

I am with you always, even to the end of the age

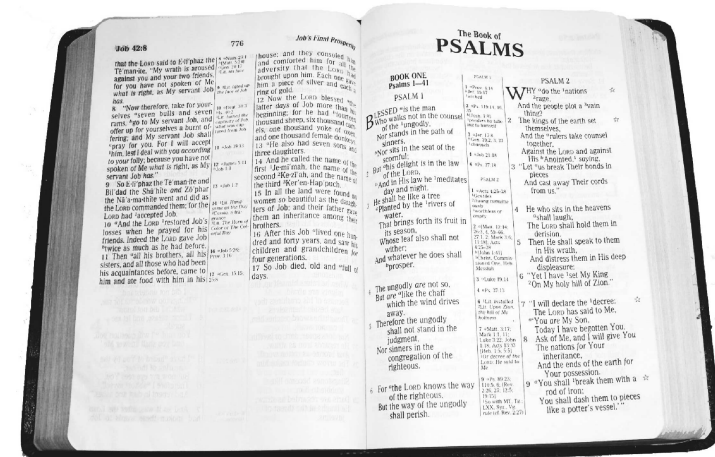
The Lord Jesus had instructed the disciples to go to Galilee where they would see him and while there, he gave them much instruction (10, 16). They later returned to Bethany in Judea where they saw him ascend to heaven (Luke 24:50–53). The reference to some who doubted (17) may refer to Thomas, but there may have been doubters among the five hundred to whom he appeared (cp. 1 Corinthians 15:6).

William Hendriksen has three helpful headings to cover these verses: ‘The Great Claim; The Great Commission and The Great Comfort.’ (COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW, page 996).

- The Great Claim – ‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth’ (18). Jesus is Lord! (2 Corinthians 4:5). The disciples served One who has authority over Satan, demons, sin, sickness and death. We serve the same risen Saviour!
- The Great Commission – ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (19–20). The apostles were told to preach the gospel to all nations (not just to the Jews). Notice that Jesus used the singular ‘name’ and not the plural ‘names’ for the three Persons of the Trinity. This demonstrates their ‘oneness’. It is important to understand that our aim must not be to make ‘converts’ but to make ‘disciples’ teaching them to observe all the things that Jesus had commanded them (20). Disciples learn from the Lord Jesus and gladly obey his Word. Are we good disciples?
- The Great Comfort – ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (20). The Christian is never alone. Nothing whatever can separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35–39; cp. Hebrews 13:5–6). **We have a wonderful message and an almighty Saviour.** He is with us and he always will be with us. Let us persevere in our God-given task of taking the wonderful news of Christ’s death on the cross for sinners and of his resurrection from the dead, to men, women, boys and girls.

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



June 2019

Matthew chapters 22 to 28

*Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole him away
while we slept’*

While the women were hurrying from the tomb to tell the disciples of the good news of the resurrection, *some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened* (11). These men, more than any others, had seen what had happened early that morning. They would have told about the stone being rolled back from the entrance to the tomb and of the appearance of the dazzling angel.

The disciples may have forgotten the prophecies of Jesus that he would rise from the dead, but the chief priests and the Pharisees remembered them (27:62–66). They knew that the terrified guards were not lying when they reported the events of the morning, but they bribed them to say, *‘His disciples came at night and stole him away while we slept’* (13; cp 27:62–66). If a soldier slept while on duty, he was generally put to death. When an angel released Peter from prison, the guards were put to death (Acts 12:19). The religious authorities assured the soldiers that if the governor heard that they had been asleep, they would persuade him to take no action against them. The story was circulated that the disciples had stolen the body. Many were prepared to believe the lie; others would have wondered why the soldiers had not been punished for their failure on duty.

The unbelief and rejection of Christ by the Jewish religious leaders was wilful and deliberate. They were prepared to lie in order to discredit the message of the resurrection of Christ. **Not everyone will accept the message of the gospel; they do not want to believe God’s good news or to follow Christ as their Lord.** The words of Abraham to the rich man are a relevant comment on their attitude to the resurrection of Jesus: *‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’* (Luke 16:31).

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Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead

No one actually saw the Lord Jesus rise from the dead. The witnesses saw that the tomb was empty and inside were the grave-clothes that had been wrapped around Jesus (John 20:6–7). The evidence that convinced the fearful disciples that Christ had risen was that he appeared to them on a number of occasions (1 Corinthians 15:3–7). He ate with them, taught them and prepared them for their work of evangelisation over a period of forty days (Luke 24:36–53; Acts 1:3).

There was an earthquake when Jesus rose from the dead. An angel of the Lord came and rolled back the stone which had sealed the tomb. Some faithful women wanted to anoint the body of Jesus (cp. Mark 16:1) but had waited until the Sabbath ended (the Jewish Sabbath runs from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday).

They went to the tomb early on Sunday morning and were the first to discover that it was empty. They saw the angel who told them not to fear, and that Jesus had risen from the grave. He called on them to see the empty tomb and said to them, *‘Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead’* (1–7). The women were then met by the risen Saviour who said to them, *‘Rejoice!’* In worshipping Jesus, the women recognised him to be God (9; cp. 4:10). He repeated the message of the angel, *‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me’* (10).

The resurrection of Jesus is good news! Christ’s resurrection declares him to be *the Son of God with power* (Romans 1:4). Death could not hold him (Acts 2:24)! He triumphed over the grave and his resurrection is a guarantee that all who belong to him will be raised at his coming to have new bodies which will be immune to weakness, pain, ageing and suffering (John 14:19; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3). **We have good news which we must share with others!**

Render ... to God the things that are God’s

The remainder of this chapter records several incidents in which the enemies of Jesus tried to *entangle him in his talk* (15). The Pharisees made believe that they were very concerned about keeping God’s law, whereas the Herodians were easy-going, caring very little for the Jewish religion. They were united however in their desire to get rid of Jesus. Notice the hypocrisy of these people. They said that Jesus taught *‘the way of God in truth’* (16), but they persistently rejected his claims. On a different occasion, Jesus quoted the Old Testament to describe the Pharisees, *‘These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’* (15:8). We will never deceive God with lip-service!

