

Genesis 7; Matthew 7; Ezra 7; Acts 7



THERE WAS A TIME WHEN scarcely a person in the Anglo-Saxon world would not have been able to cite John 3:16. Doubtless it was the best known verse in the entire Bible. It may still hold pride of place today—I am uncertain. But if it does, the percentage of people who know it is considerably smaller, and continues to decline as biblical illiteracy rises in the West.

Meanwhile there is another verse that is (perhaps more) frequently quoted, almost as a defiant gesture, by some people who do not know their Bibles very well, but who think it authorizes their biases. It is **Matthew 7:1**: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” In an age when philosophical pluralism is on the ascendancy, these nine words might almost be taken as *the* public confession.

Three things must be said. *First*, it is striking that today’s readings include not only Matthew 7 but also Genesis 7. There the sweeping judgment of the Flood is enacted: “Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark” (Gen. 7:23). The same God stands behind both passages, so we should not be too hasty in understanding Matthew 7:1 to mean that all judgment is intrinsically evil.

*Second*, this is not an instance where something practiced in the Old Testament is somehow abolished in the New. It is not as if judgment was possible in Genesis but is now abolished in Matthew. After all, Matthew 7:6 demands that we make judgments about who are “dogs” and “pigs,” and the paragraphs at the end of this chapter warn against false prophets (and tell us how we are to discern who is true and who is false), and who is truly a follower of Jesus and who is not. Moreover, not only does this chapter speak of a terrible judgment no less final than the flood (Matt. 7:13, 19, 23), but there are many passages in the New Testament that are equally uncompromising.

*Third*, we must not only expose false interpretations of Matthew 7:1, we must understand what it does say and appropriate it. The verb *judge* has a wide range of meanings, and the context (7:1-5) is decisive in giving it its color in this passage. People who pursue righteousness (6:33) are easily prone to self-righteousness, arrogance, condescension toward others, an ugly holier-than-thou stance, hypocrisy. Not all are like that, of course, but the sin of “*judgmentalism*” is common enough. Jesus won’t have it.



Genesis 8; Matthew 8; Ezra 8; Acts 8



WHY DOES JESUS FIND the faith of the centurion so astonishing (Matt. 8:5-13)? The centurion assures Jesus that as far as he is concerned it is unnecessary for the Master to visit his home in order to heal the paralyzed servant. He understands that Jesus need only say the word, and the servant will be healed. “For,” the centurion explains, “I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (8:9). Why is this such an astonishing evidence of faith?

Three factors stand out. The *first* is that in an age of not a little superstition, the centurion believed that Jesus’ healing power did not lie in hocus-pocus, or even in his personal presence, but in his word. It was not *necessary* for Jesus to touch or handle the servant, or even be present; he needed only to say the word, and it would be done.

The *second* is that he came to such confident assertions despite the fact that he was not steeped in Scripture. He was a Gentile. What grasp of Scripture he had we cannot say, but it was certainly less than that enjoyed by many of the learned in Israel. Yet his faith was purer, simpler, more penetrating, more Christ-honoring than theirs.

The *third* astonishing element in this man’s faith is the analogy he draws. He recognizes that he himself is a man under authority, and therefore he has authority when he speaks in the context of that relationship. When he tells a Roman soldier under him to come or go or do something, he is not speaking merely as one man to another man. The centurion speaks with the authority of his senior officer, the tribune, who in turn speaks, finally, with the authority of Caesar, with the authority of the mighty Roman Empire. That authority belongs to the centurion, not because he is in fact as powerful as Caesar in every dimension, but because he is a man under authority: the chain of command means that when the centurion speaks to the foot soldier, Rome speaks. Implicitly, the centurion is saying that he recognizes in Jesus an analogous relationship: Jesus so stands in relationship to God, and under God’s authority, that when Jesus speaks, God speaks. The centurion, of course, was not speaking within the framework of a mature Christian doctrine of Christ, but the eyes of faith had enabled him to penetrate very far indeed.

This is the faith we need. It trusts Jesus’ word, reflects a simple profundity, and believes that when Jesus speaks, God speaks.



*Genesis 9—10; Matthew 9; Ezra 9; Acts 9*



DESPITE THE COMPREHENSIVENESS of the punishment it meted out, the Flood did not change human nature. God well knows that murder, first committed by Cain, will happen again. Now he prescribes capital punishment (*Gen. 9:6*), not as a deterrent—deterrence is not discussed—but as a signal that murder is in a class by itself, in that it kills a being made in the image of God. But there are other signs that sin continues. The promise God makes, sealed by the rainbow, not to destroy the race in this fashion again (*9:12-17*), is relevant not because the race has somehow been shocked into compliance, but precisely because God recognizes that the same degradation will occur again and again. And Noah himself, who with reference to his pre-Flood days can rightly be called a “preacher of righteousness” (*2 Peter 2:5*), is now depicted as a drunk, with family relationships already breaking down.

