

Perplexing Texts: Why is Jesus Taking so Long?

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Matthew 16:24-28

This is the last of our Perplexing Text sermon series. We chose the texts for this series by asking you for Bible passages that you found strange and confusing. This morning's text, Matthew 16:24-28, was suggested by more than one of you. It's that last verse that's most perplexing. "Truly I tell you some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the son of man coming in his kingdom." Jesus seems to tell the disciples that some of them will live to see the second coming. He makes it sound as though the second coming will happen within a generation. Not only does Jesus say it, he says it with passion. "Truly I tell you!" he says. In the old King James version: "Verily, verily I say unto you!" It's a Greek phrase used for emphasis. It's the Greek equivalent of saying, "Listen up!!" "Listen up everyone, this is important!! Some of you will not taste death until you see the Son of man coming in his Kingdom."

This is very perplexing! Because it is 2000 years since Jesus said those words, the second coming has not happened yet, and that generation has all tasted death. Every single one of them. Was Jesus wrong? Was his prediction false? For many of us, this raises another question: Why hasn't the second coming happened? Why is it taking so long? 2000 years of waiting. Some terrible things happened in those 2000 years. Some terrible things are happening now! Jesus, please come back and heal this world! Why the delay? I want to approach this perplexing text in two stages this morning. First, I will look closely at exactly *what* Jesus is saying, then I will look at *why* he says it. What Jesus said, and why he said it.

So what is Jesus saying here? Let's look at verse 27 and 28 closely. In verse 27 Jesus says, "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done." Jesus is almost certainly talking about the second coming in verse 27. He talks about coming with angels and judging the world. In scripture, those are consistent features of the second and final coming of Jesus. Verse 28 again mentions the coming of the Son of Man, so we immediately assume that Jesus is again talking about the second coming. But is that right? Is Jesus talking about the same second coming in verse 27 and 28? In verse 28, Jesus says that some of them won't taste death until they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom. Is the second coming the only time where the disciples could see Jesus coming in the glory of his kingdom, or is there another time when the disciples see Jesus coming in the glory

of his kingdom? Are there other times when he is revealed in power as a glorious king?

I can think of a few other times. On Easter morning, Jesus rises from the dead. An angel appears and tells the terrified women, 'He is not here! He is risen!' Jesus wins a victory over sin and death. He's revealed as king. The disciples see the Son of man coming in the glory of his kingdom. At the end of Matthew, right after his resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples on a mountain. Do you remember what he says to them there? "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me!" Jesus is revealed as king. The disciples see the Son of man coming in his kingdom. On Pentecost, the disciples are all together when the Holy Spirit comes upon the group. It looks like tongues of flames that descend on their head! The glory of God comes on them and then Peter goes out and preaches a sermon that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God with all his enemies under his feet. Jesus is revealed as king. The disciples see the Son of man coming in the glory of his kingdom. These are all places where we see the Son of man come in the glory of his Kingdom. These are all places where we see the kingship, the sovereignty, of Jesus revealed. And the disciples see it.

So, we can paraphrase the two verses something like this: "My power will have the last word in this world. Someday, at the end of time, I will come with my Father's angels to judge the world. But truly, truly I say unto you, before that happens, and before some of you standing here die, you will see me display my Lordship over this world." "Someday I will come again and history will be drawn to a close, but before that day-at Pentecost, on Easter, in the ascension-you will see the son of man come in the glory of his Kingdom."

So that's what Jesus says. Now the second part of the sermon, why does he say it? Obviously he says it because he wants to tell them that he has power over this world, but why does he feel the need to say this to his disciples at that particular moment? Let's look at the context. Jesus talks about his coming in glory at the end of a series of sayings that all emphasize sacrifice. "If you want to follow me, you have to pick up your cross." "Whoever wants to save their life must lose it." "What good is it to gain all the power in the world but lose your soul in the process." I didn't read it as part of the Scripture reading this morning, but all this teaching, all these words are a response to one of his disciples. They are a response to Peter.

Jesus had been telling the disciples that he is going to die. He will suffer many things at the hands of the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and then he will be killed, and on the third day he will be raised to life. According to verse 21, this was something he told his disciples repeatedly. It was one of his standard speeches to them. Peter didn't much care for the speech. He thought it was a little too negative, too down in the dumps. Peter thought, "Man, what kind of a

motivational speech is this.” For Peter this was like a football coach starting the season by saying, “Well guys, are you all ready to lose?! Our offense will sputter. Our defense will collapse. And don’t even talk to me about special teams. So let’s get ready to lose!!”

Peter thinks this talk is bad for morale, and furthermore, he thinks it’s totally unnecessary. After all, Jesus has Messiah power! Jesus just admitted to them that he is the Messiah. They’d seen Jesus walk on water. They’d seen demons scatter before him! Why wouldn’t Jesus use his Messiah power! He could silence the priests and the teachers of the law with a word, just like he calmed the sea. He could push aside the Romans with a wave of his hand just like he cast those demons out. Jesus could set up a throne in Jerusalem and it would be like the good old days when all the surrounding nations bowed before David’s sword. The people of Jerusalem would be so excited! They would flock to him! Jesus would be a rock star! “Jesus you would own this town!”

