

Matthew 23-01-15a

Good morning, welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace and Truth Bible Church. This is the 15th of January 2023 and we're continuing our study in the Gospel of Matthew, picking up in chapter 26 and moving into chapter 27. Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and our study and we'll begin.

Father, we are so thankful for the many ways You express Your grace and faithfulness toward us. We are made of clay, we get caught up in the affairs of this world and this life and are easily distracted and drawn away from the truth that defines us and sustains us. And we thank You for Your patience with us, Your cleansing forgiveness, the presence and power of Your Holy Spirit and the active guidance and the light on our path that comes from Your Word.

As we look at this portion of it together this morning, we ask Your blessing on it and on our fellowship, on our individual hearts that we can take the observations and the principles that we find in this narrative and have it be blessed to the strength and the motivation of our souls to see clearly how we can more closely conform ourselves to the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and His faithfulness and dedication to fulfilling Your will in His life on this earth. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen. Well, we had an observation last time and I have to confess a failure on my part.

I have led myself and thus you all astray because we were looking at the quotation that the Lord Jesus gives of the Old Testament in verse 31. All of you will be made to stumble because of me this night, Matthew 26, 31, because when the shepherd is stricken, the sheep will scatter. And that took us back to Zechariah 13, verse 7. And as we looked at the context of that, we saw that as you continue, God says, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

Then I will turn my hand against the little ones. And it shall come to pass in all the land, says the Lord, two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die. One-third shall be left in it.

I will bring one-third through the fire, will refine them as silver is refined and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name and I will answer them. I will say, this is my people.

And each one will say, the Lord is my God. This is in view, the Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul, anyone in the New Testament who quotes the old never proof texts. We're always sensitive to the context of those quotes.

They are just a hot link, a bookmark to take us back to the Old Testament and its surrounding truths. So what we looked at last time and my suggestion last time is to see Jesus giving a warning to his disciples and a prediction that when they are scattered, they are going to be tested. And only a third of them are going to come through that

experience.

And as they come through it, they are going to be subjected to great stress, testing, refined in the refiner's fire, like silver and like gold. It is going to be a time of pressure, a time of temptation, a time where the truth of motivation and dedication is exposed. This is what the word of God does for us.

It pierces to the very center of our soul and spirit. It lays bare the joints and the marrow and discerns, lays bare the thoughts and intents of our heart. Everyone can be faithful.

Everyone can show up. Everyone can be a part of the operation when things are going well. All 12 disciples will gladly show up on days where the crowds are coming and they are looked at as something special.

But when the arresting party comes and when life and death are the issue and fear becomes the test, natural instincts of self-preservation, of escape, of not wanting to have life as you know it forever change and possibly end, this is the refining fire that is coming. And when you think about the one-third, I suggested last time, well, how many of the disciples become active and fruitful apostles as revealed in the book of Acts? I do not treat church tradition and extra biblical speculation as valid here. We're looking at scripture for our truth, the aftermath of these events.

And so we look at the book of Acts and how many of the disciples do we find courageous, used by God, implementing the power of the Holy Spirit? Jesus trained them in this. He sent them out in groups of two. He breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit before he left.

The Holy Spirit descends at Pentecost. How many of these 12 disciples do we find active and fruitful and doing the work for which Jesus trained them in the book of Acts? So this is where I made a mistake. Who can we name with great confidence? Simon Peter, John, and James, those three most definitely mentioned in the book of Acts.

James only to record the fact that he is the first to lose his life in persecution under Herod. Peter and John in the early chapters of Acts are visible. They are fruitful.

They are healing. Peter is preaching. Peter most prominently, by far.

John is accompanying him at the steps of the temple. Silver and gold have I none, and so on. Who is the one I mentioned last week, and I made a mistake? Philip.

Turn with me quickly to Acts chapter six. In those days when the number of disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Greeks, the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. So the 12, they are mentioned here, some of the multitude of disciples and said, it is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. So the 12, however many of the disciples compose that group, are not going to wait tables, not going to serve the widows. They're going to devote themselves to the word and prayer.

The saying pleased the whole multitude, verse five, they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip. This Philip, the Philip of Acts is not the Philip of the disciples. The Philip with the four daughters who are prophetesses, the Philip who goes and witnesses to the Ethiopian is this Philip.