The question that Jesus was asked appeared to be quite straightforward, but there was a catch to it. – *‘Tell us, therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’* (17). Every adult male Jew was obliged to pay a denarius in tax to Rome each year; this was about a day’s wages. The Jews resented paying taxes to Caesar and if Jesus had said directly, ‘Yes, pay your taxes’, the Pharisees would have branded him as a traitor. If he had told them that it was wrong to pay these taxes, the Herodians would have accused him of treachery against Rome. The wicked Jewish leadership later accused him of this very thing before Pilate (Luke 23:2).

The Lord Jesus asked them to show him a denarius coin and said, *‘Whose image and superscription is this?’* They said that it was Caesar’s and he told them, *‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s’* (21). His superb answer to their trick-question caused them to marvel (22). We cannot shirk our duty to be law-abiding citizens and we must pay our taxes whether we like it or not. Even more important, we must *‘render ... to God the things that are God’s’*. **The Lord has bought us for himself at great cost (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) and he demands first place in our lives. Do we give grudgingly to the Lord’s work or cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7)?**

You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures

The Sadducees esteemed the five books of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy) above the other books of the Old Testament. They were very influential in Jewish religious affairs but were materialistic and ungodly. The high priests were drawn from their ranks and they controlled the temple which Jesus had cleansed. These men had a score to settle with Jesus and they came with a trick question in an attempt to entangle him in his talk. Like so many modern heretics, they denied the resurrection of the dead. Such people often resort to ridicule in an argument because their own position is very weak.

They raised the principle of ‘levirate marriage’ taught in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. When a man died childless, his widow was not to remarry outside of his family, but be married to his brother. The marriage would enable the widow to bear children from the same flesh and blood as her deceased husband. This would, hopefully, give her a son to preserve his name and inheritance. The Sadducees related a far-fetched story of a woman who survived seven husbands. They asked to which man the widow would be married in the resurrection. Jesus affirmed that there is a resurrection of the dead but pointed out that there is no marriage in heaven (30). He showed from one of the books of Moses that the dead are raised. He referred to the incident at the burning bush where God told Moses that he was ‘*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*’ (Exodus 3:6,15). The great patriarchs had died long ago, but they were alive with God in heaven. ‘*He is not the God of the dead but the God of the living*’ (31–32).

Jesus told the Sadducees, ‘*You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God*’ (29). It is possible to have a form of religion, which is empty and sham, which has no power (2 Timothy 3:5). **We too will make many mistakes if we do not know the teaching of Scripture. We cannot afford to be wrong concerning God and future resurrection. The Day of Judgment will be a day of shocks for those who have been ‘mistaken’.**

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus

John, the only disciple of the twelve who is recorded as being at the cross (John 19:26) and the women, were faithful to the end (55–56). Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man (57) and *a prominent council member*; Mark 15:43). The council (or ‘Sanhedrin’, the ruling religious body of the Jews had been hostile to Jesus right from the beginning of his ministry. Joseph had become a disciple of Jesus and was a secret believer because he feared the Jews (57; John 19:38).

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus (57–58; Mark 15:43; cp. John 12:42). Pilate would have recognised Joseph as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. He sent for the centurion to confirm that Jesus was dead before granting Joseph’s request (Mark 15:42–45). Joseph now openly declared his allegiance to Christ when it was possibly the most dangerous time to do so. He knew that he would be excommunicated from the council once his secret was out. We know from John’s Gospel that Joseph was aided by Nicodemus. They may have had servants to help them as they extracted the nails that bound the body of Jesus to the cross and lifted him down. He prepared the body of Jesus for burial and laid him in a tomb that he owned which was in a garden at Calvary (John 20:19). The Lord planned that his Son should have an honourable burial and that his Word be fulfilled (Isaiah 53:9). **Are you a secret disciple? Why are you fearful? The Lord can make the most timid person bold. Confess Christ openly and you will be blessed and greatly strengthened.**

The day following the death of Jesus was the Jewish Sabbath, Friday being *the Day of Preparation* (62). The chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate on their Sabbath day with a request. They were glad to be rid of Jesus, but they remembered that he had clearly stated that he would die and rise from the dead the third day after his death (63). They wanted a guard put on the tomb of Jesus because they feared that the disciples might steal the body of Jesus and then proclaim that he had risen. They sought permission to guard the tomb and Pilate granted their request (62–66). They had no excuse for denying the resurrection.

Truly this was the Son of God

Let me set the scene in the temple for you on the afternoon when Jesus died. At three o'clock (*the ninth hour*; 46), the priests were preparing for the evening sacrifice. This offering was not brought into the Holy of Holies. They could not see into that sacred place because the veil of the temple, a thick curtain, separated the Holy Place from the Holy of holies (Exodus 26:31–33; cp. Hebrews 9:3). The ark of the covenant had been kept there. It represented the very presence of God, but had been lost when the Babylonians overran and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Only the high priest was permitted to go through the veil into the Holy of holies, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement, when he made atonement for the sin of the people.

Suddenly the great curtain was torn apart from top to bottom. The priests would also have felt the ground moving from under them because of the earthquake (51). They would have been terrified lest they gaze into the Holy of holies and die. They would later learn that this was the precise moment that Jesus died. Many priests later became Christians through the preaching of the apostles (Acts 6:7).

What is the significance of the tearing apart of the veil? The way to God had been obstructed by sin, but when Jesus died, access to God was obtained for all who trust in him and come to the Father through him (John 14:6; Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 10:19–22).

Some believers (*'saints'*) were raised from the dead when Jesus died and they appeared to many in Jerusalem after Christ's resurrection (51–53). The Roman centurion was profoundly affected as he saw Jesus die. He had heard all the words of Jesus from the cross and the triumphant cry, *'It is finished'* (John 19:30). The enemies of Christ had said, *'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'* (40). The Roman centurion and those with him were filled with fear and exclaimed, *'Truly this was the Son of God'* (54). They were convinced that Jesus was the Person he claimed to be. **Do you acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God? Is he your Saviour and Lord?**

Which is the great commandment in the law?

