after worshipping on Mount Moriah, was Abraham speculating that God would raise his son back from the grave? Did he hope that God would intervene in some unforeseen way? What conceivable explanation could Abraham give his son when he bound him and laid him on the prepared altar?

A trifle earlier, Abraham's reply to Isaac's question about the lamb is a masterstroke: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8). There is no suggestion that Abraham foresaw the cross. Judging by the way he was prepared to go through with the sacrifice (22:10-11), it is not even clear that he expected that God would provide a literal animal. One might even guess that this was a pious answer for the boy until the dreadful truth could no longer be concealed. Yet in the framework of the story, Abraham spoke better than he knew: God did provide the lamb, a substitute for Isaac (22:13-14). In fact, like other biblical figures (e.g., Caiaphas in John 11:49-53), Abraham spoke *much* better than he knew: God would provide not only the animal that served as a substitute in this case, but the ultimate substitute, the Lamb of God, who alone could bear our sin and bring to pass all of God's wonderful purposes for redemption and judgment (Rev. 4-5; 21:22).

"The LORD will provide" (22:14): that much Abraham clearly understood. One can only imagine how much the same lesson was embedded in young Isaac's mind as well, and to his heirs beyond him. God himself connects this episode with the covenantal promise: Abraham's faith here issues in such stellar obedience that he does not elevate even his own cherished son to the place where he might dethrone God. God reiterates the covenant: "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (22:17-18). On this point, God swears by himself (22:16), not because otherwise he might lie, but because there is no one greater by whom to swear, and the oath itself would be a great stabilizing anchor to Abraham's faith and to the faith of all who follow in his train (cf. Heb. 6:13-20).

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Genesis 23; Matthew 22; Nehemiah 12; Acts 22



THE CLOSING VERSES OF Matthew 22 (Matt. 22:41-46) contain one of the most intriguing exchanges in the Gospels. After successfully fending off a series of tricky questions designed rather more to trap him or demean him than to elicit the wise answers he actually gives, Jesus poses a question of his own: “What do you think about the Christ [i.e., the Messiah]? Whose son is he?” (22:42). Some Jews thought there would be two Messiahs—one from David’s line (the tribe of Judah) and one from the tribe of Levi. But not surprisingly, the Pharisees here give the right answer: “The son of David” (22:42). Now Jesus drops his bombshell: “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet”’” (22:43-44).

Jesus is citing Psalm 110, identified by the superscription as a psalm of David. If a mere courtier had written the psalm, then when he wrote “The LORD says to my Lord,” he would have been understood to mean “The Lord [God] said to my Lord [the King].” In fact, that is the way many liberal scholars interpret the psalm—which means, of course, that they must ignore what the superscription says. But if *David* wrote the psalm, then the “my Lord” whom he addresses must be someone other than himself. The explanation offered by many students of the Bible, both Jewish and Christian, over the centuries, is correct: David, “speaking by the Spirit” (22:43), writing what is called an oracular psalm (i.e., an oracle, a prophecy immediately prompted by the Spirit), is referring to the Messiah who was to come: “The LORD [God] said to my Lord [the Messiah].” And what he said, in the rest of the psalm, establishes him as both universal king and perfect priest.

In days when family hierarchies meant that the son was always viewed as in some ways inferior to the father, Jesus drives home the point he is making: “If then David calls him [i.e., the Messiah] ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (22:45).

The implications are staggering. The Messiah from the line of David would, on the one hand, doubtless be David’s son, removed by a millennium from David but nevertheless in the throne succession. But on the other hand, he would be so great that even David must address him as “my Lord.” Any other conception of the Messiah is too small, too reductionistic. The Old Testament texts pointed in the right direction generations earlier. But there will always be people who prefer the simplifications of reductionism to the profundities of the revelation in the whole Bible.

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Genesis 24; Matthew 23; Nehemiah 13; Acts 23



THE LANGUAGE IN **Matthew 23** is frankly shocking. Jesus repeatedly pronounces his “woe” on the Pharisees and teachers of the law, labeling them “hypocrites,” calling them “blind guides” and “blind fools,” likening them to “whitewashed tombs that ‘look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.’ They are ‘sons of hell,’ a ‘brood of vipers.’” What calls forth such intemperate language from the Lord Jesus?

There are three primary characteristics in these people that arouse Jesus’ ire.

The *first* is the loss of perspective that, with respect to the revelation of God, focuses on the minors and sacrifices the majors. They are ever so punctilious about tithing, even putting aside a tenth of the herbs grown in the garden, while somehow remaining unconcerned about the massive issues of “justice, mercy and faithfulness” (23:23). Jesus carefully says that he is not dismissing the *relatively* minor matters: his interlocutors should not neglect them, for these prescriptions were, after all, mandated by God. But to focus on them to the exclusion of the weightier matters is akin to straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Similarly, carefully crafted rules about when it is important to tell the truth and when and how one can get away with a lie (23:16-22) not only overlook that truth-telling is of fundamental importance, but implicitly deny that this entire universe is God’s, and all our promises and pledges are before him.

