

Three Betrayals, One Loyal Son

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- [0 : 00] Well, good morning. It's great to be here with you as we continue with Jesus on the road to the cross in Matthew. And I would imagine that many of us feel a sense of inevitability right now, just in life, as we look at the news and read the statistics and see how our neighbors are acting and all of that.
- There's a sense that there's maybe a sense of dread or a sense of at least worry, anxiety, as we expect our community to be affected somehow.
- And we don't know how serious it is, but that almost makes it worse, right, for us as we wait. But I thought it was interesting as I was writing the sermon this week that that weight, that weight of inevitability or that weight that something is coming and it's not good, that's exactly what's happening here in Matthew.
- There is this train picking up speed and we can see that Jesus is bound to die and there is just, there's no way out of it.
- And there's this sense of dread and horror, isn't there, as we read through the proceedings leading up to his crucifixion. A true sense of sorrow and inevitability has arrived in the book of Matthew.
- [1 : 29] Last week we read about Jesus' utter willingness to accept this mission, that he was utterly willing to drink the cup of God's wrath on our behalf, despite the immense cost to himself.
- And last week we saw how it was a counterpoint to the disciples' utter weakness, that they failed to watch and pray with Jesus even for an hour, while Jesus prepares himself and is willing to take on the cup of God's wrath for us.
- And this theme, this contrast, it continues today. Jesus embraces the coming cross at every turn, even as he is betrayed and abandoned by his friends, by his foes, and by his community.
- Jesus is the loyal son and he's faithful to God and he's faithful to this purpose that he's been given by God, no matter what. And so we'll see as we look through these various betrayals and denials that Jesus is utterly faithful.
- He's utterly steadfast in his purpose. Now the first betrayal, as you saw in the reading, is one of friendship. It's actually Judas' betrayal. We know the story well.
- [2 : 39] The kiss that kills. Friend, do what you came to do. And I want to only draw your attention to how purposeful Jesus is in this account, and how weak we are by comparison.
- These are not events that Jesus passively accepts. He's not just letting things happen to him. He actually embraces and even protects this unfolding betrayal.
- He welcomes Judas' friends, knowing what he is there to do. He embraces him even as he is sold out by him. And he rebukes this desperate rescue attempt that his disciples take on at the last minute, affirming that he has the ability to call an army of angels, which he doesn't do, because scripture must be fulfilled.

After the agony in the garden, the way is clear for Jesus. He knows what's next. He's chosen it, and now he walks in it. There's control and volition here for Jesus. He goes to his death willingly.

He's loyal to the Father. He's loyal to his purpose. He's loyal to us, for whom he goes to die. Notice how clearly the disciples' weakness is displayed here as well.

[3 : 51] Jesus' disciples are utterly helpless to stop this from happening, and they're utterly misguided. They have no idea what's going on. And it's interesting here that their kind of best efforts to protect God's kingdom or to propagate God's kingdom are actually completely counterproductive.

This idea that through their own force or their own plan, through the use of the sword, that they're going to bring God's kingdom or that they're going to make Jesus the king that they want to make him, utterly backfires.

And Jesus rejects it. He's like, this is impossible. The sword will not bring God's kingdom. The sword will only come back to kill. Put the sword away.

Jesus alone can overcome death through his death. That's the first betrayal, friendship. The second one is a betrayal of justice by the Jewish leadership.

And so this arrest we see as we look through Matthew is pretty carefully coordinated by the religious leaders. And so they're all now gathered outside the temple waiting for Jesus to happen.

[4 : 58] They're all aware exactly of what's going down. And they send out their crew to bring Jesus in. And right from the outset, this entire thing is just a legal disaster.

It's completely dubious. I mean, we can imagine one of us being arrested and dragged straight to trial in the middle of the night. And we would know that there was something wrong there, right?

This is not how it's supposed to work. And then Jesus arrives at the trial, and he finds that there's actually not even a charge. There's no formal charge against him.

There's no injured party. And this is made very, very clear in this narrative. The chief priests, the whole council, were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.

But they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. So what they want us to see is that this is a kangaroo court, right? That means that they leap over due process.

[5 : 54] They leap over evidence. And they just land wherever they want. They know the sentence. And they don't need evidence to support it. They are going to find a crime to fit the punishment.

The punishment being death. So this is a huge betrayal of justice, isn't it? And, I mean, can you imagine how it would feel as a member of your community to see them do something like this to you?

This is against everything that's set out in God's law. They're not just deceived, right? They're not just confused. We could imagine that that might be the case.

But Matthew goes to lengths to show that that is not what is happening here. That they are willfully, by any standard, doing something evil here. That in the name of protecting God, they actually murder God.

And that in the name of protecting the temple, which is the ultimate charge that kind of sticks, they murder God's true temple. Jesus is God's true temple. His own body is the place where the sacrifice for sin will happen.

[6 : 58] He's the bridge between heaven and earth, the meeting place. He's the temple. They are actually going to destroy the temple. They accuse him of destroying it. And throughout all of this, Jesus remains silent.

There's no plea of guilty or not guilty. There's no defense that he offers. Jesus has come to drink the cup. He's come to die. So he says nothing through this entire proceeding.

I mean, we know that he probably could have tied them in legal knots. We've seen him do that other places. We know that he probably could have gotten himself out of this situation if he had wanted to.

He doesn't. He doesn't say anything until the high priest says, I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. And now we see the thing that Jesus wants to talk about.

