

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 26 (PART 3)

Matthew 26:31-35 - Identifying Deniers

Not only did Judas betray Jesus, but Peter will deny knowing/following Jesus and the other disciples will “scatter” when things get serious. (26:31 contains a quote from Zechariah 13:7). Peter is convinced he won’t deny Jesus. He is passionate and committed, in spirit. But his resolve is shallow, and his best intentions are not strong enough to support him in the trials ahead.

But in the same breath, he also tells them that he will be “raised” and “will go ahead of (them) to Galilee” (v. 32). Jesus is not just looking at the cross, he’s looking beyond it to the resurrection and completion of God’s plan.

This brings up an interesting concept. We read the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, especially about his suffering and death and marvel at how Jesus “fulfilled” these ancient words, confirming his identity. But consider for a moment that Jesus also read these words and understood and knew that he was going to experience these things. Physical pain and suffering, emotional distress, relational betrayal and more. These words weren’t just interesting theological facts, or personal affirmations - they were about what was going to happen to him.

Matthew 26:36-46 - Jesus Prays In The Garden Of Gethsemane

The unflappable band of brothers are already starting to crack. The ones who would never fail their master are having trouble staying awake to pray.

I don’t knock them though. I would have had trouble staying awake too. It’s late. We just finished a long meal with multiple cups of wine. We walked to the Mount of Olives. We’re closing our eyes to pray. Grief is heavy. And I’m just weak in general. I would have folded too.

The tight circle around Jesus is starting to dissolve. Yet, he is not alone nor abandoned. He is seeking and speaking with his Father in his hour of need. He is honest in his words and yet desires above all to be obedient and pleasing to God.

Matthew 26:47-50 - Judas Betrays & Jesus Arrested

Judas' arrival is what wakes up the others. Matthew records that Judas was accompanied by a "large crowd with swords and clubs" (v. 47). The signal Judas had given to identify Jesus was by greeting him with a kiss. Jesus responds by calling Judas "friend" (v. 50).

Matthew 26:51-56 - Ear Cut Off, Disciples Fled

This is a good example of human tendencies when facing pressure. The phrase "fight or flight" covers this section well. One of the disciples (John doesn't hesitate to tell us it is Peter - John 18:10) takes out a sword, in this case a "small dagger" (<3162> μάχαира *machaira*) to take on the large crowd which was made up of Roman soldiers, Jewish leaders and whoever else might have been there, who don't forget were armed themselves with swords *and* clubs. A futile gesture for sure.

Jesus' response is remarkable. Unlike his disciples, he is calm, he is controlled and he is aware of the bigger picture. "Put your little dagger away Peter. That's not how my kingdom works. No mob is capturing the Messiah unless the Messiah surrenders." And then he just drops the massive flex when he says "Don't you know that my Father could send 72,000 angels to my aid if I needed?" I wonder how the crowd feels right now? I wonder if they had hesitation about their own assignment. Jesus challenges them by saying: "why all the swords and clubs? You could have arrested me in the temple anytime. I've been walking around and interacting with you."

But why doesn't Jesus use his angelic rescue option? Why was it Judas who sold Jesus out? Why didn't the leaders arrest him before this moment on their own initiative? This is all answered emphatically in the very next thing Jesus says to Peter, to the disciples, to the crowds, and to us: "How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?" (**Matthew 26:54**).

That's what is driving this whole moment. The fulfillment of the Scriptures.

Three Takeaways From This Section:

1 - Feelings fade and enthusiasm isn't enough to hold you over in difficult times. I admire Peter's passion to never deny Jesus. But I also sympathize with his failure when facing pressure. You can make a vocal confession of Jesus as Lord one day and fall on your face the next if your life and devotion to Christ is based solely on feelings and emotions.

A relationship with Christ based on such things often looks like this: when it's a good day, we're joyful. When a church service grabs our heart, we're ready to live for him. When God answers our prayers, we're giving him high praise. When our bodies feel good, we're eager to serve. When life isn't too hectic, we're ready to help a friend or encourage a new believer. But, when the music fades, when the truth of the sermon is harder to remember, when the prayer hasn't been answered yet, when our bodies have pain and life gets busy...who are we then?

In the modern world it's easy to live for God when it makes us feel good, when it seems like it is improving our lives in some way, when our emotions get stirred and everyone around us is in step and moving together. But a life for God dependent on feelings and emotions is not a life often marked by faithfulness. It is not a life that has been struck by the mercy of God in light of our sin.

When we understand and believe the gospel, when we understand the cross and embrace Jesus as Lord, feelings and emotions may come and go, but they are not the fuel for our devotion to him. Our devotion to him ought to be fueled by a love for the one who gave everything for us. Giving our lives to him is the least we can do. Whether we feel like it or not.

So, be careful that all your devotion isn't just emotion.

2 - The prayers of Jesus in the garden also teach us that our relationship with God is the most important relationship of all. I am grateful for my wife and family and friends. They provide encouragement and comfort in deep and real ways. I have often finished a very hard day with hope because I know I can go home to someone who loves me.

But, as wonderful as those relationships are, they too fail and aren't always present to provide the good things they often do. Too many people count on their relationships with others to give them value or confidence - and then adding a relationship with God on top of that only enhances a wonderful life. But this is a foolish approach.

Instead, we ought to start with our relationship with our heavenly father and enhance our lives with human friendship and love. Had Jesus found his worth and confidence in the great relationships he had with his apprentices and friends, he would have crumbled in this moment and lacked the strength to endure. But, Jesus' life was not built that way. In his hour of need, his friends were sleeping but his father was sustaining him. Of course his friends not being there for him would be real and sorrowful, but his life was centered in his love of God and the love of God for him. And so while his friends failed, his father never did. Jesus' friends were unreliable and ran away - but even so - Jesus was NEVER abandoned or alone.

3 - The Scriptures tell the story.

We can't read the script of our lives or watch a miniseries which tells us everything that's going to happen today or in the future. And yet, we have more wisdom and knowledge at our disposal to make sense of our lives than we think. This wisdom is contained in the Scriptures. The Bible tells us about how the world works, how the forces of evil work, how the human heart works. The Bible teaches us about the character and track record of God. The Bible teaches us about why things are the way they are in this world, what will happen in the future, and what God is at work doing now.

Negligence of the Scriptures leads us to complain, fear, worry and sin. While not every moment or detail is found on a page in the Bible, there is truth to discover and believe that helps us navigate our lives. We should be less surprised than we are that sinners do evil things, that difficulty exists in our days, that sickness and brokenness is a part of this age, etc. Jesus himself tells us that in this world we will have trouble, but not to fear, because he has overcome (John 16:33). Friends will fail us, governments will lie, loved ones will die. Sometimes ungodly people have success, sometimes godly people struggle. And the reverse is sometimes true too. Etc, etc.

The more we read, understand and remember the truths of Scripture, the more we will model a Christ-like confidence in times of trouble and peace when others are failing. And today we have a great advantage over the disciples of this chapter. We know at the end of the story they are living out in real time.

Things change and life is always moving, but God's promises are true and his ways are good. So as we walk through our own good days and bad days, we can remember that God is faithful, that Christ has won and that God's plan is to make all things new in the end.