The Pharisees had little time for the views of the Sadducees and would have gloated over the manner in which Jesus had silenced them. They hated Jesus however, and put forward a lawyer to test him (34–35; or 'scribe,' cp. Mark 12:28). The scribes were experts in interpreting and applying the Old Testament laws to everyday religion. Many of them were convinced that Jesus had come to destroy the law but that was not so. He had stated quite plainly, *'Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil'* (5:17). It is true that Jesus refused to endorse the petty rules that they had superimposed upon God's Word; that was not destroying the law but rejecting man-made traditions.

The scribes loved to debate the finer points of the Scriptures and the question asked by the scribe was typical of those which they debated. *'Which is the great commandment in the law?'* (36). Jesus replied by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4–5: *'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment'* (37). These verses, beginning with *'Hear O Israel'* were used to open the worship in the Jewish synagogues and this custom is still observed. The verses are called 'The Shema' (taken from the first word *'hear'* which is 'shema' in Hebrew).

The Lord Jesus not only told the scribe what is the greatest commandment, he also identified the next greatest commandment, *'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'* (Leviticus 19:18). We all break these commandments and need to repent when we do so. It is very difficult to love others as we love ourselves and to deny ourselves in the interest of God and of other people. To love is to fulfil the law (Romans 13:8–10). **If we love God with all our heart, we will desire to obey his Word and to have fellowship with him. If we truly love God, we will also love our neighbour as we love ourselves (39; cp. Ephesians 4:32; 5:2; 1 John 4:20–21).**

What do you think about the Christ?

The Lord Jesus had told the Sadducees, ‘*You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God*’ (29). He went on to demonstrate that the Pharisees also fell short in their knowledge of the Scriptures. He now asked the Pharisees a question about the Christ (the Messiah): ‘*What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is he?*’ (42). They replied that he is ‘*the Son of David*’. They expected the Messiah to be a man like themselves. Jesus referred to Psalm 110 and pointed out to them that David by inspiration of the Holy Spirit called Christ ‘*Lord*’ (Psalm 110:1). How then could he be David’s Son (44–45)? In other words, the Messiah is more than a descendant (‘*Son*’) of David. He is God! They were silenced and there were no more questions that day from the enemies of Jesus (46).

The scribes and the Pharisees failed to understand the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures which speak of Christ (Luke 24:44–46; John 5:39). * They had seen the amazing power of Jesus on many occasions, but refused to recognise him as the Messiah. They had accused him of being in league with the devil and they would not submit to his lordship (cp. 12:22–30).

It is most important that we read the Old Testament and seek to understand it. The false cults and religions go wrong in failing to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do (his Person and Work). Be sure that you not only know who Jesus is, and about his great work to save sinners, but that you also know him as your own Saviour, Lord and Friend. ‘*What do you think about the Christ?*’

*What think you of Christ? is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of him.* (John Newton)

* See my evangelistic Bible reading notes, ‘The Promise,’ which deal with this vital teaching.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

We must never forget the humanity of Jesus though we rightly defend his deity. His suffering was not easier to bear because he is God the Son. The fact that he is sinless and that he had enjoyed constant fellowship with the Father from all eternity greatly increased his suffering. The holy One was *made ... to be sin for us* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We are here faced with a scene of judgment! A supernatural darkness came over the land at the sixth hour (12 noon) and lasted for three hours. Jesus then cried out, ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ (45–46). Some thought that he was calling upon Elijah for help but they had not correctly heard the words, ‘*Eli, Eli.*’ We must remember that God the Father delivered Jesus up to be punished. He laid our sins upon him, the holy, sinless One: *Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him* (Isaiah 53:6,10). What amazing love and condescension for poor sinners like us! The Holy God turned his face away from his beloved Son at Calvary as he bore our sins. He loved us so much that he was prepared to give him up for us: *He did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all* (Romans 8:32).

Sin separates us from God and the three hours of darkness symbolised the utter horror brought by such a separation (45; cp. Isaiah 59:2). The cry, ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ expresses the appalling suffering of our Saviour. He knew and felt the utter desolation and loneliness of being punished by God the Father (cp. Isaiah 53:10–12). **The Lord Jesus died to save us from hell, that dreadful place of final and eternal separation from God. What wonderful love; let us worship him and adore him!**

*O, make me understand it,
Help me to take it in,
What it meant to thee, the Holy One,
To bear away my sin.*

(Katherine A. N. Kelly).

He saved others; himself he cannot save

The soldiers brought the Lord Jesus to a place called Golgotha where they crucified him. They offered him wine mingled with myrrh to help deaden his pain but he refused it (32–34). They crucified Jesus at the third hour (nine o'clock in the morning; Mark 15:25) between two criminals and they gambled for his clothes, fulfilling Old Testament prophecy (35; cp. Psalm 22:18; Isaiah 53:12).

The Lord Jesus was blasphemed by those who passed by to gaze at the gruesome spectacle. They shook their heads in contempt of Jesus. They seized upon the accusation of the two false witnesses who accused Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple and to rebuild it within three days (26:60–62; see notes on these verses). They taunted him, *'You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'* (40). They were saying, *'If you have such great power, if you really are the Son of God, prove it by coming down from the cross.'*

The chief priests, scribes and elders also mocked him for claiming to be the Son of God (43), though they did not speak to him directly. They spoke to each other about him: *'He saved others; himself he cannot save'* (42). Those words had a far deeper significance than his enemies realised. He could have saved himself and come down from the cross, but he would not. It was not the nails that bound him to the cross, but his great love for sinners like you and me. *He was obedient to the point of death* (Philippians 2:8) to fulfil the Father's plan to save sinners (Acts 2:23). *By one Man's obedience many will be made righteous* (Romans 5:19). **Are you having problems with obedience to God? Meditate upon Christ's great love and obedience to save us. If you love him, surely you will want to obey him (John 14:15).**

*Was it the nails , O Saviour,
That bound thee to the tree?
Nay, 'twas thine everlasting love,
Thy love for me, for me.* (Katherine A.N. Kelly)

All their works they do to be seen by men

This chapter can be divided into three sections:

1. A warning against the sins of the scribes and Pharisees (1–12).
2. Eight woes pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees (13–36).
3. The lament of Jesus over Jerusalem (37–39).