The *second* is love for the outward forms of religion with very little experience of a transformed nature. To be greeted as a religious teacher, to be honored by the community, to be thought holy and religious, while inwardly seething with greed, self-indulgence, bitterness, rivalry, and hate is profoundly evil (23:5-12, 25-32).

The *third* damning indictment is that because they have a major teaching role, these leaders spread their poison and contaminate others, whether by precept or example. Not only do they fail to enter the kingdom themselves, they effectively close it down to others (23:13-15).

How many evangelical leaders spend most of their energy on peripheral, incidental matters, and far too little on the massive issues of justice, mercy, and faithfulness—in our homes, our churches, the workplace, in all our relationships, in the nation? How many are more concerned to be thought wise and holy than to be wise and holy? How many therefore end up damning their hearers by their own bad example and by their drifting away from the Gospel and its entailments?

Our only hope is in this Jesus who, though he denounces this appalling guilt with such fierceness, weeps over the city (Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44).

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## FEBRUARY 1

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*Genesis 25; Matthew 24; Esther 1; Acts 24*



IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES, Christians have often been tempted to set dates as to when the Lord would return—almost always saying that he would return within a generation of the one making the prediction. In **Matthew 24:36-44**, however, Jesus insists that the time is hidden. We cannot know it, and we should not try to know it.

More precisely, the passage emphasizes two things.

*First*, not only is the hour of the end a secret preserved by the Father for himself alone, but when the judgment falls it will be unexpected, sudden, and irreversible. That is the point Jesus is making when he draws a comparison with the sudden onset of the deluge: “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (24:37). The point is not that the people at the end of the ages will be as wicked as people were in the days of Noah. That may or may not be true, but it is not what Jesus says. Jesus draws attention to the sheer normality of life in Noah’s day before the Flood: “People were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark” (24:38). The Flood took them by surprise, and utterly destroyed them. “That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (24:39). Two men or two women will be laboring together in some joint task, and the judgment will snatch one away and leave the other (24:40-41). The end of the age will be sudden and unexpected.

*Second*, it follows (“Therefore,” 24:42) that faithful servants will always be ready. Obviously a homeowner in a dicey neighborhood doesn’t know when a thief will turn up. Rather, he takes such precautions that he is always prepared. The point is not that Jesus’ return at the end of the age is sneaky—like the approach of the thief—brutal, or exploitative. The point, rather, is that although the timing of his return cannot be predicted, he will come, and his people should be as prepared for it as the homeowner in the insecure neighborhood is prepared for the arrival of the thief (whose timing is equally unpredictable). “So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:44).

What would you like to be doing, saying, thinking, or planning when Jesus comes again? What would you *not* like to be doing, saying, thinking, or planning when Jesus comes again? Jesus tells you always to “keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (24:42).

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## FEBRUARY 2

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Genesis 26; Matthew 25; Esther 2; Acts 25



THE PARABLE OF THE sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46) focuses attention on the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. It speaks volumes to us in a culture where the poor, the wretched, and the unfortunate can easily be ignored or swept aside to the periphery of our vision. Here Jesus, the Son of Man and the King, declares, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (25:40; cf. v. 45). Doesn’t this mean that somehow when we serve the wretched we serve Christ? Doesn’t this then become a distinguishing mark—perhaps even *the* distinguishing mark—of true followers of Jesus Christ?

That, at least, is how this parable is usually interpreted. At one level I am loath to challenge it, because it is always important for those who know and follow the living God to show their life in God in the realms of compassion, service, and self-abnegation. Certainly elsewhere the Bible has a great deal to say about caring for the poor.

But it is rather unlikely that that is the focus of this parable. Another ancient stream of interpretation has much more plausibility. Two elements in the text clarify matters. *First*, Jesus insists that what was done by the “sheep,” or not done by the “goats,” was done “for one of the least of these brothers of mine” (25:40; cf. v. 45). There is overwhelming evidence that this expression does not refer to everyone who is suffering, but to Jesus’ followers who are suffering. The emphasis is not on generic compassion (as important as that is elsewhere), but on who has shown compassion to the followers of Jesus who are hungry, thirsty, unclothed, sick, or in prison.

*Second*, both the sheep and the goats (25:37, 41, 44) are surprised when Jesus pronounces his verdict in terms of the way they have treated “the least of these brothers of mine.” If what Jesus is referring to was compassion of a generic sort, it is hard to see how anyone would be all that surprised. The point is that it is *Jesus’ identification* with these people who have (or have not) been helped that is critical—and that is a constant feature of biblical religion. For example, when Saul (Paul) persecutes Christians, he is persecuting *Jesus* (Acts 9:4). Real followers of Jesus will go out of their way to help other followers of Jesus, not least the weakest and most despised of them; others will have no special inclination along these lines. That is what separates sheep and goats (25:32-33).

