

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

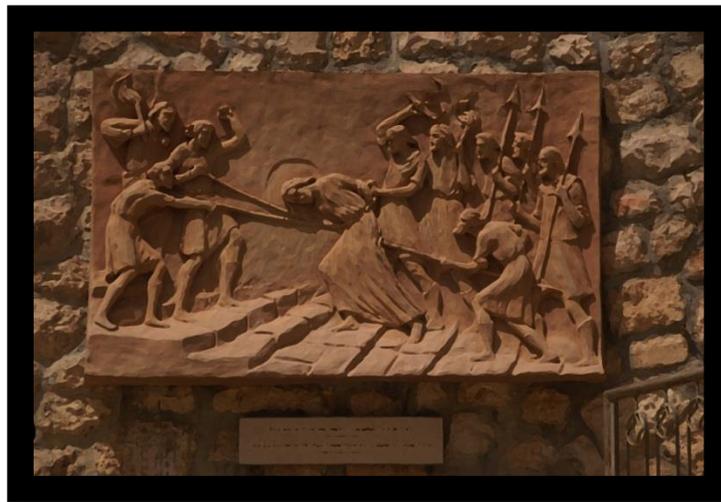
From Fragility To Faith

Matthew 26:31-35

Written By

©Pastor Marty Baker

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There are three references in the New Testament to a Greek convert to Christianity named Demas.

Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas (Colossians 4:14).

Ephaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers (Philemon 1:21).

During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul had several brothers in Christ who ministered with him prior to his trumped up incarceration and during that dreaded, dark time. I'm sure they risked much to visit him, and if was permitted, I'm sure they also brought him much needed personal items to function in the austere, unpleasant, and unsanitary environment. Demas was one of those men who was there for Paul. Don't you know that if you were Paul, words could not express how much you loved and respected men who'd been there for you at one of the lowest times of your life?

When Paul wrote his last letter before his execution under Caesar Nero, it closes in the most unexpected, truly sad way:

... for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia (2 Timothy 4:10).

A man who used to love to share the gospel, see people won to Christ, hear Paul preach and teach, to see the living, resurrected Christ change sinful lives, and who didn't mind the hardships and dangers of working alongside a spiritual firebrand like Paul, somewhere between Paul's first and second imprisonment had a change of spiritual heart.

Somewhere along the line, the lure of an important and wealthy port city like Thessalonica, a place where life happened in a big way because it straddled the *Via Egnatia*, making its main street the actual link between Rome and the lucrative East, a place where a young man could find just about any type of sin to engage in became too great of a temptation for him. So, when the carnal pressure became just too great for him, he chose to desert one of the greatest saints of New Testament times, Paul. Yes, unfortunately, there came the moment when he traded the love of eternal treasure, for the love of earthly treasures. Paul's final words in Timothy record the personal pain of the desertion of a close friend at a critical time. Tears probably filled his eyes as he wrote in the dim light of the dark, cold-stoned prison.

I, like Paul, have seen Demas before. He is the saint who built a relationship with you, who shared their spiritual life with you, who worked alongside you in Christian projects, who loved to be present and participate in their Small Group, who had their chair in a given worship service, but who, for a variety of reasons, has now walked away from the vibrancy and vitality of their faith. And just perhaps they did it to you like Demas did it to Paul by pulling out of your life just when you needed them the most. Yes, I've met Demas before and I've felt the emotional trauma of their desertion and it's always tough and trying, and their reasons are, well, never justifiable, no matter how well they articulate or rationalize them.

If you are Demas, or if you know Demas, I have a question for you: What will it take to move you from your fragile faith to founded faith? What will it take to get you back on track, back in the game, and back in the spiritual race where what is eternal is embraced over the fleeting nature of the temporal? What will it take to get you move from desertion to insertion, insertion, that is, into the thick of the spiritual action, where saints are supposed to be regardless of what temptations life are dangled before their eyes or regardless of how arduous the way becomes?

