

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

16:21-23

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

In the beginning of these verses we find our Lord revealing to his disciples a great and startling truth. That truth was his approaching death upon the cross. For the first time he places before their minds the astounding announcement that "He must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed." He had not come on earth to take a kingdom, but to die. He had not come to reign and be ministered to; but to shed his blood as a sacrifice, and to give his life as a ransom for many. It is almost impossible for us to conceive how strange and incomprehensible these tidings must have seemed to his disciples. Like most of the Jews, they could form no idea of a suffering Messiah. They did not understand that Isaiah 53 must be fulfilled literally; they did not see that the sacrifices of the law were all meant to point them to the death of the true Lamb of God. They thought of nothing but the second glorious coming of Messiah, which is yet to take place at the end of the world. They thought so much of Messiah's crown, that they lost sight of his cross. We shall do well to remember this: a right understanding of this matter throws strong light on the lessons which this passage contains. We learn in the first place, from these verses that there may be much spiritual ignorance even in a true disciple of Christ. We cannot have a clearer proof of this than the conduct of the apostle Peter in this passage. He tries to dissuade our Lord from suffering on the cross. "Be it far from thee!" he says. "This shall not be unto thee!" He did not see the full purpose of our Lord's coming into the world. His eyes were blinded to the necessity of our Lord's death. He actually did what he could to prevent that death taking place at all! And yet we know that Peter was a converted man; he really believed that Jesus was the Messiah. His heart was right in the sight of God. These things are meant to teach us that we must neither regard good men as infallible because they are good men, nor yet suppose they have no grace because their grace is weak and small. One brother may possess singular gifts, and be a bright and shining light in the church of Christ; but let us not forget that he is a man, and as a man liable to commit great mistakes. Another brother's knowledge may be scanty: he may fail to judge rightly on many points of doctrine; he may err both in word and deed. But has he faith and love towards Christ? Does he hold the head? If so, let us deal patiently with him. What sees not now, he may see hereafter. Like Peter, he may now be in the dark, and yet, like Peter, enjoy one day the full light of the Gospel. Let us learn in the second place, from these verses that there is no doctrine of Scripture so deeply important as the doctrine of Christ's atoning death. We cannot have clearer proof of this than the language used by our Lord in rebuking Peter. He addresses him by the awful name of "Satan," as if he was an adversary, and doing the devil's work in trying to prevent his death. He says to him, whom he had so lately called "blessed." "Get thee behind me! Thou aert an offence unto me!" He tells the man whose noble

confession he had just commended so highly, "Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men." Stronger words than these never fell from our Lord's lips. The error that drew from such a loving Saviour such a stern rebuke to such a true disciple, must have been a mighty error indeed. The truth is that our Lord would have us regard the crucifixion as the central truth of Christianity. Right views of his vicarious death, and the benefits resulting from it, lie at the very foundation of Bible religion. Never let us forget this. On matters of church government, and the form of worship, men may differ from us and yet reach heaven in safety. On the matter of Christ's atoning death as the way of peace, truth is only one. If we are wrong here, we are ruined forever. Error on many points is only a skin disease; error about Christ's death is a disease of the heart. Here let us take our stand: let nothing move us from this ground. The sum of all our hopes must be that Christ "has died for us" (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Give up that doctrine, and we have no solid hope at all.

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