So we're back to the core group of disciples where we have Peter, James, and John. Philip, and this is a common source of confusion. I am not the first to make this.

I think I knew this and forgot it, which happens when some of you get older, you'll find this out. Anyway, I apologize for that. But in thinking about it and reviewing it, it dawned on me.

I suddenly recovered that the Philip in the later chapters of this account is Philip, the deacon, Philip, the evangelist. He is not Philip, the disciple. So we're back to this principle.

Why am I agonizing over this? First of all, to be sure that we're all keeping our individuals straight. But secondly, even people who begin well, even people who receive a lot of great early training, grounded in the word, dedicate themselves to the study of the word of God and prayer, in the biblical account, we are not told. It could be that they did and it is not recorded, but it is significant to me that as far as the scriptural record is concerned, you have really only a third of the disciples.

You could really say a quarter, if it's just Peter, James, and John. You have deacons. Two of these deacons are going to be much more fully mentioned and documented, which is Stephen and Philip.

These individuals who are chosen by the disciples, they're going to devote themselves to the word and prayer. I do think the suggestion that was made last week that if you want to add a fourth, it would be Matthew, Levi, the tax collector, dedicating himself to the word and to prayer and ultimately producing the gospel that is under our gaze for these last many months. That is certainly a lasting contribution to the church.

Mark, of course, records the preaching of Peter. Luke was not among the original disciples, but certainly is a companion of the Apostle Paul and then John, of course. Mark and John, those gospels, come from Peter and John.

Luke is going to record as a Gentile author, a companion of the Apostle Paul, and spoke firsthand with many of the witnesses to these things, including Mary herself, the mother of the Lord Jesus. Even in the gospels, you have a reflection that it is going to take the

Apostle Paul from outside the group of the original twelve, who is going to replace Judas. And his contribution, of course, goes without saying, is substantial.

Having said that, what is the point? Why would we observe and dwell on this? First of all, because the Lord Jesus, in one of his last Old Testament allusions before the cross, draws our attention to Zechariah chapter 13, and the fact that when hardship comes, when testing comes, and the sheep are scattered, there are two observations you can make about this. When the shepherd is stricken, it isn't the flock of sheep that move together as a group and find themselves in a canyon or in a ravine or far away from the fold. The sheep not only lose their connection to the shepherd, but they lose their connection to each other.

This is not ideal. This is part of the problem. There is safety in numbers, even for sheep.

Look at your nature films, Africa, gazelles, Northern America, caribou and elk and moose and such. Sticking together is a means of preservation and safety. One of the applications we can make from this is that when we are under pressure and it is difficult to sustain our vertical relationship, our vertical communication, under pressure it is difficult to be calm and relaxed and absorb the Word of God from reading or study or reflection or in prayer.

The pressure is distracting. The pressure creates a great difficulty in focus and concentration. We are going to see Jesus giving the perfect example of how to overcome that problem.

Because our love is in the vertical direction and in the horizontal direction, when we come under pressure and testing, our resources come and our motivation and our encouragement and our sustaining grace comes from purposely, consciously, actively preserving and cultivating our vertical relationships and our horizontal relationships. We bear one another's burdens. We intercede on one another's behalf.

To allow ourselves to be scattered by pressure, to be scattered by the tests that come from the world, the flesh and the devil, to not only be distracted and have our vision of heavenly truths and our relationship with the Heavenly Father be clouded with doubt, with confusion, with fears, with anxiety, with worry, trying to keep that straight, we also need to be careful not to be scattered from one another, to maintain the unity that is pictured over and over again in Scripture as being one body. We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one unifying Spirit, one God and Father of us all, but we are members together of the body of Christ. And so when pressure comes, it is extremely important for us to remember both directions.

That love is not just an abstraction. It's not just a good feeling about God and a good feeling about each other. It's not just acceptance of God and acceptance of each other.

There is the means of sustaining grace. There is the means of drawing strength, not only from our relationship with God, but from our relationship with each other. We are a team.

We are a family. We are a brotherhood. And so this idea of scattering, and you find that Peter and John stick together.

You see them together in the early chapters of Acts. You see them together. We're going to see them in the courtyard when Jesus is being tried.

John is there and Peter is there. John is inside and Peter is outside. But one of the reasons Peter fails, Peter's not with John.