I pose these pragmatic questions because there is hope for you, the Lord does have His door open for you, and He does desire to take deserters and turn them into great tools in His hands. I know this is true because of the discussion Christ had with His disciples on His middle-of-the-night walk to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane to prepare for His betrayal and eventual crucifixion the next afternoon. From Matthew's inspired record of the discussion, we can't help but encounter the main motif:

God Desires To Move You From Frailty To Faith (Matthew 26:31-35)

Let's dig into this rich soil by first reading the Word:

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "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.' ³² But after I have been raised, I will go ahead

of you to Galilee." ³³ But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too.

Shocking, sobering words we'd all do well to study and learn from for we, in many respects, are no different than the Lord's disciples.

In order to properly understand and apply this sad, though highly instructive narrative, I suggest we break it down into two pragmatic movements which help us learn how to come back after we've left our spiritual post.

The Cause Of Fragile Faith (Matthew 26:31)

Just hours before His trumped up, illegal arrest by Jewish authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus gave this jaw-dropping, emotionally stunning prophecy to His trusted, devoted disciples, minus Judas, of course:

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "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 Greek, the adjective "all" appears before the personal pronoun "you," serving to make it highly emphatic. It is tantamount to saying, "You, of all people, will desert me at the most critical time of my life." And He, the God of all time, let them know it would happen that night.

I'm sure their minds cognitively locked up at that precise moment. They had just enjoyed the spiritual intimacy of Passover with Jesus, but they were still unsettled by His disclosure about a lone deserter, and *now* this emphatic prophetic revelation that they would *all* be deserters. Their unified thought had to be, "How in the world can this be? How could, or why would, we ever desert Jesus?"

Interestingly enough, the word for "fall away" is a Greek word we all know too well: *skandalizo* from the verb **σκανδαλίζω**. If it sounds familiar, it is. We get our word scandalous from this root word. Lexically, it has two cognitive emphases:

σκανδαλίζω (σκάνδαλον) 1 aor. έσκανδάλισα. Pass.: 1 fut. σκανδαλισθήσομαι; 1 aor. έσκανδαλίσθην; pf. ptc. έσκανδαλισμένος; (LXX, Aq., Sym., Theod.; PsSol 16:7; TestSol; AscIs 3:14 [but not in Test12Patr, EpArist, Philo, Joseph., apolog.]; Cat. Cod. Astr. X 67, 23; Christian authors).

① **to cause to be brought to a downfall, cause to sin** (the sin may consist in a breach of the moral law, in unbelief, or in the acceptance of false teachings)

Ⓐ **τινά someone** (Mal 2:8 Sym., Theod.; PsSol 16:7 γυναικὸς σκανδαλιζούσης ἄφρονα; Palladius 5 p. 21 σκανδαλίσαι ψυχὴν) Mt 5:29f; 18:6, 8f; Mk 9:42f, 45, 47; Lk 17:2; 1 Cor 8:13ab; 1 Cl 46:8.—Pass. *be led into sin* (Sir 23:8; 32:15; AcJ 82 [Aa II/1, 192, 1]) so perh. 2 Cor 11:29 (s. 2 below).—The abs. pass. can also mean *let*

oneself be led into sin (for the 'permissive pass.' s. Gildersleeve, Syntax I §167), fall away (Passio Perpet. 20, 10 vGebh.; MartPt 3 [Aa I p. 82, 22]) Mt 13:21; 24:10; Mk 4:17; 14:27, 29; J 16:1; D 16:5.—ἐσκανδαλισμένοι Hv 4, 1, 3; m 8:10 are *people who have been led astray*, but who have not altogether fallen away fr. the faith.

ⓑ σκανδαλίζεσθαι ἐν τινι (Sir 9:5; 23:8; 32:15) *be led into sin, be repelled by someone* of Jesus; by refusing to believe in him or by becoming apostate fr. him a person falls into sin Mt 11:6; 13:57; 26:31, 33 (cp. AscIs 3, 14 δώδεκα οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ σκανδαλισθήσονται); Mk 6:3; Lk 7:23. ἐν ᾧ ὁ ἀδελφὸς σκανδαλίζεται Ro 14:21 v.l.

