

The Promise by the Disciples
Matthew 26:30-35
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Jesus' prediction of the desertion by His disciples in Matthew 26:30-35 occurs after Jesus and His disciples eat the Passover meal. This account can also be found in the other Gospels (Mark 14:26-31; Luke 22:31-34; John 13:33-34).

The place referenced (26:30)

Matthew 26:30 transitions from Jerusalem, where the last Passover meal was eaten and the Lord's Supper was instituted, to the Mount of Olives. Assuming that Judas had departed prior to the Lord's Supper, only Jesus and the remaining eleven disciples would journey to the Mount of Olives. This is consistent with the account of Judas' arrival with those who arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:47-50), which was located on the slope of the Mount of Olives.

Prior to departing for the Mount of Olives, they sang a hymn. This hymn is unidentified but the Passover meal was traditionally concluded with the Hallel, which was the singing or chanting of Psalm 118. Several verses of Psalm 118 are very fitting for what was at hand:

- *"The LORD is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (118:6).*
- *"You pushed me violently so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation" (118:13-14).*
- *"I will not die, but live, and tell of the works of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but He has not given me over to death" (118:17-18).*
- *"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. This is the LORD's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (118:22-24).*

It is fitting that Jesus would choose to leave Jerusalem for the Mount of Olives. He did not go there to hide, for He knew Judas would betray Him that night. Also, Judas knew that each *"evening He would go out and spend the night on the mount that is called Olivet"* (Luke 21:37; cf. Luke 22:39; John 18:2). He knew that He would return to earth with the kingdom on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4).

It was well into the evening, possibly close to midnight, by the time they traveled to the Mount, meaning there would be no crowds following them. Judas and the chief priests would have wanted to arrest Jesus at night, in a remote location, in order to avoid the public uprising that was feared, as noted in Matthew 26:4-5, *“they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. But they were saying, ‘Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people.’”* Therefore, Jesus willingly submitted Himself to the will of God by making this trek up to the Mount of Olives and allowing Himself to be arrested.

The prediction of renunciation (26:31)

While Matthew and Mark place the account of Jesus predicting the desertion by His disciples after leaving for the Mount of Olives, Luke and John place these words while Jesus was still in the upper room. Matthew uses the adverb *“then”* which delineates a sequence of events. This sequence could be a logical sequence, rather than a time sequence, but no other Gospel makes the time sequence clear.

The exact location of these words does not affect their meaning, therefore we can assume that either these words were spoken in Jerusalem and Matthew positioned them where he did in his Gospel in order to emphasize how soon the disciples would desert Jesus, or else that Luke and John included these words with other words Jesus said in the upper room as a general summary of all of what He spoke. Because Matthew often adjusted his order of events to fit points that he desired to highlight, it is likely best to consider these words were actually spoken in Jerusalem, before they headed to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus tells His disciples that all of them will fall away *“this night.”* This further shows the nearness of their defection. In a matter of hours, they would do something they could not imagine at this moment. This will occur according to the sovereignty of God, and the free will of the disciples. We see the sovereignty of God in the reference by Jesus, *“You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.’”*

In Matthew 26:31, Jesus references the text of Zechariah 13:7, *“Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate, declares the LORD of hosts. ‘Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; and I will turn My hand against the little ones.’”* The context of Zechariah was the apostasy of false prophets causing *“the Shepherd”* to be cut down and the sheep scattered.

When we look at Zechariah 13:7, we see some minor differences from Matthew 26:31. The most interesting difference is the grammatical change by Jesus to the future tense of “*I will strike*” from Zechariah’s imperative command to “*strike*.” This can be understood by realizing that God is commanding the sword to strike in Zechariah 13:7, whereas Jesus directly associates the striking with God.

Also, Matthew, unlike Mark 14:27, adds the phrase “*of the flock*” to the Zechariah reference. Surely, Matthew is recording what Jesus said and Mark simplified his quotation. While Zechariah 13:7 does not include the phrase “*of the flock*,” Jesus added it in order to affirm the disciples’ place in the flock, even though they will scatter. Matthew 26:31 shows that Jesus freely referenced Old Testament passages according to their meaning and their prophetic application.

Jesus affirms God’s sovereignty in His coming death by referencing Zechariah 13:7, “*I will strike down the Shepherd*.” This plan of God will necessarily result in the sheep of the flock being scattered. This plan did not excuse their defection, but it prepared them to repent after falling away. What they could not conceive of would be understood in the coming days.

Ultimately, the developments of the opposition to Christ do not end with the crucifixion. These eleven disciples, along with the rest of God’s people, would be scattered across the Roman Empire. The rejection of Jesus would bring persecution upon the church, and the sheep would be scattered, bringing the Gospel of the redemption from sin to the nations. Thus the sovereignty of God will also use the evil opposition to the Messiah toward a greater end. This is consistent with the conclusion of Zechariah’s words that reflect the blessing of God in the future, “*They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God’*” (Zechariah 13:9).

The promise of resurrection (26:32)

Jesus does not end His words about their falling away without encouraging them with His resurrection, “*But after I have been raised*.” Many times Jesus had encouraged them with His predicted resurrection (cf. Matthew 16:21; 17:9; 17:23; 20:18-19). The resurrection is central to their own resurrection, as Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection of all God’s people (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). The resurrection that Jesus spoke of was specifically referencing His appearances to the disciples in His resurrected body. The concept of resurrection is not simply spiritual in heaven, but involves an earthly presence as well. This is what we look forward to in the kingdom to come.

