

The Stumbling Stone

Matthew 26:31-56

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew Jesus has been boldly proclaiming and living out the kingdom of God. Lies, slander, and the attacks of enemies have had little effect on His ministry, and the disciples, though often mistaken and immature, have stuck with Him. This is about to change; all will be made to stumble this night. We see that Jesus is a stumbling stone not just to His enemies, but to those who love Him. And as He nears the cross and feels death bearing down, He falls on His face, asking God to let this cup pass. But it can't and so He trusts the Father to restore Him.

Strike the Shepherd

When John the Baptizer was in prison, he sent a couple disciples to ask Jesus if He is the one to come, the promised messiah. Jesus said to let John know that “The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me” (Matt. 11:5-6). “Offended” is the same word (*skandalizo*) used here for “stumble” (vv. 31, 33). It means to be tripped up, offended, scandalized sent packing by something that happens. John led the way for the Messiah and was greatest in the kingdom of God, so he was incarcerated. Imagine sharing the gospel in that context: “All this, and prison, too.” *Blessed are those who are not offended by Jesus*. The disciples insist they will not stumble, and Peter says that even if everyone else does, he never will (v. 33). But when Jesus is arrested, they all forsake Him and flee (v. 56). Jesus is steeped in Scripture and explains that this will fulfill Zechariah 13:7: “I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (v. 31). Zechariah's speaks about exile and restoration. It's Yahweh who strikes the shepherd and scatters the sheep, but outcome will be a refined and restored flock: “But one-third shall be left in it: I will bring the 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’” (Zech. 13:8-9). Why do Christians flee from Christ? The church is struck. The pastor commits adultery. The elders buckle and divide. The government shuts down worship and leaders capitulate. Conflicts arise between friends and families. Someone confronts them. Marriages fall apart. Children leave the faith. Some kind of offense occurs that causes people to stumble and leave the Lord. They shouldn't, and yet He still uses it for good. Being faithful to Christ means loving Him above all else and counting the cost of losing all things (cf. Phil. 3:8). Jesus already told the apostles “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). But instead of denying themselves, they will deny Him. It has to be this way. You either deny yourself, or you will deny Christ.

Made Complete Through Suffering

Jesus comes to Gethsemane and asks Peter, James, and John to watch with Him because His soul is deeply distressed even unto death (vv. 36-38). This is the darkest night of any soul, where the eternal Son of God falls on His face—literally stumbles—and prays three times for the Father to find another way: “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (vv. 39, 42, 44). He asks these “pillars” to pray for Him, but they fail all three times. Obedience does not mean we always feel like doing what God says. It also does not mean we are emotionally detached and serene like Lake Washington on a perfectly still spring morning. Jesus is in agony. He weeps and sweats, horribly conflicted, knowing the pain of the cross that lies before Him. He doesn't want to die on the cross. How could He?

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Why can't He die a quick and painless death? Scripture reveals that Jesus bore the wrath of God for us and our sins on the cross. The Father so loved us that He did not spare His own Son (Rom. 8:32). The author of Hebrews describes this scene in the garden: "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:7-8). Wasn't Jesus perfectly obedient already? Yes up to this point, but He hadn't conquered death yet, and in this sense, His complete obedience had not been fulfilled. He had to face the horror of Calvary and the lead up to it. He had to look death in the face and say this prayer—for the cup of suffering pass by Him—and be answered "No." At the same time, the Father *did* hear His prayer and did deliver Him from death: "He was heard because of His godly fear." Jesus was delivered from death but only by dying. He swallowed up the grave going inside it. And He learned obedience by trusting the Father and submitting His desires to Him in the garden of Gethsemane: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done" (v. 42). We pray to not have to go through hard things, and this is fine. But remember this isn't the only way for God to deliver us. G.K. Chesterton said, "The one perfectly divine thing, the one glimpse of God's paradise given on earth, is to fight a losing battle—and not lose it." It looks like a losing and lost battle. But He won. And He won because He suffered faithfully.

Put Your Sword Away

Peter will stumble famously when he denies Jesus three times, but he falls here first. When Jesus is distressed, He seeks the Father in prayer and gathers the church around Him. When Judas comes with a multitude to take Jesus, they lay hands on Him, and Peter takes his sword and cuts the ear off of the high priest's servant (vv47-51). The disciples are to take up their crosses and not their swords. Jesus says all who take the sword will perish by it. The problem is not having enough power. He has more than twelve legions of angels at his disposal, and a Roman legion consisted of 5,800 infantry. Nor is Jesus commanding a strict pacifism. After all it was He who told the disciples to carry swords (Lk. 22:36-38). They will use them in self-defense when traveling on perilous roads, but those who try to advance the kingdom with swords will perish. Many Christians look at the chaos breaking out in our culture and just want it to end in cataclysmic fashion, usually with the return of Christ. He could have ended it right there, but "How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that is must happen thus?" (v. 54). God could put a stop to the world right now, but if He did how would the nations be discipled (cf. Matt. 28:19-20)? Some people stumble by going soft and walking away from Christ. They don't want to stumble anyone for any reason. Others lash out and are happy to take off an ear or two. We have fighters and flighters who cling desperately to what they want, losing sight of what God is doing and the way He does it. But Jesus doesn't: "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee" (v. 32). He calls Judas "friend" and highlights the hypocrisy of those arresting Him, as if He is a criminal (vv. 50, 55), but never lashes out or sins against His enemies. Friends fail Him, foes assail Him, but God the Father will make Him whole.