ⓐ **2** *to shock through word or action, give offense to, anger, shock* (AcJ 56 [Aa II/1 p. 178, 35]; Athanasius, Vita Anton. 81; Palladius 37 p. 115 σκανδαλίζω πολλούς; 46 p. 136) τινά *someone* Mt 17:27 (JDerrett, NovT 6, '63, 1-15); J 6:61. Pass. Mt 15:12.—τίς σκανδαλίζεται; perh. *who has any reason to take offense?* 2 Cor 11:29 (s. la above).—S. σκάνδαλον, end.—DELG s.v. σκάνδαλον. M-M. EDNT. TW.¹

The second lexical meaning is in view here.² Jesus informs His disciples that they would collectively be shocked and offended by His arrest, resulting in their willful desertion of Him when He needed them most. Fear, of course, would be the chief motivating factor behind their departure, fear of what might happen to them in light of their association with Jesus.

Christ's prophecy of their desertion had the ancient support of Zechariah 13:7. Taking into account that Zechariah prophesied from 520-518 B.C., and combining this data with the date for the arrest of Jesus during Nisan 15, or the first part of April of 33 A.D.,³ Jesus stated how His arrest and crucifixion would fulfill the 551 year old prophecy. Zechariah foretold in this chapter how one day, the Jews, as a nation, would not only turn to the Messiah they crucified (Zechariah 12:10-14), but how false teaching would, once and for all, be driven from them and be replaced by true worship of the living Messiah (Zechariah 13:1-6).

Jesus, with divine insight into the divine eschatological program, reached into this prophecy and showed how verse seven spoke of the time before Israel's redemption at the Second Coming of the Messiah when the Messiah would be stricken, resulting in the scattering of His sheep, i.e., the disciples ... and ultimately the dispersion of the nation when Rome defeated them in 70 A.D. We know the Messiah is in view here, not only based on the context, but in light of the fact that God calls Him, "My Associate." The notable, and late, Hebrew scholar Dr. Charles Feinberg, states in his commentary on Zechariah how the lexical meaning here not only identifies the Messiah here as God's nearest of kin, but expresses His unimpeachable deity.⁴ This divine Messiah would be the one stricken and deserted, and it would all be part of the Father's overarching redemptive/kingdom plan. How utterly amazing and instructive. The fact that the Messiah would be stricken and deserted according to the Father's prophetic word clearly demonstrated that even this tragedy was permitted and planned by the Him to achieve His

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature*: 926.

² Interestingly, the noun skandalon, in Grecian times, spoke of a device used for trapping and animal. Is this not an apt description of what happens when someone is offended by someone else? It is like a trap being sprung and holding the person in question tight.

³ Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977): 139.

⁴ Charles Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982): 339.

loftier redemptive/kingdom purposes. The disciples should have taken some solace in this. But they didn't.

For now let us focus on the fact that an unthinkable, unwanted event, viz., the arrest, beating, and crucifixion of Jesus, the Messiah, would be *the* event which would cause the once devoted disciples to desert Him. This became the cause of their problem with remaining close to Christ at this pivotal time. To be near Him could result in your arrest, your beating, and potentially your crucifixion. To remain close to Him when blood-thirsty opponents surrounded Him could lead to them surrounding you. Better to back off and blend in to the cityscape could have easily been the mantra of the disciples. And back off and blend in they did ... to a man.

In light of this, I have to ask you some probing, though highly necessary, personal questions: What has caused you to either toy with or to actually desert Christ and Christians? What has made you ashamed of your Savior and moved you to either pull back or walk away? What teaching from the Scriptures cause you not just angst, but blushing every time someone brings it up? Believe me, we all have limitations in how far we'll go with the faith. We all have the spirit of the disciples from this sad evening in us, and if we don't think we do, we had better wake up. So, I ask you, "What is causing or has caused you to stumble?"