So how do you treat other Christians, even the least of Jesus’ brothers?

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BEFORE WE MEET:

1. In the past week what did you learn about God from what you read?
2. In the past week what did you learn about people from what you read?
3. In the past week what is one question you have from what you read?

## FEBRUARY 3

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*Genesis 27; Matthew 26; Esther 3; Acts 26*



ALL FOUR OF THE PASSAGES contribute to the theme of the providence of God.

**Genesis 27** is in many ways a pathetic, grubby account. Earlier Esau had despised his birthright (25:34); now Jacob swindles him out of it. In this Jacob is guided by his mother Rebekah, who thus shows favoritism among her children and disloyalty to her husband. Esau throws a tantrum and takes no responsibility for his actions at all. Indeed, he nurses his bitterness and plots the assassination of his brother. The family that constitutes the promised line is not doing very well.

Yet those who read the passage in the flow of the entire book remember that God himself had told Rebekah, before the twin brothers were born, that the older would serve the younger (25:23). Perhaps that is one of the reasons why she acted as she did: apparently she felt that God needed a little help in keeping his prediction, even immoral help. Yet behind these grubby and evil actions God is mysteriously working out his purposes to bring the promised line to the end he has determined. Certainly God could have arranged to have Jacob born first, if that was the man he wanted to carry on the line. Instead, Esau is born first, but Jacob is chosen, as if to say that the line is important, but God's sovereign, intervening choosing is more important than mere human seniority, than mere primogeniture.

In **Matthew 26**, the authorities hatch a nasty plot to corrupt justice and sort out a political problem; Judas, one of Jesus' intimates, sells his master; Jesus is in agony in Gethsemane; he is arrested and betrayed by a kiss; the Sanhedrin condemns and brutalizes its prisoner; Peter disowns Jesus. Yet who can doubt, in the flow of the book, that God remains in sovereign control to bring about the desired end? Jesus will give his life "as a ransom for many" (20:28), and all the failures, pain, and sin in this chapter issue in redemption.

The book of **Esther** does not even use the word *God*, but here too, even Haman's gross government-sanctioned genocide is heading toward God's salvation. And Paul (**Acts 26**) apparently would have been acquitted if he had not appealed to Caesar—yet that very appeal brings him in the end to declare the Gospel at the heart of the Empire.

Providence is mysterious. It must never be used to justify wrong actions or to mitigate sin: Isaac and his family are more than a little sleazy, Judas is a deceitful wretch, Haman is vile, and the Roman court trying Paul is more than a little corrupt. Yet God sovereignly rules, behind the scenes, bringing glory out of gore and honor out of shame.

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## FEBRUARY 4

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*Genesis 28; Matthew 27; Esther 4; Acts 27*



THE NAME *BETHEL* MEANS “house of God.” I wonder how many churches, houses, Bible colleges and seminaries, Christian shelters, and other institutions have chosen this name to grace their signs and their letterheads.

Yet the event that gave rise to the name (*Gen. 28*) was a mixed bag. There is Jacob, scurrying across the miles to the home of his uncle Laban. Ostensibly he is looking for a godly wife—but this reason nests more comfortably in Isaac’s mind than in Jacob’s. In reality he is running for his life, as the previous chapter makes clear: he wishes to escape being assassinated by his own brother in the wake of his own tawdry act of betrayal and deceit. Judging by the requests he makes to God, he is in danger of having too little food and inadequate clothing, and he is already missing his own family (*28:20-21*). Yet here God meets him in a dream so vivid that Jacob declares, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven” (*28:17*).

For his part, God reiterates the substance of the Abrahamic Covenant to this grandson of Abraham. The vision of the ladder opens up the prospect of access to God, of God’s immediate contact with a man who up to this point seems more driven by expedience than principle. God promises that his descendants will multiply and be given this land. The ultimate expansion is also repeated: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring” (*28:14*). Even at the personal level, Jacob will not be abandoned, for God declares, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (*28:15*).

Awakened from his dream, Jacob erects an altar and calls the place Bethel. But in large measure he is still the same wheeler-dealer. He utters a vow: If God will do this and that and the other, if I get all that I want and hope for out of this deal, “then the LORD will be my God” (*28:20-21*).

*And God does not strike him down!* The story moves on: God does all that he promised, and more. All of Jacob’s conditions are met. One of the great themes of Scripture is how God meets us where we are: in our insecurities, in our conditional obedience, in our mixture of faith and doubt, in our fusion of awe and self-interest, in our understanding and foolishness. God does not disclose himself only to the greatest and most stalwart, but to us, at *our* Bethel, the house of God.

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