

# Matthew 26:31-56: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Matthew chapter 26 verses 31 to 56 Then Jesus said to them, 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.

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee. 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. Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, Sit here while I go over there and pray.

And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch with me. And going a little farther, he fell on his face and prayed, saying, My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.

[1:10] And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, My father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.

And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, Sleep and take your rest later on.

See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand. While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him. And he came up to Jesus at once and said, Greetings, Rabbi. And he kissed him.

[2:20] Jesus said to him, Friend, do what you came to do. Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear.

Then Jesus said to him, Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?

But how should the scriptures be fulfilled that it must be so? At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, Have you come out as against a robber with swords and clubs to capture me?

Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples left him and fled.

The middle section of Matthew chapter 26 concerns the falling away of the disciples of Jesus, as he is taken in Gethsemane and as Judas Iscariot betrays him.

[3:27] Strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. We've encountered several allusions to and citations of Zechariah in these concluding chapters of Matthew, and they continue here.

This verse is taken from Zechariah chapter 13 verse 7. As usual, it's important to hear the stories behind the story. From the triumphal entry onwards, Matthew is taking up such things as the Old Testament melody of Zechariah chapter 9 to 14, and he plays out the melody of the passion narrative around this melody, making frequent allusions to it along the way.

Here are a few examples that we might think of. Chapter 9 verse 9. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your king is coming to you. Righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Chapter 14 verse 21. And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

Chapter 9 verse 14. Then the Lord will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning. The Lord God will sound the trumpet, and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.

[ 4 : 42 ] Chapter 12 verse 10. And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

Chapter 10, 8-9. I will whistle for them and gather them in, for I have redeemed them, and they shall be as many as they were before, though I scattered them among the nations, yet in far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return.

Chapter 14 verses 4-7. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward, and the other half southward.

And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel, and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah the king of Judah.

Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost, and there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

[ 6 : 01 ] Chapter 9 verse 11. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Chapter 13 verse 7.

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. I will turn my hand against the little ones.

Chapter 11 verses 12-13. Then I said to them, If it seems good to you, give me my wages, but if not, keep them. And they weighed out as my wages 30 pieces of silver.

Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter, the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the 30 pieces of silver, and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter.

We might perhaps add to this list the perplexing reference to Zechariah the son of Berechiah in Matthew chapter 23. These themes are messianic and apocalyptic. It's the rejected Messiah, wounded and killed.

[ 7 : 00 ] And Matthew is taking this story and placing it in the background of his passion narrative, so that we can see that Jesus is fulfilling prophecy all the way along. Jesus foretells his disciples' rejection of him in a way that shows that it fulfills Old Testament prophecy, and in a way also that reveals that he knows what's about to take place, and that even those elements that take the disciples and the reader by surprise do not take him by surprise.

He's already foretold Judas' betrayal, but now the disciples forsaking him and Peter's denying him are foretold. Peter is the lead disciple, and he's the one who speaks up and declares with confidence that he will not fall away.

But Jesus declares that all of them will stumble that very night. However, Jesus will be raised, and he will go before them to Galilee. This is the closing scene of the Gospel, and the fact that Jesus foretells it here suggests that it is important that it happens in Galilee.

He's returning to the point where he first gathered them. The shepherd is going to regather his sheep, and he's going to send them forth as shepherds themselves. It's a reunion of the scattered sheep and the risen shepherd.

Peter's excessive confidence in his own abilities and his insistent denials that he will deny Christ are striking here. He presents himself as the most faithful disciple. All the others might reject him, but Peter would not.

[ 8 : 23 ] And perhaps there's an invited comparison between the proud crowing cockerel and Peter himself. Peter is crowing about his faithfulness, but that very morning he will be reminded about that crowing that he is engaged in by the crowing of the cockerel, who alerts him to the fact that he has just denied his Lord.

From the prediction of three denials, Jesus goes on to pray three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, three times for the cup to be removed. And he takes with him Peter, James and John. They're the same disciples as were present at the Transfiguration. And they're probably near enough to hear his prayers. He tells them to watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. We've had that statement before in the context of the Lord's Prayer.

Lead us not into temptation. Or we can think about the way that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted. It's that entrance into that place of testing and trial, that place of tribulation, where your faith will be pushed to its limit and maybe beyond.

And they're supposed to pray that at this very moment, this critical moment, that they will not find themselves pushed beyond, that they will not find themselves in a situation where their faith is overwhelmed.

[ 9 : 39 ] They must pray for that. You can also think of the way that people are warned to keep awake in the Olivet Discourse. Warned to stay awake because they do not know when the time of trial and testing and tribulation will hit them.

They must be prepared at all times. And the disciples here just fall asleep. They cannot keep awake. Three times they are tested and three times they fail in contrast with Jesus in the wilderness.

He talks with Peter in particular in verse 40 in a way that maybe anticipates Peter's denial. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Peter is zealous, but he lacks the ability to carry it out in practice. And Jesus wrestles with the reality of his forthcoming suffering. These are agonized, passionate prayers calling upon his father. And yet there is a shift in the balance of the prayers between verse 39 and verse 42.

In verse 39, my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. And it seems by verse 42 he has his answer and he prays differently.

[ 10 : 47 ] My father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done. His first prayer is a prayer that if there is any way according to God's will that the cup could be removed, that it would be removed.

And the second prayer is knowing that it cannot be removed, let God's will be done. It's a prayer in which we see the will of Christ according to his human nature conformed with the will of the father, a will that is set on the same thing.

Once again, we might hear an echo of the Lord's prayer here, your will be done. And perhaps further, an echo of the story of the binding of Isaac and the relationship between Isaac and his father Abraham.

Having prayed these three times, Jesus then gets up and goes out to face his betrayer who has come. And Judas is accompanied by a mob. He's one of the twelve, we're told.

Now we know that Judas is one of the twelve, but this underlies the scale of the treachery that is taking place here. He betrays Jesus with a kiss. Maybe it reminds us of Joab betraying Amasa with a kiss in 2 Samuel 20, verses 9-10.

[ 11 : 55 ] One of those with Jesus, identified with Peter elsewhere, strikes the high priest's servant. This, again, might make us think of the story of David fleeing from Absalom and the way that Abishai, the son of Zerariah, asked to strike down Shimei, who comes out against him with curses.

Here, Peter is forbidden and in that place, Abishai is forbidden by David. Those who deal in the coin of violence will receive their recompense in violence. But Jesus is not being taken for want of force.

If he wanted, he could summon legions of angels to his aid. However, the scriptures must be fulfilled. What are the scriptures in question? We could think of a number of different stories.

The story of David and his fleeing from Absalom and the different events that occur there. The story of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers and Judah in particular. We could think of the story beneath the final part of the prophecy of Zechariah.

We could think of a number of other places like these that seem to point forward to what Jesus accomplishes and suffers. In other Gospels we see this particular incident associated with Isaiah 53, verse 12.

[ 13 : 08 ] He was numbered with the transgressors. They come out against him like a brigand because he's numbered with the transgressors in fulfillment of the scriptures. A question to consider.

What similarities can we see in the way that Paul prays in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 7 to 10 concerning his thorn in the flesh and the way that Christ prays in the Garden of Gethsemane? What can we learn by the comparison and how does it relate to the broader themes at the end of the book of 2 Corinthians?■■■