

Matthew 26:31-35

I. Matthew 26:31a — Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night.”

Just a little earlier, Jesus had taken a cup and given it to the disciples, saying, “Drink of it, *all of you...*” Now Jesus says to these same disciples, “*You will all* fall away.” Jesus knowingly offers the cup of His shed blood to the very ones who will fall away from Him before that night is over. Jesus did not shed His blood for those whom He considered worthy. “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*.” The cross is not about the salvation of relatively innocent and worthy people, but only of the guilty and the unworthy. The shed blood of Jesus is not for those who deserve to be forgiven, but only for those who deserve *not* to be forgiven. May we gladly abandon all our dreams of goodness in exchange for mercy and grace that come only to the utterly *undeserving*.

“Drink of it, all of you,” Jesus said, “for *this is My blood*.” But now He says, “you will all fall away *because of me*.” Jesus offers His own blood for the disciples, but the disciples will be offended *by Jesus*. Jesus lays down His life for the disciples, but the disciples will stumble *over Jesus*. Jesus loves His disciples to the uttermost, but His disciples will all fall away *because of Him*. Do we wonder how this could possibly be? Should we really be so confused – we who have the same nature as the disciples? The disciples will be disillusioned with a Jesus who suffers and dies so passively – without any resistance at all. They will especially be unwilling and unable to accept what *His* suffering and death could mean for their *own* experience of suffering and death. And so because of *Jesus* – on account of His suffering and death for them – they will all fall away. Are we really so different? While we were utterly undeserving, unworthy, ungrateful, and unaware, Christ died for us. On the night that all of Jesus’ disciples would fall away – on that very same night, Jesus gave them His blood of the covenant to drink – for the forgiveness of their sins. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

The disciples will all fall away. But even in the midst of an announcement so horrible and so overwhelming, the focus of Jesus is not on defeat, but rather on the wonderful, beautiful, providence of God. “You will all fall away because of me this night...”

II. Matthew 26:31b — “*For it is written*, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

In some mysterious way, even the falling away of the disciples had been *ordained* by God. The disciples would fall away, *just as it had been written*. In Zechariah 13, God speaks:

✓ Zechariah 13:7a — “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,” declares the LORD of hosts. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”

The sword that awakes is God’s own sword. God’s own sword strikes God’s own shepherd at God’s own command. In all the plotting and scheming of men, in the midst of all the human betrayal and injustice, what we are actually witnessing is the sword *of God*, who said: “I will

strike the shepherd... awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me.” What does it mean when God strikes His own Son with His own sword?

- ✓ Isaiah 53:5–6, 10 — He was pierced *for our transgressions*; he was crushed *for our iniquities*; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all... [So] it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief.

“No human plummet is long enough to sound the depths of that grace which led [God] to say of His only-begotten, Smite the shepherd. The Lord Jesus was his own Son, the brightness of his glory and the very image of his being, and therefore the object of infinite [delight and pleasure], dear to Him beyond all human expression or conception, and yet He spared Him not, but freely delivered Him up for us all... How fearful an evil [then] is sin when it could call forth the sword against God’s own... well-beloved Son! ... [this sword] had a black side toward Christ, yet it has a bright and light side toward all the Israel of God; for this cloud of blood distills in a sweet shower of blessings unto poor sinners; there is a light in this cloud wherein we may see God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.” (Lange; Chambers, Moore, & Erskine) At what price have we valued Jesus?

But if the striking of the shepherd is to bring the sheep salvation, then what are we to make of the scattering of the sheep? How are we to make sense of the falling away of the disciples? “For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” The point in Zechariah is that God will give the nation of Israel over to all the misery and destruction to which any flock without a shepherd is exposed (Keil-Delitzsch). The scattering of the flock is not just the sad and unfortunate result of the striking of the shepherd. The scattering of the flock is the divine *judgment* of God upon a nation that has rejected their Shepherd. But then what about the forgiveness of sins? How can we make sense of a “scattering” and “falling away” on the one hand, but salvation on the other? Why must the disciples be scattered? Why was it written that the disciples would fall away? What does all of this mean?