But there is another parallel between these chapters of Genesis and what took place before the Flood. Before the Flood, despite the grip of sin, there are individuals like Abel, whose sacrifice pleases God (*Gen. 4*); there are people who recognize their great need of God, and call upon the name of the Lord (*4:26*); there is Enoch, the seventh from Adam, who walked with God (*5:22*). In other words, there is a race within the race, a smaller race, not intrinsically superior to the other, but so relating to the living God that it heads in a quite different direction. Writing at the beginning of the fifth century A.D., Augustine of Hippo in North Africa traces back to these earliest chapters the beginning of two humanities, two cities—the city of God and the city of man. (See also the meditation for December 27.) That contrast develops and grows in various ways throughout the Bible, until the book of Revelation contrasts “Babylon” and the “new Jerusalem.” Empirically, believers find they are citizens of both; in terms of allegiance, they belong to one or the other.

The same distinctions re-form after the Flood. The race soon demonstrates that the problems of rebellion and sin are deep-seated; they constitute part of our nature. Yet distinctions also begin to appear. While this covenant that God makes not to destroy the earth the same way again is between God and *all* living things (*9:16*), Noah’s sons divide, much as Adam’s had. The wearisome cycle begins again, but it is not without hope: the city of God never falls into utter abeyance, but anticipates the more explicit covenantal distinctions to come, now just around the corner, and the glorious climax to come at the end of redemptive history.



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*Genesis 11; Matthew 10; Ezra 10; Acts 10*



MOVED BY COMPASSION when the crowds remind him of sheep without a shepherd, Jesus instructs his disciples, “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:38)—and then he organizes a trainee mission for the twelve who constitute his inner circle (Matt. 10). There are many wonderful things to learn from this chapter, which, judging by the language (e.g., 10:18), Jesus takes to be a kind of forerunner of a lifelong mission. Here I must focus on just one element.

That element is the degree of conflict that Jesus anticipates in this evangelistic enterprise. Some entire communities will reject Jesus’ followers (10:11-14). In later years, although their witness will reach to the highest levels of government, those very governments will sometimes impose harsh sanctions (10:17-19). The priorities of the Gospel will split families so severely that some family members will betray other family members (10:21, 35). At its worst, persecution will hound Christian witnesses from one center to another (10:22-23). In some instances this persecution will end in martyrdom (10:28).

Anyone with the slightest familiarity with history knows how frequently and chillingly these prophecies have been fulfilled. The fact that many in the West have for so long been largely exempt from the worst features of such persecution has let us lower our guard—even Christians may think that a hassle-free life is something that society owes us. But as the Judeo-Christian heritage of the West weakens, we may one day be caught up in realities that missions specialists know but that the rest of us sometimes ignore: the last century and a half have seen more converts, *and more martyrs*, than the first eighteen centuries combined.

What will stabilize us in such times? This chapter mentions several precious supports: the recognition that Jesus our Master was hated before us (10:24-25); assurance that in the end justice will be done and will be seen to be done (10:26-27); recognition that a proper fear of God reduces fear of human beings (10:28); quiet confidence in the sovereignty of God, even in these circumstances (10:29-31); encouraging recognition that those who do receive us receive Christ, and therefore receive God (10:40); Christ’s own promise that the rewards of eternity cannot fail (10:41-42).

In any case, a fundamental principle is at stake: This is the way Christians view things; indeed, it is bound up with being a Christian. “Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (10:38-39).



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*Genesis 12; Matthew 11; Nehemiah 1; Acts 11*



THIS PASSAGE, **Genesis 12**, marks a turning point in God's unfolding plan of redemption. From now on, the focus of God's dealings is not scattered individuals, but a race, a nation. This is the turning point that makes the Old Testament documents so profoundly Jewish. And ultimately, out of this race come law, priests, wisdom, patterns of relationships between God and his covenant people, oracles, prophecies, laments, psalms—a rich array of institutions and texts that point forward, in ways that become increasingly clear, to a new covenant foretold by Israel's prophets.

Even in this initial covenant with Abram, God includes a promise that already expands the horizons beyond Israel, a promise that repeatedly surfaces in the Bible. God tells Abraham, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). Lest we miss its importance, the book of Genesis repeats it (18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). A millennium later, the same promise is refocused not on the nation as a whole, but on one of Israel's great kings: "May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed" (Ps. 72:17). The "evangelical prophet" often articulates the same breadth of vision (e.g., Isa. 19:23-25). The earliest preaching in the church, after the resurrection of Jesus, understood that the salvation Jesus had introduced was a fulfillment of this promise to Abraham (Acts 3:25). The apostle Paul makes the same connection (Gal. 3:8).

Even when the passage in Genesis is not explicitly cited, the same stance—that God's ultimate intentions were from the beginning to bring men and women from every race into the new humanity he was forming—surfaces in a hundred ways. In fact, quite apart from this passage, two of the three remaining passages in today's readings point in the same direction. In Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus makes it clear, in disturbing language, that on the last day pagan cities, though punished, may be punished less severely than the cities of Israel who enjoyed the unfathomable privilege of hearing Jesus for themselves, and seeing his miracles, but who made nothing of it. His own invitation is broad: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). And in Acts 11, Peter recounts his experiences with Cornelius and his household to the church in Jerusalem, leading them to conclude, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).