- You cannot believe what another believer said about or did to me.
- God hasn't answered a prayer I've prayed for quite some time as I think He should. What's the deal?
- I, like Demas, have the tenacious tentacles of a powerful sin wrapped around my spiritual heart and mind. I just can't seem to break free.
- God took something or someone from my life, leaving me simply devastated and numb. I don't know how I'll ever recover, or get over feelings of bitterness and resentment.
- An IED took out a Humvee full of my buddies in Afganistan as my vehicle followed behind. I just can't get over God allowing this to happen, and because of this I've pulled back in my faith.
- God left us to move from a place of great contentment, and we just can't get over how He permitted this.
- I, (how about you fill in the blank).

Now that you've identified it you need to deal with it before the Lord. Why? Because He is not finished with you, because He does have great plans for you, and because He loves you and He desperately wants you to grow up in the faith. So what is the way back? It's the way the disciples encountered in our second pragmatic point.

The Cure Of Fragile Faith (Matthew 26:32-35)

What's the cure? We catch a glimpse of golden nugget as we continue to dig deep into this most intriguing and breath-taking historical account:

³² But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.

Did you see it? I did.

On the one hand, Jesus just prophetically foretold His death based on the words of the prophets (like Isaiah in chapter 53, and the Psalmist in Psalm 22). On the other hand, in the next breath He spoke prophetically and positively of what would transpire after He was stricken. He would go ahead of the disciples, who had deserted Him, into Galilee where He would meet them. This is so important you might need to read it again.

For quite some time, Jesus had taught His men of His imminent death and glorious resurrection.

³⁹ But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; ⁴⁰ for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:39–40).

He said it but they didn’t get it.

⁴ “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them and went away (Matthew 16:4).

He said it, but they didn’t get it.

²¹ From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. ²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You” (Matthew 16:21–22).

He said it, but they didn’t get ... and Peter, the lead disciple, really didn’t get it. His confrontation of Christ tells us that much.

²² And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; ²³ and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved. (Matthew 17:22–23).

He said it, but they didn’t get it. The talk of His crucifixion rightly caused them to grieve, but His balanced teaching about His glorious resurrection should have given them much joy and a heavy dose of hope. It didn’t because they didn’t get it.

¹⁸ “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.” ²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him (Matthew 20:18–20).

He said it, but they didn't get it. The fact that the mother of James and John followed up this clear teaching with a selfish, arrogant request for Jesus to seat her sons on His right and left in the kingdom verifies the sad point.

Here, again, on their walk to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus gives them the twin theological truths of His mission: He will die for the sins of the world as the final and perfect Passover Lamb, and He will rise from the grave and meet them in Galilee, their old stomping grounds, the place where they enjoyed so many ministry memories. Such is the nature of Jesus. Despite your desertion, despite your failure to live up to the faith as you should have, despite the fact you bolted at a tough time when you should have stood your spiritual ground, He is always waiting for you in Galilee with arms wide open to pick up and move forward with the relationship and the mission. To read the resurrection accounts is to readily see He did, in fact, fulfill His promise to them to the letter.

¹ After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing. ⁴ But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." ⁶ And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. ⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish. ⁹ So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." ¹¹ Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn (John 21:1-11).

He didn't just meet them in Galilee, He told them where to fish in order to catch fish, plus He personally did the most ordinary but thoughtful (and necessary) thing for men who'd been fishing all night: He cooked them breakfast. What a servant. What a friend. What a Savior. Despite their desertion He welcomed them back, as He did when He visited them in Jerusalem post-resurrection. He cooked a meal so He could sit down and eat with these former deserters. Would you have? He did. Why? Because He loved them and saw their intrinsic worth and ultimate potential for cutting deep into the Devil's dark kingdom.

How did ol' Peter fare when He saw Jesus? He impulsively hit the water and swam the one hundred yards to shore. Faith and joy propelled his legs and arms, but it wasn't always so because he was, in fact, one of the biggest deserters of them all when Jesus was arrested.