Jesus quotes only from Zechariah 13:7, but in doing this, He is inviting us to read further in Zechariah.

- ✓ Zechariah 13:7b–9a — “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; [I will bring again my hand upon] the little ones. In the whole land, declares the LORD, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested.”

So as a result of the scattering of the sheep, a majority of these sheep will be cut off from the covenant people and perish in their sins. The Jewish people would turn their backs on a suffering and crucified Messiah and so the majority of these sheep would be forever excluded from the regenerate, born again community of the New Covenant in Jesus’ blood. But in the midst of these righteous judgments, an undeserving remnant of God’s gracious choice would be saved and left alive (Rom. 11:5-6). This remnant would be scattered and made to go through the fire just like all the rest, but for them the scattering and the fire would not result in their destruction (as it

would for the rest), but rather in their refinement and their purification. By God's amazing grace, the same fires that bring *destruction* to one may bring *salvation* to another. The cross was a stumbling block to *all* of Israel, and ultimately to all the world. For the *majority* (the "two thirds") who reject a crucified Messiah, the cross is an aroma from death to death, but for the *remnant* (the "one third") who have been chosen by God's grace, it is a fragrance from life to life (2 Cor. 2:15-16). So even though the remnant is scattered along with the rest, yet God has promised to "bring back His hand upon them" in His mercy and grace.* They will not be consumed by the fires. Instead, they will be refined and purified. Instead of being excluded from God's people, they will be welcomed into the regenerate, born again, community of the New Covenant in Jesus' blood.

Remember that at the heart of Passover was the celebration of Israel's covenant relationship to God.

✓ Exodus 6:7 — *I will take you to be **my people**, and I will be **your God**.*

But through sin and rebellion, Israel broke that covenant – time, after time, after time. So when Jesus took the Passover cup and explained that it was His blood of the Covenant, He was thinking of Jeremiah's prophecy:

✓ Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34 — Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And *I will be **their God**, and they shall be **my people***... for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Here is the *fulfillment* of all God's covenants because the goal of all God's covenants is that we might be His true people, and that He might be our God. And so now, as Jesus announces that His own disciples will all be scattered and fall away, He quotes Zechariah to show that even this falling away is *a part of God's plan* not for their destruction, but to *refine* them, and to *purify* them, and to establish and confirm them as His very own.†

✓ Zechariah 13:7-9 — I will bring back my hand over the little ones... I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. *I will say, 'They are **my people**'; and they will say, 'The LORD is **my God**.'*”

* Cf. Lange; Keil-Delitzsch; Oswalt on Isaiah 1:25; contra most all Bible translations.

† “Matthew alone (cf. Mark) includes ‘of the flock’ in the second line of the quotation (following LXX); but to what does ‘the flock’ refer? In light of the context of Zechariah 13:16, many have suggested that a wicked prophet is in view there. But this is incompatible with ‘the man who is close to me [i.e., to Yahweh]’ (Mt 13:7b). Instead, Yahweh pictures a day when, owing to the prevailing apostasy, the Shepherd who is close to him (as opposed to the false shepherd in Zech 11) is cut down and the sheep scattered. In 13:8-9 most of the sheep perish; but one-third are left, after being refined, to become ‘my people’—those who will say, ‘Yahweh is our God.’ If Jesus’ quotation of Zechariah in the Gospels presupposes the full context of Zechariah 13:7, then the disciples themselves join Israel, the sheep of God, in being scattered as the result of the ‘striking’ of the Shepherd. Their falling away ‘this very night’ continues to the Cross and beyond and is emblematic of the coming dispersion of the whole nation. But a purified remnant, a ‘third’ will survive the refining and make up the people of God, ‘my people.’ Thus at the very instant Jesus’ disciples show by their scattering that they temporarily side with the unbelieving and apostate nation, God is taking action to make them his true people.” (Carson)

Truly, “*all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). We saw last week that for Judas, the “son of destruction,” his stumbling was the sign of God’s righteous and deserved judgment (26:20-25; Jn. 17:12). But for the rest of the disciples who were part of the remnant according to God’s gracious choice, *even their scattering and stumbling* was used by God to bring about their ultimate *salvation*. This is an impenetrable mystery. But it is also wonderful and glorious. This explains how immediately following Jesus’ announcement that His disciples would all be scattered and fall away because of Him, He can go right on to say what no human wisdom could have ever expected.

