

Chapter 105: Denying Jesus

Matthew 26:30–35

The closer Jesus gets to the cross, the more weight settles upon his shoulders. After informing his disciples that one of them would betray him, he now tells his disciples that all of them will fall away from him. What Jesus will endure, he will endure alone, with all of his closest friends abandoning him with varying degrees of betrayal. Though the disciples (and especially Peter) cannot imagine themselves capable of such failure, Jesus knows the truth and warns them about it. Nevertheless, this passage also holds out an important gospel truth for weak sinners who will fail Jesus time and time again: *the Good Shepherd died for sheep who are helpless to help him.*

Denying Jesus (Matt. 26:30–32)

At the conclusion of the Passover meal, Jesus sang a psalm with his disciples (v. 30). Carson offers a few significant insights into the psalms that they would have sung, along with some reflections on the contents of those psalms:

The “hymn” normally sung was the last part of the *Hallel* (Pss 114–18 or 115–18). It was sung antiphonally. Jesus as the leader would sing the lines, and his followers would respond with “Hallelujah!” Parts of it must have been deeply moving to the disciples when after the resurrection they remembered that Jesus sang words pledging that he would keep his vows (Ps 116:12–13), ultimately triumph despite rejection (Ps 118), and call all nations to praise Yahweh and his covenant love (Ps 117).¹

It is important to note the ultimate “triumph” Carson points to in Psalm 118 includes a prophecy, “I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death” (Ps. 118:17–18), as well as the prophecy, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:22–24). As Jesus headed out to be betrayed and handed over to be crucified, he sang confident prophecies that promised the coming day of his resurrection.

After singing these prophecies of his final victory, Jesus turns his attention back to the immediate issues surrounding his crucifixion and death. He begins by prophesying that his disciples would abandon him: “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’” (v. 31). Previously, Jesus prophesied that “one”

¹ Carson, “Matthew,” 604.

of them would betray him. Now, Jesus prophesies that “all” will fall away from him. Hendriksen notes that there are three important uses of “all” in this chapter: all will fall away (v. 31), all protest that they will not fall away (v. 35), and then all do indeed flee from Jesus (Matt. 26:56).² Hendriksen continues, observing also that “Nevertheless, *all* of these eleven were saved men, so regarded by the Lord in his bounteous, forgiving love (26:29; cf. John 17:6, 14, 16). *Not one* of them perished (John 17:11).”³

Although many translations (including the ESV) have Jesus as saying that his disciples will fall away “because of me,” the Greek does not carry the idea that Jesus will cause them to fall away, as though he were to blame. The idea rather is that they will fall away from their connection to Jesus (i.e., as his followers).⁴ Jesus also states that all will fall away from him “this night.” This phrase appears only in Matthew, and it heightens the shock by emphasizing the close proximity of the denial.⁵

Jesus ties the falling away of his disciples to a prophecy from Zechariah 13:7. The specific language of the prophecy anticipates what the disciples will do, but France points out that the wider context in Zechariah connects more broadly with what Jesus is undergoing:

Zech 13:7–9 is one of a sequence of passages in Zech 9–14 which appear to present a messianic figure who is nonetheless rejected, wounded, and killed, a model which seems to have been important for Jesus in understanding his own messianic suffering, and which Matthew draws on several times in his account of Jesus in Jerusalem (cf. 21:4–5 [Zech 9:9–10]; 24:30 [Zech 12:10–14]; 27:3–10 [Zech 11:12–13]).⁶

As Jesus prepares to go to the cross, he continues to explain to his disciples not only that *he* is the good shepherd who must be struck down in order to save his sheep, but also that his closest sheep will abandon him while he suffers.