Christ receives the unrestrained praise of heaven, because with his blood he purchased people for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9; see meditation for December 15).



Genesis 13; Matthew 12; Nehemiah 2; Acts 12



THE PICTURE IS A LOVELY ONE. Jesus is so tender and gentle that when he finds a “bruised reed” (Matt. 12:20), instead of snapping it off thoughtlessly, he binds it up in the hope that it will rejuvenate itself. If the wick of a candle has been reduced to a smoldering ember, instead of snuffing it out—thereby extinguishing it completely—Jesus fans it back into flame. He will act this way, we are told, “till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope” (12:20-21).

The words are drawn from Isaiah 42:1-4, one of the “Suffering Servant” passages of Isaiah. Many people expected a Messiah who would come with decisive and irresistible power and bring justice to the earth, or at least to Israel. But it appears unlikely that many people linked the coming King with Isaiah’s promised servant. That is why the notion of a kingdom that dawned in the context of meekness and blessing, and restrained in the matter of climactic judgment, was so unexpected. Yet here was Jesus, healing the sick among the people—and then warning them not to tell people who he was (12:15-16). Small wonder Matthew sees in such conduct a direct fulfillment of Isaiah’s lovely words.

Even the surrounding verses betray something of the same theme. While Jesus is healing someone on the Sabbath, his opponents try to kill him for ostensibly breaking the Sabbath (12:9-14); while Jesus casts out demons from a poor victim, his opponents are ready to write Jesus off as the devil himself (12:22-28). Their very harshness, in the name of an alleged orthodoxy, contrasts sharply with his gentleness.

In addition to the great christological implications, this passage discloses something of the nature of the kingdom into which Christians have been drawn, and therefore of the conduct that is demanded of us. On the one hand, as Matthew has made clear in the previous chapter, Jesus’ witnesses are called to a holy and courageous boldness, a firm fidelity to the Gospel that is willing to endure ostracism and even persecution. But we are not to display the kind of “strength” that is hard and harsh, the kind of uprightness that is angry and condescending, the kind of courage that is merely ruthless, the kind of witness that rants and manipulates. We follow the Lord Jesus, who tells his followers, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (11:29). That means that we too, while we proclaim “justice to the nations” (12:18), resolve not to quarrel or cry out, clanging cymbals in the streets.



## DAILY BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from this chapter?
2. Which point in this chapter spoke to you the most?
3. Are there truths in this chapter that contradict the ideas we hear in the world? If so, what are they?
4. During your reading has God laid something upon your heart? (a need to confess a sin, a person or people in your life who need prayer, something to be thankful for)
5. Take time to pray now

## 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?

*Genesis 14; Matthew 13; Nehemiah 3; Acts 13*



IF ONE WERE TO READ through the book of Genesis without knowing the content of any other book of the Bible, one of the most enigmatic sections would certainly be these few verses about Melchizedek (*Gen. 14:18-20*). After all, how does he contribute in any substantial way to the plotline of the book?

His presence is precipitated by the decision (recorded in *Gen. 13*) of Abram and Lot to separate in order to stop the wrangling that was breaking out between their respective herdsmen. Lot opts for the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah. That means he and his family and wealth are taken captive when Kedorlaomer and the petty kings aligned with him attack the twin towns and escape with considerable plunder. Abram and his sizable number of fighting men go after the attackers. The skirmish ends in the release of Lot and his family, and the restoration of the people and goods that had been carried off. In the verses that follow, Abram refuses to accept any reward from the king of Sodom, a city already proverbial for wickedness, but he gladly accepts the blessing of the king of Salem (which possibly equals Jerusalem?) and in return pays him an honorific tithe.

Historically, Melchizedek (his name means “king of righteousness”) appears to be the king of the city-state of Salem (a name meaning “peace” or “well-being”). He functions not only as Salem’s king, but as “priest of God Most High” (14:18). Indeed, it is in the name of God Most High that he blesses Abram. And Abram so respects him, apparently knowing him from previous dealings, that he honors him in return.

We need not think that Abram was the only person on earth who retained knowledge of the living God. Melchizedek was another, and Abram finds in him a kindred spirit. In a book that provides the exact genealogy of virtually everyone who is important to the storyline, rather strikingly Melchizedek simply appears and disappears—we are told neither who his parents were nor when and how he died. He and his city are a foil to Sodom and its king. Once again, there are two cities: the city of God and the city of man (as Augustine would label them).

Melchizedek is mentioned in only two other places in the Bible. The first is Psalm 110 (see meditation for June 17); the other is Hebrews, where the writer recognizes that the inclusion of Melchizedek in the plotline of Genesis is no accident, but a symbol-laden event with extraordinary significance (especially Heb. 7). God is preparing the way for the ultimate priest-king, not only in verbal prophecies but in models (or *types*) that provide the categories and shape the expectations of the people of God.