Returning back to our Lord's discussion with His disciples in Matthew 26:31-35 validates this perplexing point:

³³ But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away."

Bold, brave, loyal-to-the-core Peter would have none of this talk of desertion. That offensive word wasn't even his dictionary, so, as usual, Peter, the man wired according to the Myers-Briggs personality grid as an **Extroverted/Sensing** or **observant/Thinking/Judging** (viz., practical, realistic, matter-of-fact. Decisive, quickly move to implement decisions. Organize projects and people to get things done, focus on getting results in the most efficient way possible. Take care of routine details. Have a clear set of logical standards, systematically follow them and want others to also. They are typically quite forceful in implementing their plans. Some arguably, however, would like to change the T to a F, identifying Peter as feeling, or somewhat emotional man. I can certainly live with that analysis. On Army Colonel and one Air Force Colonel's wife told me this is better classification, so they might be correct ... after all they outrank me. ☺) spoke without thinking, which was a personality issue he constantly struggled with. Yes, he did love to talk before anyone else did. Yes, he did typically say those uncomfortable and sometimes inappropriate things others were thinking. Yes, he, more than any other disciple, vacillated between saying profound spiritual things to saying unbelievably lame spiritual things to God's face:

⁸ But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5).

Faith statement.

²⁸ And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (Matthew 14).

Faith statement.

²⁸ And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (Matthew 16).

Faith statement.

²² And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (Matthew 16).

Lame statement.

²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18).

Lame statement.

²⁷ Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" (Matthew 19).

Lame statement.

⁴³ And a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, ⁴⁴ came up behind Him, and touched the fringe of His cloak; and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵ And Jesus said, "Who is the one who touched Me?" And while they were all denying it, Peter said, "Master, the multitudes are crowding and pressing upon You." ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, "Someone did touch Me, for I was aware that power had gone out of Me" (Luke 8).

Lame statement.

⁸ Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13).

Lame statement.

And now we have before us, just a few hours before Jesus is betrayed and put on trial for His life, Peter, His lead disciple saying something he was going to regret, something which arrogantly contradicted the very prophetic word of the Messiah, and something which ran completely counter to everything Jesus had carefully taught about His death and resurrection. His words are most emphatic in the Greek text, equivalent to making a statement and then slamming your fist down on a table for emphasis. Quite obviously, Peter's conversion and call to discipleship did not, as Alexander Whyte points out in his book *Bible Characters Of The Old And New Testaments*, "decompose or at all suppress his true nature; the primal elements of his character remained, and the original balance and the proportion of those elements remained."⁵ Can you relate?

To attempt to drive those carnal and spiritually immature elements from Peter one more time, Jesus lowered the boom on His pivotal man:

³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

Put into our vernacular: "Before sunrise, Peter, you will have openly and publically not only deserted me, you will have denied you even know me three times."

In customary, hard-headed fashion, Peter didn't bat an eye or show for one moment he'd give any ground to Jesus/God:

³⁵ Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You."

⁵ Alexander Whyte, *Bible Characters Of The Old And New Testaments* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, 1896): 475.

And as with the definitive stand of any leader, Peter's stand spilled over to all the other ten disciples standing there.

All the disciples said the same thing too.

He, along with all of them, would learn that the high estimation they held of themselves would quickly dissipate in the heat of Christ's arrest.

Ever been there? Ever done this? Ever said things to Christ you shouldn't have said? Ever chafed against His outright, clear, concise teaching, opting to hold tenaciously to your untenable viewpoint? Ever deserted Christ when you thought that you, of all people, would stand your ground?

If so, you, like the disciples, you, like Peter, don't just need a word of rebuke, you need a flash of insight in Christ's heart. And what is His heart? He is waiting for *you* in Galilee, waiting to forgive you as He told Peter up to seventy times seven or infinity, waiting to restore you, waiting to use you in a greater fashion now that He has tested and strengthen you through the hardness.

He's on the sandy beach right now. Won't you go to Him and get things spiritually squared away.