Most of the scribes and Pharisees were hostile to Jesus, though not all (21:23; 22:15; cp. Luke 7:36; 13:31). Jesus did not hesitate to condemn them for their hypocrisy as he taught in the temple (1; cp. 24:1). They were respected as the experts in the law of Moses and were more orthodox than the liberal thinking Herodians and Sadducees. Jesus urged that the truths they taught should be followed, but not their example (2–3):

- They lacked sincerity. – *For they say, and do not do* (3). It is not enough to say that the Bible is the Word of God, we must obey it (James 1:22). Beware of hypocrisy!
- They lacked sympathy. – Their man-made rules and regulations made religion a miserable and burdensome affair. They were hard-hearted, having no compassion for struggling sinners (4, 23). The Lord Jesus is so different and we must follow his example (11:28–30; Colossians 3:12–14). Beware of heartlessness!
- They lacked humility. – *All their works they do to be seen by men* (5). They wanted everyone to see their phylacteries (leather cases containing passages of Scripture, cp. Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 11:18) worn on the forehead and left arm. They also lengthened the tassels on the hem of their robes (cp. Numbers 15:38). They wanted to be seen in the place of honour at banquets and in the synagogues (6). They were pompous showmen (7); all this *to be seen by men* (cp. 6:2, 5, 16). The Lord Jesus warns us against pride and calls on us to serve him with humility (8–11). Beware of pride!

God has his ways of humbling the proud (12). **How real is your Christianity? If it is shallow and designed for outward show, please remember that you cannot deceive God.**

A son of hell

The Lord Jesus addressed the scribes and Pharisees as ‘*hypocrites*’ in seven of the eight woes between verses 13 and 36 (verse 14 is omitted from the ESV, which has only seven woes). These woes are not only words of denunciation but also of lament. ‘*Woe*’ is an expression of sorrow and could be expressed, ‘*Alas for you.*’ Hendriksen points out in his commentary on this chapter that to feel sorrow over someone and to denounce them at the same time is not necessarily self-contradictory. He refers us to 1 Samuel 15:13–31 as an example of this. The Lord Jesus felt great sorrow over those who rejected him and the message of the gospel. See how he lamented over wicked Jerusalem (37–39).

Jesus denounced the scribes and Pharisees because:

- They shut up the kingdom of heaven by their perversion of the teaching of Scripture (13). They had *taken away the key of knowledge* (Luke 11:52). They did not go into the kingdom themselves and they prevented others from entering.
- They robbed some of the most vulnerable people in society while pretending to be holy, mouthing long prayers to make an impression (14; cp. Mark 12:40).
- They would go to any length to win a proselyte only to make him *twice as much a son of hell* as themselves (15).
- They sanctioned deceit by their teaching that some oaths were binding, but others were not (16–22; cp. 5:33–37). If we love the Lord Jesus who is ‘*the truth*’ and if we have ‘*the Spirit of truth*’ (John 14:6,17), we will shun all forms of deception. *Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD* (Proverbs 12:22).

Zeal is not a proof of true religion! Satan has his zealots like the scribes and Pharisees who are far from God. They are busy making each of their converts ‘*a son of hell*’. The zeal of some sects and false cults puts many of us to shame. **Puritan John Trapp rightly asks, ‘Shall we not be as busy in building stair-cases for heaven as seducers are in digging descents to hell?’**

A man of Cyrene, Simon by name

Let us ponder the suffering of our Lord Jesus for us unworthy sinners. The scourge was a whip with several thongs into which were knotted small pieces of metal or bone. When a victim was lashed, his flesh was torn away. Jesus was scourged before being handed over to the soldiers. The whole garrison then made fun of him. The soldiers put a mock royal robe of scarlet over the bleeding, lacerated back of the Saviour. The crown of thorns ripped into his brow and scalp, and they put a reed (a piece of wood) into his right hand as an imitation royal sceptre. They spat on him as they knelt in mock worship and beat him over the head with the reed. When they finished their wicked game, the soldiers removed the scarlet-coloured robe and put his own clothes upon him. They then led him away to be crucified (26–31).

Jesus was led out of Jerusalem, carrying his cross, but he was unable to carry it far, owing to his injuries and sheer exhaustion. *They found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear his cross* (32). Simon was probably a Jewish pilgrim to the Passover feast. Cyrene was on the north coast of Africa, in what is now Libya. There was a sizeable Jewish community in Cyrene (Acts 2:10; 6:9; 11:20). We see in his experience the wonderful and mysterious ways of God. We don’t know how Simon felt when the Roman soldiers singled him out but it was to be the turning point in his life.

Matthew names Simon, and in his Gospel Mark points out that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21). These men were obviously known to Mark’s first readers. It would appear that they were well known Christians in the early church. Rufus may be the same person mentioned in Romans 16:13. – *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine.* Early Christian tradition has it that this Rufus was the son of Simon, though we cannot be sure. Paul comments that the mother of Rufus (Simon’s wife?) had been like a mother to him. **God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform!**

He took water and washed his hands

Imagine the scene when the chief priests and elders arrived with their prisoner at the governor's residence. They hurled one accusation after another at the Lord Jesus but he did not speak, except for confirming that he was the King of the Jews. Pilate *marvelled greatly* that Jesus did not seek to defend himself against the charges made against him (11–14).

Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent and had been delivered to him because of the envy of the leaders of the Jews (18,24). There was a custom at Passover for the governor to set a prisoner free at the request of the people. Pilate saw this as an opportunity to release the innocent Jesus and gave them a stark choice, – he would release a murderer, Barabbas, or Jesus (15–17; cp. Luke 23:19). Surely, these religious people would ask for the release of Jesus rather than Barabbas? The plan failed, however. The wicked chief priests and elders were so determined that Jesus should die that they persuaded the crowd to press for the release of the notorious criminal, and to call for the crucifixion of Jesus (20–23).

Pilate's wife had suffered a nightmare about Jesus and sent a message to her husband. She pleaded, *'Have nothing to do with this just man'* (19). How did Pilate respond to her pleading? *He took water and washed his hands* (24) but he could not escape his responsibility by protesting his innocence. Pilate used the same words as did the chief priests to Judas – *'You see to it'* (4,24).