Peter goes to Jesus and pitches his Messiah power idea. Do you remember how Jesus responds? He tells Peter that his ‘winning’ strategy is from Satan. “Get thee behind me Satan, you do not have the things of God in mind but the things of men.” You have a human idea of what victory looks like and how to win it. If you want to follow me, you have to pick up a cross. If you want to save your life, you’ll have to lose it. If we go down your path, we may gain the world, but we will lose our souls, our humanity.

Jesus finishes his rebuke of Peter with verses 27 and 28 because he wants Peter to understand that this talk of losing your life and sacrifice is not just giving up. It’s not a way of defeat. It’s a way of victory. But it’s the victory of love and not the victory of brute force. “You’ll see Peter, my way may be slow and painful but in the end the Son of man will come with the Heavenly angels and every knee shall bow, and even before that happens you will see my kingdom come. Even before that you will see the triumph of my sacrificial power.”

There’s a good reason Jesus calls Peter Satan here. It’s because what he’s trying to get Jesus to do is exactly what the devil tried to get Jesus to do in the third temptation in Matthew 4. The Devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. ‘Jesus, you are here to show your Lordship over the world, right? You are here to make every knee bow to you, right? Well, all these kingdoms can be yours right now, if you will just bow down to me. Just give me a little worship and you can come into the fullness of your kingdom just like that. Instant triumph!! You won’t have to do that long ministry! You can skip the cross and the suffering. No blood! No nails! You can go directly to victory.’ It’s the same path Peter wants. ‘Jesus skip the cross. I’ve got a better idea about how you can be a messiah.’

Jesus rejects both temptations. He chooses the way of the cross. And the way of the cross is slow. Brute force always goes faster than love right? If I point a gun at your chest I can get you to do what I want right now, but I can't change you. Love goes deeper. People changed by brute force are only changed on the surface. People changed by love are changed all the way down to their soul. And Jesus wants to change us all the way down.

Which gets us back to why He's taking so long. He's on the path of love, and it's slow. Sometimes I'm frustrated about how long the path is and I pray more and more as I get older, 'Jesus! Please! Finish your new creation.' But more than anything I want his love to change me and I want it to change me all the way down.

Thinking about winning and how the path of Jesus' victory is slow made me think of something that happened at the State High School Cross country championships a couple of weeks ago. Did you hear about this story? At the division 2 girls' cross country championship just over a week ago, Maggie Duba, a cross athlete from West Catholic, was running toward the finish line. Maggie is a good runner. Her personal best is 19:02 and as a dad of two former girls' cross runners, 19:02 is a good time. I'm sure Maggie started the race with hopes of being all state – which you get if you're one of the top 30 finishers.

But about 100 yards from the finish line she came across Sarah Storey. Sarah was also a really good runner. Her personal best was also right at 19 minutes. She too was running for all state, and she was running really well, but about 100 yards from the finish line she started to wobble and her legs suddenly gave out. This happens to cross runners sometimes. She just went down. She tried to get up but her legs just wouldn't go, so she lay in a heap on the course while runners streamed past her. But not Maggie. Maggie stopped her pursuit of all state and bent down to help Sarah. She put Sarah's arm over her shoulder and helped this girl-who was a complete stranger-get back up again and get going so she could cross the finish line. They didn't win all state. They both ran one of their slowest times of the year. The story of what Maggie did for Sarah was posted on Mlive. It was by far the most shared story I could find. More than 21 thousand shares.

Maggie is a Jesus person. She was raised Catholic. Yes, Catholics are Christians too. Every Sunday she walked into a Christian church. Every Sunday she worshipped under the sign of the cross and heard about Jesus' kind of victory. Obviously that sunk in, because when she saw her fellow competitor she knew what Jesus called her to do. Sarah Storey's mom recognized Jesus in Maggie's actions... This is what she wrote on social media later: "Thank you to Maggie Duba. You were truly the hands and feet of Jesus for us."

Here's a question I have. Why was this story so compelling? Why was it shared 21 thousand times? Because people see a different kind of victory in that

story. We're so used to the other kind of race. Running and striving to get all state, running to get that promotion, running to stay ahead, running to stay afloat. But when we see Maggie stop we realize it could be different. There is another way to live. There is another kind of victory. There is a kind of victory in love and sacrifice that is better than a state championship. And people want this life. They are tired of a cut-throat world and they see in Maggie's kindness the hope of something better. They want this better life to fill them and they want it to go all the way down.

As Christians, we say they want it because it's Jesus' kind of life. It's Jesus' path. It's Jesus way of victory. It's a slower path. If you walk it, your time won't be as good. You'll miss out on some of the medals and shiny prizes, but you will be fulfilled. You might lose a few races, but you will find your soul.

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