Jesus told His eleven disciples that He *“will go ahead of you to Galilee.”* Therefore, their abandonment of Him would not affect His faithfulness toward them. That He will go to Galilee ahead of them implies their response to His crucifixion will be to return to their homes. However, the Lord went ahead of them to impart a greater plan for them.

After Christ's death and burial, an angel appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to tell them *“Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him”* (Matthew 28:7). Jesus then appeared to the women with the same message, *“Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me”* (Matthew 28:10). Matthew 28:16 tells us they did as Jesus instructed them, *“But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.”*

It was in Galilee that Jesus gave His disciples His great commission, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:19-20). This was the Lord's plan to reach the world through His disciples. No longer would the world come to Israel to know God. Now the people of God would go to the world to tell them about God. The very purpose of Jesus going ahead of them to Galilee was to send them to the world, *“So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you’”* (John 20:21).

The proclamation of reliability (26:33)

Peter responded to the words of Jesus with his typical bold assertion, *“Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”* He acknowledged the possibility of the other ten disciples falling away, but saw himself as better than them. He viewed himself as completely committed to following Jesus, regardless of what may come.

Peter did not address the prophecy of Zechariah 13:7, nor the promise of the resurrection and the reuniting in Galilee. Such self-confidence opposed what Christ said about them all falling away. It was similar to other moments when Peter would oppose the words of Jesus about God's plan, believing that he knew better. When Jesus first spoke of His death and resurrection, *“Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You’”* (Matthew 16:22). Peter had a habit of rejecting what he did not understand.

The prediction of renunciation reaffirmed (26:34)

Jesus responded to Peter by restating His prophecy, along with additional details, *“Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”* Not only would Peter fall away, but in his falling away, he would deny Jesus three different times. Peter not only was not better than the other ten disciples, he would actually claim, *“I do not know the man”* (Matthew 26:72, 75).

This would occur *“this very night.”* That the three denials would occur while it was still night is affirmed by Jesus’ words about the rooster crowing. Since roosters, across all time and places, crow before the breaking of dawn (typically between 3:00-4:00 am daily), Jesus told Peter that these denials would occur within a few hours. The Lord continued to press upon Peter how wrong he was about his confidence in himself.

Luke 22:31 provides additional information of what Jesus told Peter, *“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”* Therefore, Jesus did not only speak about Peter’s weakness, but confirmed His strength to ensure Peter’s faith would not fail. Jesus prayed the will of the Father, that Peter’s faith would remain and be evidenced in repentance.

We see the advocacy of our Lord in time of need as we see Him ensuring that our faith will remain. True faith does not mean sinless perfection, but it does involve turning from sin. The true sign of faith is repentance. Furthermore, the result of repentance is the ability to serve others by strengthening their faith. This is done by means of the encouragement of the word of God.

Matthew recorded Peter’s falling away and denying Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-74), and also that he repented, *“And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, ‘Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly”* (Matthew 26:75). The book of Acts describes how Peter would strengthen the faith of his fellow believers.

The proclamation of reliability repeated (26:35)

Peter was unfazed by the words of Jesus and said to Him, *“Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.”* He simply refused to accept the possibility that he would deny Jesus. He could not perceive any circumstances for such a denial.

The grammar of Matthew 26:35 includes the subjunctive mood, which includes the possibility of something occurring. There is no sense of the degree of possibility but it is apparent that since Peter says *“Even if I have to die with You,”* he has some doubt that this will occur. Peter’s lack of full belief in what Jesus has spoken is another evidence of his weakness. He has too much confidence in himself and not enough confidence in Jesus.

Furthermore, *“All the disciples said the same thing too.”* Peter was not alone in his perspective, as he was simply the one whose words were recorded for us. All eleven disciples found it difficult to believe what Jesus told them as they each were convinced that they would never fall away, regardless of the difficulty of the circumstances to come.

Of course, we find the disciples falling away as seen in Matthew 26:56, *“Then all the disciples left Him and fled.”* We also find the account of Peter’s denials of Christ in Matthew 26:69-75. Yet in spite of their weakness, the Lord was faithful to them. They would return to Him after His resurrection and when they received the Holy Spirit, they truly would die with Him and not deny Him.

Conclusion

The record of this failure of the disciples testifies to the truthfulness of the Scripture. The leaders of the church did not sanitize the account of their unfaithfulness. This includes Matthew himself, the author of this Gospel. They did not seek to be honored as the heroes of the faith, but remained humble and sought to tell the true story of what actually occurred regarding the life and death of Jesus Christ.

The knowledge of the disciples falling away from Jesus during the crucifixion period should be an exhortation to us. If those eleven disciples, who lived with Jesus for over three years, saw His miracles and experienced His teaching, could leave Him, we ought not to have the confidence of the flesh to think we could never do the same. While the power of the Holy Spirit works within us, this did not prevent Peter from hypocrisy (cf. Galatians 2:11-14), or prevent John Mark, the author of the second Gospel, from deserting Paul on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). We ought to be humble regarding our own power to remain faithful, and dependent upon the Lord for His faithfulness to us.

“If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).