They are separate. They are both there, but they've been scattered. Do you think if John had been by the fire or do you think if Peter had slipped in with John to the inner precincts to witness the questioning and the trial and the answers that the Lord Jesus gives, do you think if Peter was inside, if the two of them had been together, that there would have been the denial? Do you think Peter could have said what he is going to say if John was standing right by his It is the separation and the division.

It is being alone that contributes to the failure. This happens in churches when, for whatever reason, it may be needful or it may be unjust, but there is a controversy. There is a scandal of some kind that affects the leadership in the church and the church splits, the church fragments.

I'm talking about a local church. I think all of us are aware of such situations. Some of us have lived through it.

There is a great opportunity to turn cursing to blessing, to turn hardship and difficulty and pressure into an opportunity to be driven to God in prayer, in reflection, in concentration on his word, and in the maintenance of fellowship with believers of who are those who love the Lord Jesus and who have spiritual resources to share. So, having said that, we pick up now in verse 33. Peter answered and said to him, Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble.

This is very pregnant with problems. Confidence in anticipating and imagining what pressure is going to be like, what the test will be like, and then finding out what it is actually like. We can convince ourselves and try to convince others that we are prepared, that we are ready, that nothing is going to faze us.

I am resolved. This is my intention. This is how I picture myself in hardship.

But when it actually happens, it can be quite a different story. So, Peter's confidence here, as they are walking down the path, this is how we like to think of ourselves. There have been studies done where they will give someone a survey and say, What kind of

person do you think you are? What kind of person do you imagine others believe you to be? How would others describe you? And then you give that same survey to others about you, and there is a distance between our self-perception and how we believe we are perceived and how we are actually perceived.

Well, take that and magnify it to our view of ourselves in contrast to God's view of us. Man looks on the outward appearance. Even we are fooled.

Jeremiah 17 verse 9, The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it? Who can understand it? Who can give an accurate appraisal of his own heart? This is the compass needle that is diverted by any number of nearby magnets, and we are not conscious of the fact that what we believe is true North is not true North, and what we believe is true about ourselves is not. Peter is the archetype, the classic demonstration of this truth.

What Peter believes about himself contrasts sharply with what Jesus says about him. What would be wise for Peter to do at this point? Jesus says, All of you will be made to stumble. Peter says, Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble.

There is Jesus' assessment and there is Peter's self-assessment. Peter says, Sure, the rest of these guys may stumble. I never will.

Has he already forgotten the passage we reviewed last time? Get thee behind me, Satan. You are thinking the thoughts of men, not the thoughts of God. We are selective in our memory.

As Barbra Streisand famously sang, What's too painful to remember, we choose to forget. The word of God is our objective standard. We have to soak in it.

We have to steep our souls in it so that we can pray with David in Psalm 51, Try me and know my heart. He doesn't say, Oh, Lord, help me to try myself and know my own heart. He says, Lord, you try me.

You know my heart. You figure out if there is any wicked way in me and reveal it to me. Purge me with hyssop.

Wash me and make me white. All of these things are done by God. We are extremely limited in our ability to cleanse ourselves.

Scripture says, Wash your hands, you sinners. We cannot wash our own heart. God has to do this.

It comes by our choice, but not by our power. We can choose it, but we can't do it. It's just like our salvation.

So when Jesus says, all of you will be caused to stumble, if Peter actually believed and took to heart what Jesus said, what would his response be? Lord, what should I do? How can I avoid this? Is there a way? When a cup of temptation and pressure comes to the Lord Jesus, what is his prayer to the Father? If this cup can pass from me, nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done. And understanding that the refining fire is coming, Peter's question could be asked rather than an affirmation of, I am nine feet tall and this will never happen to me. That hardness of heart, that's a rock in the soil that prevents the seed of Jesus' word to him directly and personally from sinking in and bearing fruit.

I say to you this night before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times. A second communication is denied. As I said last week, this is where the denial begins.

Peter is actually going to deny the Lord about six times this night, not three. Remember, this conversation on the road is the second time that Jesus tells Peter, you are going to deny me. This is the second time.

We saw the first time last week in the upper room before they leave. This is the second time Peter denied it in the upper room. He denies it twice here before the cock crows, before the arresting party shows up.