We too are faced with the challenge of Christ. We may not hate him like the crowd and their leaders, but we may reject him because, like Pontius Pilate, we do not want to be involved with him. We cannot be neutral in our attitude to Christ. We either own him as our Saviour and Lord or we reject him. **It is no use pretending that we have no sin and thus need no Saviour. We cannot wash our hands of Jesus and escape God's judgment.** If we reject Christ, we will be lost eternally. How is it with you?

How can you escape the condemnation of hell?

The Lord's denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees continues:

- They were meticulous in paying their tithes (a tenth), even on the herbs that they gathered, but they neglected the most important requirements of the law – *justice and mercy and faith* (23–24). In their blindness, they were like someone who strained his wine to remove a gnat (an unclean insect), but they swallowed a camel (an unclean animal). Their tithing was not joyful giving to God, but a source of bondage and pride.
- They paid much attention to outward appearances. They avoided religious defilement through eating or drinking from unclean vessels but were themselves full of extortion and self-indulgence (25–26).
- They were like the whitewashed tombs which were beautiful on the outside, but inside were full of decaying bodies. They appeared to be righteous, but their hearts were lawless and wicked (27–28).
- They honoured the dead prophets, preserving their tombs and raising up monuments in their honour (29; cp. Acts 2:29). The scribes and Pharisees insisted that they would never have slain God's servants had they lived at the time of their ancestors, but the murderous blood of their fathers flowed in their veins. They themselves would persecute and kill God's messengers (30–34). They hated the sinless Son of God and would soon crucify him. Their persecution of his church is documented in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

Many thousands of Christians were persecuted, imprisoned and martyred under atheistic communist regimes during the twentieth century, but our greatest opponents are often religious. The scribes and Pharisees rejected repeated offers of mercy and forgiveness. Is it any wonder that Jesus asked, *'How can you escape the condemnation of hell?'* (33). They would surely be punished for their wickedness (34–36).

Think about your religion. Is it genuine or are you a hypocrite? Do you love the Lord Jesus and seek to honour him in your life?

But you were not willing

These verses present a willing Saviour and an unwilling people:

- A willing Saviour. – Jerusalem, the holy city which contained the temple, was known as the city of God (Psalm 48:1–2). It was also a wicked city which had murdered God’s servants. Her people had been privileged to receive numerous opportunities to turn from their sin and to come to the Lord, but they had refused God’s gracious offers of mercy. The Lord Jesus grieved and lamented over Jerusalem: ‘*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!*’ (37). The intense emotion and pathos of his grief is shown in his repetition of the word ‘*Jerusalem*’ (cp. David’s lament over Absalom, 2 Samuel 18:33 – ‘*O my son Absalom – my son, my son Absalom!*’).
- An unwilling people. – The Lord would have often gathered Jerusalem to himself, to have her for himself and to lovingly protect her people. He lamented, ‘*How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate*’ (37). Jerusalem and her temple was destroyed and left desolate in AD 70. Jesus would not make any public appearances to the Jews after his death and resurrection until his second coming when every eye will see him (Revelation 1:7). People will then say, ‘*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!*’ (39).

The words of Jesus, ‘*But you were not willing*’ will haunt many a person who has rejected him. He is very patient and very kind, but will not leave open for ever his door of mercy and opportunity. Is your heart right with God? Have you responded to Christ’s invitation to turn from your sin and to follow him? If you are not willing to submit to Jesus as your Lord and Saviour now, do not be surprised when he rejects you on the day of judgment!

What is that to us?

The chief priests and elders were determined to have Jesus executed, but the death penalty had to be approved by the Roman governor. They thus had him bound and taken to Pontius Pilate (1–2). Judas Iscariot was full of remorse when he saw that Jesus had been condemned to death. He now wanted him released and he said to the chief priests and elders, ‘*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.*’ They were quite unmoved by the plea of Judas or the confession of his sin. They replied, ‘*What is that to us?*’ (3–4). They were intent on crucifying the Lord of Glory! They had no time for Judas now that he had served their purpose.

J. C. Ryle writes concerning this incident, ‘There is such a thing as repentance which is too late. His repentance (3) and his confession (4) were not unto salvation. This is a point which deserves special attention. It is a common saying, “It is never too late to repent.” That saying is no doubt true if the repentance is true, but unhappily, late repentance is not often genuine. It is possible for a man to feel his sins and be sorry for them, to be under strong convictions of guilt and express deep remorse, to be pricked in conscience and exhibit deep distress of mind, and yet, for all this, not to repent with his heart.’ (DAILY READINGS, VOLUME 1 from J.C. Ryle, Day 325).

The betrayer went into the temple and threw down the thirty pieces of silver. He then went out and hanged himself. What a warning to any who would entertain sin and treachery in their life! Satan casts them off when they have served his purpose and even worse, they face a dreadful eternity without Christ. Notice the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders. They were guilty of treachery and of plotting murder and yet were so careful to refuse blood money which after all had originated with them. They would not have it used for anything sacred, and so purchased a field to be used as a burial ground for foreigners (6–7). In doing this, they unwittingly fulfilled Scripture (9–10; cp. Jeremiah 32:6–9). **Can there be anything worse than wickedness which is covered by a cloak of religion?**

Then he went out and wept bitterly

The suffering of the Lord Jesus involved more than the crucifixion. Judas betrayed him, he was humiliated and beaten when facing the high priest and the Sanhedrin, and Peter denied him. Peter followed Jesus *at a distance to the high priest's courtyard* (58). He loved his Lord, and no doubt wanted to see what would become of him. As he sat with the servants (57), he was accused on three occasions of being a follower of Jesus.

Peter's courage deserted him! He first pretended not to understand what the girl was talking about (69–70), and next claimed that he did not know Jesus. He then denied his Lord with swearing and cursing (71–74). He may have thought that such language would convince them that he could not be one of the disciples. Christians should be different from the world in their language. Bad language and malicious gossip are not the marks of a believer. Our speech must *always be with grace* (Ephesians 5:4; Colossians 4:6). Are you fearful and lacking in boldness in your Christian witness? Remember, *God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind* (2 Timothy 1:7).