This is the thing that Jesus wants them to know and wants us to know. He wants it to be clear who they're about to kill. You have said so. But I tell you, from now on, you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

[8 : 02] Jesus says, it won't be long before you see me at God's right hand, glorious, ascendant, and ruling. The high priest tore his robes and said, he has uttered blasphemy.

What further witnesses do we need? Sometimes people say, Jesus never claimed to be God. But that's exactly what he claims. That's why it's blasphemy. That's why they killed him.

He claims to share God's very power and glory. He takes two Old Testament texts, the kind of most elevated messianic texts that speak of God's own power.

And he says, these are about me, and you're going to see it soon enough. And so they say, you deserve death. It's over. And one thing that's really interesting about this whole account is that while Jesus is on the stand, there's a sense in which it's actually the religious leaders that are on the stand, right?

They're actually on trial. They're claiming to act in the name of God. But what they're actually doing is conspiring to murder. They're drumming up false evidence. They're twisting Jesus' words. And they're revealed ultimately as betrayers.

[9 : 12] They are the blasphemers. And Jesus is revealed to be true, steadfastly loyal to who he is as the Son of God. Now, as I said, there were a million ways that Jesus could have gotten out of this.

He could have stalled. He could have tied them in legal knots. He could have called the legions of angels at this point in the process. But he doesn't do that. He's steadfast. He goes forward to redeem and forgive those who hate him.

And this leads to the final betrayal. And I call this a betrayal of faithfulness. And that's by Peter, the disciple. So there's this really intentional parallel that happens in this text, right?

Which is that Jesus is being questioned by the religious leaders inside the temple. And Peter is being questioned at the same time, kind of right outside the room in the same area.

And there's quite an intentional contrast between what happens with those two men. Both are put to the question. Jesus stands against the most powerful men in his community. He knows that speaking honestly will mean death.

[10 : 20] He looks it right in the eye and moves forward with his purpose. What does Peter do? Peter just wilts instantly, right? And it's not even really that impressive.

It's just two servant girls and a group of servants. He just instantly wilts. He had said, even if I must die with you, I will not deny you. But he can't even hold forth with this grade school serving girl when she asks him maybe not even an unfriendly question.

So there's this really intentional contrast happening. Jesus knows who he is. He knows what he's about. And he's faithful. Peter, utterly confused, weak, helpless, unable to follow through.

His denial starts small. We see that in verse 70. I do not know what you mean. And then it builds to verse 72. I do not know the man. And he finishes by cursing and swearing.

And it's pretty likely, given the way that the Greek reads, that he's actually cursing Jesus' name itself in his attempt to prove that he doesn't know him. So Jesus faces the whole institutional weight of the Jewish leadership, his imminent death, and the agony of bearing the world's sin without wavering.

[11 : 37] Peter faces a whisper of reproach, and he crumbles. His chance to speak for Jesus is completely abandoned. And immediately the rooster crowed. Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.

And he went out and wept bitterly. I think you'll probably agree that Peter's denial is a form of betrayal. He has abandoned and cursed his friend in his time of need.

He's weak and fearful. It's pretty disappointing when we look at his performance. But the other thing to see here is that this is completely expected. It's amazing the difference between Peter's self-perception and Jesus' knowledge of his actual character and ability.

Jesus knows that Peter's a sheep that's going to be scattered when the shepherd is struck. And I think we can relate to Peter, can't we? So many times we set out with the best intentions, only to find that in word and deed, and in things done and left undone, that we have cursed and denied and betrayed our Lord Jesus.

I found it really interesting over the last week to watch how quickly we personally and institutionally have...

[12 : 56] Maybe crumble is too strong of a word, but at least panic would be the right word, right? This... Our economic systems, our financial markets, our hospitals, our hospitals, I'm talking worldwide here, our ability to manage and predict what is going to happen.

We've just been revealed to be utterly weak, haven't we? And we are... We forget so quickly our mortality and our need for God's power and his help.

And it had me thinking in the context of this sermon that we just need a champion, don't we? We need someone that can...

We need a hero. We need someone that can do what we cannot do. And that's who Jesus is for us. And there's a word of grace in this betrayal that it is expected and predicted.

Just as Jesus goes to his death knowing this is what God's prophets have predicted, this is his will, this is what must happen, he also goes knowing all of my disciples will abandon me, they will completely fail, they're going to completely blow it.

[14 : 11] That is expected and predicted by Jesus. Being rejected by his community, being betrayed by Jesus, all of it is expected. And it isn't actually the main point, is it?

The main point is God's faithful and loyal son, our champion. The true Lord of heaven and earth, the true temple, who willingly embraces death and humiliation, who drinks the cup of wrath for our forgiveness in life.

Jesus knows that we need forgiveness. This is not a surprise to him. He knows that we have failed him and we will fail him. It's not a surprise to him. And even with the words of betrayal fresh off of his community's lips, his beloved disciple betraying him, cursing him, he still goes to the cross.

And so for Jesus, just as death isn't the end of the story, neither is betrayal, neither is failure. It's not the end of the story. Rather, just as all of these betrayals are expected and predicted means by which he will accomplish the salvation of humanity, he can bear our weaknesses, he can bear all our failures and begin that work of transformation and reconciliation to God.

So, if that's who Jesus is, let us hold nothing back from him. Let us put our trust in him. And this is a time when trust is a thing that is good for our hearts and good for our communities.

[15 : 50] Being able to put our trust in God and his power and his plan. Knowing that Jesus loves us, he's in the work of redeeming and transforming us, and that he is a good savior. Amen.