Peter has denied the Lord Jesus three times and this is the source of his failure. Not listening to what divine truth communicates about our weakness, our need for God's strength. Lord, if this is so, what would you have me do? Can I avoid this failure? Why will I fail? How will I fail? What can be done? But his misplaced self-confidence is going to be his undoing.

Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you. So said all the disciples. Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane and said to the disciples, sit here while I go and pray over there.

We're going to pause here and take our break. But when we come back, this is the example of the Lord Jesus. Sit here while I go and pray over there.

This is not a shared prayer. Isn't it interesting that Jesus doesn't say, okay, kneel with me, Peter and James and John. He comes with all of the disciples to Gethsemane and he says to the 11, sit here.

I am going to go over there and pray. This is not a Lord teach us to pray moment. The bulk of the disciples are not going to hear the content of Jesus' prayer.

He took with him as he left the group of eight. Notice the sheep are already being divided by the shepherd himself. He leaves eight behind and he takes with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee.

And he began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. The inner circle, the advanced

class, those who have gotten the furthest know Jesus the best. The same ones he took to the upper room, the same ones who were present on the Mount of Transfiguration.

This is the best of the group. They've got the three highest averages in the class. Peter and James and John, he takes with him.

Why does he do this? Why does he divide the disciples, leave eight behind and bring the three? He begins to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. And he said to them, said to whom, my soul is exceedingly sorrowful even to death. Stay here and watch with me.

He doesn't give any kind of command to the eight. Evidently, there's not much they can do for him. Peter and James and John are asked by the Lord Jesus to watch with him.

He went a little further. He is within earshot and fell on his face and prayed saying, oh my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. Peter and James and John hear this spoken prayer, but Jesus has separated from them.

They overhear it, but this is not a community prayer. It is not a corporate prayer. It is an individual prayer.

And notice that unlike the model prayer or the, the exhortation to prayer, when the disciples said, teach us to pray. And Jesus said, when you pray, say, father, who art in heaven, this is very personal. My father, oh, my father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.

Jesus is exceedingly sorrowful in his soul, even unto death. When we are against extreme hardship, imminent death, rejection, castigation, false accusation from those around us, when physical death is imminent, sorrow is legitimate. Jesus faced every temptation.

He was tested in all points like as we are yet without sin. So what does it tell us? You don't have to feel guilty about sorrow. We don't have to feel guilty about reluctance to enter into great pain.

We don't have to feel guilty about being victimized, being rejected, being castigated, being falsely accused, falsely estimated, falsely charged with error by those who ought to know better. This makes us feel bad. And it's not a sin to feel bad in the face of rejection, hardship, sorrow, pain, and death.

It's not a sin. What matters is our response. What is Jesus' response? Prayer.

Individual, heartfelt, directly addressed to the Father and laying the situation out before the Father. There is a cup. We just had a cup that we've discussed in great detail in the upper room.

This cup is the new covenant. And that word new doesn't mean something new that's never been seen before. The idea is renewal.

There has been a covenant with God in the past. This is a renewed, this is an enhanced, this is an upgraded covenant. You can have a new version of software.

It's the same program, but it is enhanced and more powerful and faster and easier to use. There has always been covenant relationship with God possible, but through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, the covenant is renewed. This cup, if possible, let this cup pass from me.

This cup, this is a cup of judgment. It is a cup of paying the penalty for sin. And it is the hardest thing any human being has ever done.

How does Jesus approach it? He doesn't get the scroll of Isaiah and read through it over and over again. He doesn't sit and recite the memorized scripture that he has in his soul. That is present.

It is circulating in his thinking. Old Testament imagery talks about the cup of wrath that is poured out on sin and on evil. It is certainly in the background.

It is certainly a part of the context, but Jesus' response to the hardest test any human being has ever faced is personal, individual prayer. What should Peter and James and John be doing? What should the other eight disciples be doing? Having been told repeatedly what's going to happen on this night, Peter being warned twice, being told three times he is going to fail on this night, what should Peter be doing that he's not doing? Jesus is praying, oh my father, but when he comes back in verse 40, he finds Peter and James and John sleeping. What? That's the question.

We should look at ourselves, if we're falling short of this standard and this approach to hardship and difficulty, what? Is this what we're doing? When what we should be doing is praying, praying for ourselves and praying that the will of God will be done, that we are given the strength to endure whatever cup is coming. Let's pause here and take a break. When we come back, we'll pick up here at verse 40.