The Lord Jesus had warned Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock crowed (34). Peter remembered these words when he heard the crowing. *Then he went out and wept bitterly* (75). He wept over his sin, he repented, and he was restored. He went on to accomplish great things for his Lord.

Peter's denial is a warning for us to beware of self-confidence. We may think that we could never deny our precious Saviour but we must never forget that though we want to please him, we are capable of any sin. Jesus prayed for Peter (Luke 22:31–32) and it is encouraging to know that he also prays for us (Hebrews 7:25). If you are beset by guilt because of some sin in your life, come to the Lord Jesus and ask him to forgive you. He will accept you and freely forgive you if you truly repent and trust in him.

Take heed that no one deceives you

The disciples were admiring the beauty and the grandeur of the temple and were shocked to hear the Lord Jesus say that it would be destroyed (1–2). They left for the Mount of Olives, where Peter, James, John and Andrew (cp. Mark 13:3) asked him two questions (3):

1. *'When will these things be?'* (ie. the destruction of Jerusalem).
2. *'What will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?'*

Some of the events leading to the destruction of Jerusalem and to the second coming of Christ are similar, and there is a certain amount of overlap in the verses of this chapter. Some verses may refer to both events. The Jews revolted against the Romans in AD 66 who besieged Jerusalem, destroying the city and the temple in AD 70. More than a million Jews were slaughtered, many of the victims being women and young children. Many Christians remembered the warning of Jesus (15–20). They left Jerusalem as the Romans approached and so escaped the massacre.

The conditions which preceded AD 70 are not a sign of the end of the world. They are to be found in any age. There have always been false teachers (5,11,23–24), wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines (6–8), and persecution of God's people (9–10). **How are we to react to all that is happening and will happen?**

- We must be on our guard against deceivers. Jesus said, *'Take heed that no one deceives you'* (4). Many are deceived by false teachers today because they do not *take heed* to God's Word.
- We are not to let fear and trouble overcome us (6). Remember, God is sovereign and he is in control of all these things.
- We are to beware of growing cold in our love for the Lord (12).
- We are to be encouraged because *the gospel ... will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations* (14). We are rightly concerned today at the increase of false religions and occult activities in our land, and at the confusion in so many evangelical churches, but nothing will prevent the progress of the gospel. Perseverance in times of persecution will lead to glory (13; cp. Romans 8:18)!

Be ready

There will be frightening cosmic disturbances immediately before the return of Christ (29–31). Everyone living will see the Lord Jesus return, *coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory* (30). Every true Christian (*‘his elect’*) will be gathered by the angels to meet the Lord in the air, together with every believer from previous ages. It will be the day of resurrection for our bodies (31; cp. John 5:29; 1 Corinthians 15:51–55; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

The Lord Jesus used the fig tree as an illustration to prepare people in the first century for the destruction of Jerusalem which was to happen in their lifetime (32–35). The fig tree indicates the coming of summer when it comes into leaf. When the Roman armies approached Jerusalem, those who remembered his words would know that the destruction of the city was at hand.

No one knows the date of Christ’s return (36). We know, however, that everyone living at that time will see his return (30; cp. Rev. 1:7). Many foolish people have predicted dates for the return of Christ. At the beginning of this millennium, some claimed that the Lord Jesus would return at the beginning of January 2000. We are very foolish if we ignore the warning of verse 36,

Conditions will be the same before Christ’s second coming as they were in the days of Noah before the flood (37–39). The people were godless, materialistic, wicked and indifferent to Noah’s message. Just as a burglar comes unexpectedly, so Christ’s return will take most people by surprise (43). Jesus said, *‘Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him’* (44). How are we to be ready? We must lead holy lives, seeking always to please the Lord. Always remember, that this world with all its sinful ways and vain pleasures, will pass away (1 John 2:15–17). *Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?* (2 Peter 3:11). **If Jesus returned today, would you be ready?**

But Jesus kept silent

The Lord Jesus was taken to the palace of the high priest where his enemies made feverish attempts to find a charge against him that would carry the death penalty. At last they found two false witnesses who accused Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple and to rebuild it within three days (57–61). Jesus had never said such a thing. He had said that if **they** destroyed *‘this temple’* (his body), he would raise it up in three days, and his enemies knew this (27:62–63; cp. John 2:19–21). *Jesus kept silent* though he could have easily out-argued them (63; cp. Isaiah 53:7). We are so quick to react when we are unfairly treated or slandered but we must follow the example of Jesus at such times (1 Peter 2:21–23).

When the high priest charged Jesus to say on oath whether he were *‘the Christ, the Son of God,’* it was a way of asking Jesus if he was God (63; cp. John 5:18). The Lord’s answer, quoting from Daniel 7:13 indicated that he is indeed God. When he returns, he will come as King and Judge (64; cp. 25:31–46). These men were trying the almighty Judge of all the earth as a criminal. The high priest in feigned distress tore his clothes, accusing Jesus of blasphemy, saying that he deserved to die. He had the answer he wanted and stated that they had no further need of witnesses (65–66). We must not think that Jesus was trapped into giving such an answer. He knew that he had to go the way of humiliation and the cross in order to save us (Philippians 2:5–8).

As soon as Jesus was pronounced guilty, his enemies heaped insults upon him. They spat upon him, mocked and beat him (67–68). Jesus could have easily destroyed his tormentors but he allowed them to vent their wicked spite upon him because he loved sinners and was determined to bring us salvation through his suffering and death.

Let us thank the Lord Jesus for all that he endured to save us. He is worthy of our heartfelt praise and devotion. Let us always strive to please him, who for our sakes did not please himself but went the way of humiliation, torture and death to save us from our sins.

All this was done that the Scriptures ... might be fulfilled

Judas must have known that Jesus was going to Gethsemane (John 18:2) and so he left the Last Supper to go to the Jewish authorities to set his treacherous plot in motion (John 13:30). As the Lord Jesus roused his disciples who were *sleeping from sorrow* (45–46; Luke 22:45), Judas arrived with a great multitude who were armed with swords and with clubs. They arrested Jesus after Judas had betrayed him with a kiss.