III. Matthew 26:32 — “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”

What beautiful, miraculous, amazing words. On the surface, they can appear so simple and so mundane. But especially *now*, we can hear in these words the wonderful, joyful proclamation of the free, and undeserved grace and mercy of God.

“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; I will bring back my hand over the little ones... I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’” When Jesus says to His disciples, “After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee,” He is promising nothing less than the fulfillment of these verses. You will be scattered, but I will gather you together again. You will fall away, but I will restore you, and raise you up, and take you to myself to be my very own treasured possession. “Though you will forsake me, I will not forsake you; though you fall, I will take care you shall not fall finally” (Henry; quoted in Bruner). Instead, for all who have been called according to God’s gracious purpose, He uses even our falling away to establish and confirm us as His very own. There is *nothing* that God’s chosen one’s can possibly do to separate themselves from His saving love. Oh what glorious hope and comfort this is for weak and frail sinners like we all are. But for the disciples, on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, they could not yet see any comfort at all in these words.

IV. Matthew 26:33–35 — Peter answered him, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” And all the disciples said the same.

Never was anyone more sincere, and earnest, and devoted than when Peter and the rest of the disciples spoke these words. And yet never has anyone ever been more wrong in the words that he spoke. “Peter thinks that his deeply felt commitment will last forever — ‘I will never.’ Jesus tells him that it will not last the night.” (Bruner) Oh how frail and fickle we are. That very night, within only a few hours, every single one of the disciples will fail at the test. Every single one of the disciples will turn his back on Jesus (cf. Bruner). They cannot accept the thought that suffering and death should be willingly embraced. They have not yet fully understood the weakness, and the frailty of their own sinful flesh. And so they argue with Jesus, and they contradict His word.

“Though all fall away because of you, I will never fall away... *Even if* [in the unlikely event] I must die with you, I will not deny you!” Right now, how many of us might wish with all of our hearts that the disciples had been right in speaking these words? But here’s the mystery: If the disciples *had* been right, and Jesus wrong, then in the end they would have been cut off from true salvation. Their *self*-confidence and their *self*-reliance would have led them ultimately to eternal destruction. So what they desperately needed to learn was how *rightly* to respond to Jesus’ warning that they would all fall away. “O Lord, I am distressed and grieved that this is so. Help me O Lord, I beseech you, to live in the power of your forgiveness and grace.” (cf. Bruner)

Conclusion

After the disciples were scattered, and after they had fallen away, God restored His hand to them in mercy and grace. The stumbling that resulted for so many in eternal destruction, resulted for the disciples in their eternal salvation. And so the Peter who once boasted that he would never fall away would one day write these words:

- ✓ 1 Peter 1:24 — All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

The Peter who once took up his sword against Jesus’ persecutors (cf. Mat. 26:51; Jn. 18:10-11) would one day write:

- ✓ 1 Peter 4:1, 12 — Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking... Let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing [what is] good.

By God’s sovereign grace, Peter and the rest of the disciples came *through* the fire, refined, purified, a people for God’s own possession. We, too, can know that as those who have been chosen according to God’s gracious purpose, even in our falling away and in our sinful failures, God is even then at work to establish us and to confirm us everlastingly as His very own – so that He might say of us, “They are ***My people***,” and so that we might say of Him, “The Lord is ***my God***.” Knowing these things, and knowing what Jesus has told us about the total weakness and inability of our flesh, may we learn to pray at all times:

“O Lord, I am distressed and grieved that this is so. Help me O Lord, I beseech you, to live in the power of your forgiveness and grace. Help me to live only in the assurance of your gracious promise: ‘You will all fall away because of me this night... but after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.’”