It is astonishing, then, that Jesus moves immediately into a second prophecy: “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (v. 32). Notice how this prophecy skirts quickly past the extraordinary nature of his resurrection from the dead and also Jesus’ forgiveness of his disciples for abandoning him. His eyes are fixed immediately on the subsequent reconciliation as he, “like a shepherd leading his sheep,” goes before them into Galilee.⁷ Hendriksen observes, “The beauty in all this is not only that Jesus loved them all the same, but also that this very prediction would serve the purpose of bringing the scattered sheep together again, once they reflected on the fact that their Master had lovingly forewarned them.”⁸

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 913.

³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 913.

⁴ “And this that caught them was ἐν ἐμοί, ‘in connection with Jesus,’ and not ‘in (within) me’ or ‘because of me.’” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1034.)

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 663.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 998.

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, 777.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 913.

In Denial about our Helplessness (Matt. 26:33–35)

Consistent with his character throughout the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, Peter quickly interjects: “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away” (v. 33). To be sure, there are some aspects of Peter’s response which we should admire, especially in his zeal for Jesus. Nevertheless, Peter’s pride overshadows the positive parts of his zeal. Notice how he distinguishes himself from the others: “Though *they all* fall away...I will never.”⁹ Ironically, while the others do all fall away, Peter’s denial of Jesus gets the lion’s share of attention.¹⁰ Indeed, while he had submitted himself for examination before Jesus with the others (Matt. 26:22), it seems that Peter “had not been sufficiently careful to examine himself.”¹¹ Even the way that Peter states this suggests that he “he does not really think that Jesus’ death is likely” (“*Though...*”; i.e., “in the unlikely event that...”).¹² Peter’s example should sober us, in order that “every man, remembering his own weakness, may earnestly resort to the assistance of the Holy Spirit; and next, that no man may venture to take more upon himself than what the Lord promises.”¹³

Jesus gently, but powerfully, corrects Peter: “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times” (v. 34). In part, this statement serves to confront Peter’s brash, self-confident promise. It also illustrates the depth of his denial of Jesus, in that Peter will make his denial “three times.” So, although “Jesus’ closest followers all made protestations of loyalty, but that when the testing time came all were found wanting. Throughout his ordeal Jesus was alone.”¹⁴ Yet, Peter doubles down on his claim, and all the other disciples follow suit: “‘Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!’ And all the disciples said the same” (v. 35). The failure of the disciples (especially Peter) to live up to their own promises was salt in an already-excruciating wound.

Discussion Questions

1. What “hymn” (i.e., psalm) might Jesus have sung at the conclusion of the Passover meal (v. 30)? What hope does Psalm 118 particularly hold out regarding Jesus’ future vindication from the judgment that he would face? How does Jesus’ warning to “all” his disciples connect with the betrayal that “one” of the disciples would commit (v. 31; cf. Matt. 26:21)? How does the total failure of Jesus’ friends inform us about the extent of his suffering?
2. What significance should we draw from Jesus’ simple statement that he would meet his disciples afterward in Galilee (v. 32)? What does this tell us about his confidence in his own vindication and resurrection? What does this tell us about his mercy toward sinners? What does this tell us about his grace in meeting his disciples to give them a great commission that would shape the rest of their lives, and all of human history (Matt. 28:16–20)?

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 665.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 999.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:219–20.

¹² Carson, “Matthew,” 607.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:220.

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 666.

3. What should we admire about Peter's zeal in v. 33? What should we recognize as stemming from foolish overconfidence and sinful pride? How does Peter's example model both positives and negatives for our own zeal for the Lord? Do you think that you would have joined the other disciples in affirming their unwavering commitment to Jesus (v. 35)? Do you think that you would have joined the other disciples in fleeing from Jesus in the garden (Matt. 26:56)?

4. What does Jesus' response to Peter tell us about the extent of our own weakness and sin (v. 34)? How is weakness inherent in the human condition as frail creatures of dust? How does sin indwell us as a result of the original corruption that is inherited by all those descended from Adam? How does your weakness relate to your sin? What does this brash oath of the disciples teach us about how to protect ourselves from sinful failures?