Peter, in an act of bravado, cut off the right ear of the servant of the high priest (we learn from John's Gospel that the man's name was Malchus; John 18:10). Jesus told his impetuous disciple to put away his sword. He could call upon the Father to provide him with twelve legions of angels to protect him from his enemies. If he did this, however, *'how then could the Scriptures be fulfilled?'* (47–54). He had to drink the cup given to him by the Father (John 18:10–11). The Lord, full of grace, healed Malchus (Luke 22:51). The terrified disciples forsook Jesus and fled for their lives.

The cowardly chief priests and elders had sent the armed crowd out to Jesus as if they were to arrest a robber. They had not touched him as he taught in the temple (55), but took him under cover of darkness. Judas and the enemies of Christ had their plans, but all that happened to Jesus in Gethsemane and at Calvary was according to God's plan (Acts 2:23). *'All this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled'* (56). The Old Testament has many prophecies concerning the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus (eg. Psalm 22; 41:9; Isaiah 52:13–53:12; cp. Luke 24:27). They were all fulfilled.

The Bible, this holy book that you are reading, is God's precious Word. Do you take it seriously? **God's Word is true, and will be fulfilled in every detail. It tells us many times that Jesus is coming again to judge the world and to take his people to be with himself. Are you ready? The Scriptures will be fulfilled!**

Who then is a faithful and wise servant?

If the message of the previous verses is 'be ready', the message of today's reading is 'be faithful'. Peter asked the Lord Jesus if the warning to be ready were just for the disciples or for all people. Jesus did not directly answer his question, but went on to draw the comparison between the wise servant and the wicked servant (see Luke 12:35–48). The wicked servant had been appointed to rule his master's household, but he had betrayed that trust. He knew his master's will, but assumed that he could be cruel and careless because the master was delaying his return (48–49). Some who profess to know Christ are like that wicked servant. They appear to a true Christians and may even have a position in the church, but by their actions they dishonour Christ.

The words of the Lord Jesus in these verses remind us again that he will come suddenly and when we least expect him. Many professing Christians live as if there were no heaven nor any second coming of Christ. They are so settled in this world that they show little interest in laying up treasure in heaven. They say to themselves, *'My master is delaying his coming'* (48). Oh, let us beware of lethargy in our Christian lives! If Jesus were to come back today as King and Judge, how prepared would you be for his return? Would you be regretting all the resolutions you had made and which you had not kept?

Who then is a faithful and wise servant? (45). He is the person who is found doing the work given to him by Christ. Salvation is by grace and not through our own works, but an evidence of that grace of God in our lives is love to Christ and faithful and loyal service in his kingdom. **Are you 'a faithful and wise servant' of Christ?** Have you resolved to be more prayerful, to be more committed in your walk with the Lord, to be more involved in the work of your church? The devil will not attack us for our good intentions that never come to anything, but he does tremble when he sees in us *'a faithful and wise servant'*.

Lord, Lord, open to us!

This chapter continues to emphasise the need to be ready for the return of Christ. An understanding of Jewish wedding customs in New Testament times will throw some light on the parable of the ten virgins. The wedding began with the betrothal when the couple made their vows. They were then considered to be man and wife, though they did not live together as such until after the wedding feast; this usually took place several months later. The bridegroom would first go to the house of his bride and return with her and their friends in a procession to his own house where the feast was held. Others would carry lamps in their honour.

In the parable ten virgins were to carry the lamps but five were ill-prepared with insufficient oil for their lamps. While they were away buying oil, *the bridegroom came and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut* (10). When the foolish virgins returned with oil, it was too late. They went on to the feast, but it was in progress and they were shut out. They pleaded in vain, *'Lord, Lord, open to us!'* (11). All ten virgins appeared to be ready, but five were not. **We may appear to be Christians, but is our experience genuine? If we are careless about our spiritual state, we too will be shut out of heaven.**

There are many who attend good churches week by week, but who have never repented of their sin and trusted in Christ to save them. They may not even be aware of their great need to be saved. Others may realise that they are not saved and they intend to seek the Lord some day, but they keep putting it off. If you fall into either of these categories, please be warned and come now to Christ for salvation. The return of Christ will be a day of judgment and separation when he will take believers to heaven, but send those who are not saved to hell. *Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming* (13).

Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will

The Lord Jesus warned his disciples that they would be made to stumble because of what would happen to him that night. He also told them that he would be raised and would go before them to Galilee. Peter sincerely believed that he would never deny his Lord. He would rather die than deny his Master (31–35). He didn't know his own heart! We must beware of a self-confidence that reckons without the need to lean on the Lord at all times (cp. 1 Corinthians 10:12). Let us be encouraged and comforted that the Lord does not cast off any Christian because of failure and shortcomings. After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane was located (30).

At the first Communion service, the Lord Jesus *took the cup ... and gave it to the disciples* (27). That cup is for us *'the cup of blessing'* (1 Corinthians 10:16). Jesus, however, had to drink a 'cup' of terrible suffering and sorrow in order to save us. In Gethsemane, he was overwhelmed with anguish as he contemplated this 'cup' which he had to drink. He said to Peter, James and John, *'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me'* (36–39). He was in such agony, that *his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground* (Luke 22:44). His love for us is so great, that he submitted to the Father's will to be punished for our sin. He prayed, *'If it is possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will'* (39). He drank that terrible cup in order to give us a cup of blessing, a cup of salvation. When we think of what it cost him to save us, we should shudder at even the thought of sinning.

The Lord Jesus returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, *'What, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation ...'* (40–41). He went away and again prayed to the Father before finding them still asleep. They were again sleeping when he returned to them a third time after prayer. Peter was not alert and failed to pray because he was tired. He was soon to *enter into temptation* and fall into sin. **If you are neglecting prayer – beware!**

My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many

The Lord Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare the Passover (17–19; cp. Luke 22:7–13). The Feast of Unleavened Bread began with the Passover meal. Lamb, unleavened bread and bitter herbs were eaten and three cups of wine were taken during the meal. The bitter herbs were a reminder of the bitter slavery of the Israelites in Egypt. The lamb commemorated the protection of Israel's first-born, and the unleavened bread was a reminder of the haste in which the Jews escaped from Egypt. As Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with the twelve disciples, he warned them that one of them would betray him. He said, *'It would have been good for that man if he had not been born'* (21–25). Judas was on the slippery slope to hell!

J.C. Ryle wrote, 'The Lord's Supper is not a sacrifice. There is no offering up of anything but prayers, praises and thanksgiving. From the day that Jesus died there needs be no more offering for sin. By one offering he perfected forever them that are sanctified (Hebrews 10:14). Priests, altars and sacrifices all ceased to be necessary when the lamb of God offered up himself. Their office came to an end. Their work was done' (DAILY READINGS, VOLUME 1 from J.C. Ryle, Day 315).

The Lord Jesus gave bread and wine to his disciples as a remembrance of his body and blood given for us at Calvary (26–29; cp. 1 Corinthians 11:24–25). He is described as *'our Passover'* (1 Corinthians 5:7). He has delivered us from a far greater tyranny than that suffered by Israel in Egypt. He has saved us from our sin and from the power of Satan (John 8:34–36; 1 John 3:8). Jesus said of the wine that we take at the Communion service, *'This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins'* (28). At this service, we especially remember how our Saviour was tortured, crushed and slain to save us. **Salvation is free, but we must never forget that it was purchased at tremendous cost!** The holy Son of God was punished for his people (Matthew 1:21; 1 Peter 3:18). We must never take our salvation for granted! *You were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's* (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Faithful over a few things

The parable of the ten virgins warns us to be vigilant while that of the talents stresses the need for diligence. Bishop J.C. Ryle points out, 'The story of the virgins calls on the church to watch. The story of the talents calls on the church to work.' – (DAILY READINGS FROM J.C. RYLE, day 304 – compiled by Robert Sheehan, published by Evangelical Press). A talent represented a huge amount of money; it would take a labourer almost twenty years to earn just one talent.

A certain man was going away to a distant country. Before he went away, the man entrusted his servants with varying amounts, *according to his own ability* (15). Two of the servants by careful and diligent trading doubled the sum entrusted to them. The third servant did nothing except to bury and hide his talent. When their master returned *and settled accounts with them*, he commended the two who *were faithful over a few things* (19, 21, 23).

The third servant excused himself for his laziness. He said, *'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man ... and I was afraid'* (24–25). His master condemned him and cast him out (26–30). The man had a poor opinion of his master because he did not really know him. The devil wants us to think of God as a hard taskmaster but Satan is a liar (John 8:44). The Lord is good and kind. He understands us and he is patient with us in our weakness.

This parable encourages those who faithfully serve the Lord but it has a solemn warning for professing Christians. God will hold everyone accountable for the way we deal with opportunities to follow him and to serve him. The Lord has entrusted each of us with varying gifts to be used for himself and he will reward us for faithful service. Are you a worker or a spectator in your church? Are you faithful in the work that God has given you to do? If you are lazy, it may be a sign that you are not genuine in your faith. It certainly shows a contempt for God's Word and a lack of interest in the kingdom of God. **Let us always seek to be faithful over the few things that God has given us to do.**

Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom

The Lord Jesus continues with the theme of his second coming and the day of judgment: *When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory* (31). He will judge every one who has ever lived, from every nation (31–32; cp. Revelation 20:11–15). The saved and the lost are likened to sheep and goats. God's people are often called 'sheep' in Scripture (Psalm 95:7; 100:3; John 10:15–16; Hebrews 13:20). The 'sheep' are described as those who are 'blessed' by God the Father (34), the 'goats' are 'cursed' (41).

The Lord remembers every deed of kindness that we do, even though we may forget. To show kindness to Christ's people is to show kindness to Christ. His return will be wonderful for those who belong to him. He will say to them, '*Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*' (35–40). That kingdom is indescribably wonderful (1 Corinthians 2:9–10).

Many religious people will be shocked to find themselves shut out of heaven. They will be condemned for the things that they failed to do (sins of omission, 41–45). Good works are a vital evidence of true faith. *Faith without works is dead* (James 2:14–26; cp. 1 John 3:17–19). **It is not only what we profess that counts but also what we practise.** The Lord Jesus warned many times of the wrath of God and of hell. He teaches here that those who are lost will be punished eternally for their sins in the everlasting fires of hell, *prepared for the devil and his angels* (41,46). The words of verse 41 are truly solemn and frightening!

We will all spend eternity in one of two places and the contrast between them could not be greater. There is *the kingdom prepared for God's people from the foundation of the world* or *the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*. **Are you a genuine, true Christian? Examine your own heart. You cannot afford to be mistaken. It is a matter of life or death, of heaven or hell!**

She has done a good work for me

When the Lord Jesus had finished speaking of his own coming in glory and of the final judgment, he again told his disciples that at the Passover feast he would *be delivered up to be crucified* (1–2). Two days before the Feast of the Passover, the chief priests and scribes were plotting *to take Jesus by trickery (deceit) and kill him* (3–5; Mark 14:1). At the same time, a meal was prepared in Bethany for Jesus and his disciples at the house of Simon (a leper who had been healed by Jesus?).

Mary of Bethany showed her love and devotion to Christ by pouring costly perfume over his head (6–7). John informs us in his Gospel that it was worth three hundred denarii – that was a year's wages for a working man. The disciples and Judas in particular criticised her lavish sacrifice (8–9; John 12:4–6). They complained that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor, though Judas cared little for the poor. After this, he went to the chief priests and agreed to betray his Lord for thirty pieces of silver (14–16).

The Lord Jesus rebuked Mary's harsh critics, saying, '*She has done a good work for me*' (10). The Greek word for 'good' ('kalos') can be translated 'beautiful'. Why was Mary's work '*a good work*'? It was an act of faith and a symbolic pre-anointing of the body of Jesus for burial (12). Mary's act was also one of great love and gratitude to the Lord who had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead (John 11). She made a costly sacrifice, but such sacrificial devotion to the Lord Jesus is never a waste (8).

The Lord Jesus, though he was rich, became poor for our sakes. Dare we begrudge giving him our time and money? Jesus said that Mary's act of devotion would be remembered wherever the gospel is preached (13). He never forgets our sacrificial expressions of devotion to him because they are beautiful works which delight him. **Can you think of any beautiful work which you can do as a token of your love for Christ?** He delights in our extravagant expressions of devotion to himself. Sadly, they are often rare.