

**“Descent into Despair”**  
**Matthew 27:1-10**  
**February 23, 2020**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The end of chapter 26 and the beginning of chapter 27 of Matthew’s Gospel describe the fall of two of Jesus’ disciples. After Peter fell, he **“went out and wept bitterly”** (26:75). After Judas’ fall, **“he went and hanged himself”** (27:5). The end of the road for Judas is described with four verbs occurring in rapid, machine gun fashion. **“And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself”** (v. 5). What a tragic end to a promising life! Here is one who had so many advantages. He was part of God’s chosen people, a child of Abraham. He was privileged to be one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. He had a front row seat to observe countless miracles and to hear teaching straight from the mouth of God. He had walked with Jesus, conversed with him, eaten with him, suffered with him and rejoiced with him.

How does someone come to that place of such despair that the decision is made to commit suicide? Sadly, more and more people in our own nation are coming to that place. Throughout most of the world, suicide rates have been declining over the past 20 years. In America, they have been rising, from 10.5 per year per one-hundred thousand people in 1999 to 13.9 in 2016. Suicide rates in Alabama are even higher, at 16.2 per one-hundred thousand people.

Judas didn’t arrive at this tragic end all at once. His suicide came as a result of decisions made long before this day. It came at the end of a path he had been walking for quite some time, one marked by idolatrous values and misplaced trust. Though not every case of depression and suicide is identical to that of Judas, there are enough common elements to make him a case study in avoiding such despair. I note three elements in his descent into despair.

**I. Getting What You Want**

It is striking that Judas’ downfall came at the very moment he got what he had wanted. Our text reports that Judas changed his mind when he saw that Jesus was condemned. But isn’t the condemnation of Jesus what he had wanted when he agreed to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver? It is precisely what he wanted. But now that he gets what he had wanted, things begin to fall apart rapidly. The thirty pieces of silver that he had coveted to the point of betraying Jesus to get that prize become so distasteful to him that now he has an even stronger desire to be rid of it. So he goes back to the leaders with whom he had conspired earlier and wants them to reverse their judgment. He

asserts the innocence of Jesus, perhaps wanting them to order a new trial that would lead to Jesus' exoneration. But they provide no help for Judas, showing that they really don't care about justice. They only want to get rid of Jesus, and if the price to pay is some injustice, well then, so be it.

Why did Judas betray Jesus? Many have speculated about that, but the Scriptures are pretty clear in telling us. In particular, John's Gospel is revealing about this. It says first that it was the devil who put it into Judas' heart to do this (13:2). Then, John records that Satan **"entered into him"** (13:27). But John reports something prior to these verses to show us how Judas had opened himself to Satan's influence. It was the sin of greed that motivated Judas. That is seen in the incident when Mary anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume just about a week before his death. The perfume was worth about a year's wages, and Judas took offense at what he considered a foolish act. He said that the perfume should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. John adds, **"He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it"** (12:6).

The Bible teaches that greed is an idol, a false god. Like all idols, it promises satisfaction and happiness but delivers only misery and ultimately death. So it is not always the case that getting what you want leads to despair. Rather, it is when the thing you want is an idolatrous desire, or when you want the wrong things, that getting what you want leads to despair. Note that Judas comes to the place of hating the money he had so desperately wanted. When the chief priests and elders won't take it back, in desperation he throws it into the temple. There's an irony in this. The temple is Israel's sanctuary, their sacred space. Money had been to Judas his sanctuary and refuge, his ultimate good. It was worth paying any price to get it, including betrayal of Jesus. He comes now to despise it with equal fervor.

This is the nature of idolatry. Frederick Bruner writes, "Money is a god that destroys its worshipers and finally reaps self-contempt." All idols do the same. Judas reminds me of that saying about the two happiest days in the life of a boat owner: the day he buys his boat and the day he sells it. You get what you want, only to discover that you don't want it. Perhaps this is one reason suicide rates peak in the 50-54 age group. A person that age has had time to realize and achieve desires. It brings much despair to achieve a long-sought after goal, only to find it empty.

Two applications of this point come to mind. First, watch your heart for the presence of greed. Jesus had said that it is impossible to serve both God and money. Judas had chosen money, and it proved a deadly choice. Someone I came across recently said about a new car they wanted to buy, "Never hurts to dream." Actually, it does. To set our heart on money or the things it can buy

destroys the soul and has the potential to lead us to the place where Judas found himself.

How can you recognize the presence of greed in your heart? That brings us to the second application, which is to ask God to help you discern your desires. When guided by the Holy Spirit, it is very helpful to ask the question, “What do I really want?” When you begin paying attention to your heart’s answer to that question, you will discover two things. First, you will discover how great is your sin. Second, you will find that God is the only One who can meet your deepest desires. We commonly look to money to be our security, but only God can provide such security. We look to money to provide a sense of importance. But how much more important can we be than to be the sons and daughters of God. We look to money to provide power, but money gives access only to human power, which is far outstripped by God’s power.

## **II. Remorse without Repentance**

Did Judas repent? Words and actions like his are often interpreted as repentance, though they clearly are not. We read that he changed his mind, confessed his sin to the priests and returned the money. It is obvious that Judas regrets what he has done. Regret or remorse is a strong emotion, but it is not the same as repentance. Regret that stops short of repentance often leads us to do the same things that Judas did.

We see him first seeking the help of others, the priests in this case, to undo what he has done. He goes to them and asserts the innocence of Jesus. But they provide him no help at all. After Judas’ suicide, they have a debate on what to do with the money Judas threw into the temple, showing a scrupulous attitude toward minutiae of the law while ignoring the more important matters. Judas had become convinced of the innocence of Jesus. They were at risk of being complicit in the execution of an innocent man, and they don’t seem to care. Instead, all they care about is some small point in the law. They are like the parents of young children whose five-year old comes running to his parents shouting, “Mommy and Daddy, come quickly! My little brother accidentally started a fire in my bedroom.” The parents then respond by sitting their five-year old down and instructing him on using an inside voice, while all the time the fire is spreading.

So the priests provide no help to Judas. What they tell him is the next thing he tries. They say, **“What is that to us? See to it yourself”** (v. 4). One translation words it, “You handle it.” The last thing a depressed, despairing person needs to be told is, “Just deal with it yourself.” In most cases, that’s what they’ve been trying to do, but it hasn’t been working. To be told, “Just deal with it,” will only serve to deepen depression and despair.

So if Judas is remorseful but not repentant, what's missing? What more could he do than change his mind, confess his sin and return the money? The missing element is hope in God. He looks to others for help and he looks to himself, but he never looks to God. He doesn't do what Peter did that we saw last week. Peter remembered the words of Jesus, while Judas did not. Remorse says, "My sin is so big that there's no hope for me." Repentance says, "My sin is so big that my only hope is in the grace of God that is bigger than all my sin."

Have you been laboring under regret and remorse? Don't we all have sins in our past that bring great regret and remorse? The lesson we learn from Judas is to move beyond such regret and remorse into faith-filled repentance. This is the distinction Paul makes when he talks about the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Worldly sorrow brings death, while godly sorrow brings life. Remorse is sad for the sin and its consequences, while repentance moves beyond that to be glad for the hope of forgiveness. The thing that keeps so many in bondage is thinking that as long as they have regret for sin, then they've done enough. Such an attitude leaves us worse off because it leaves us hopeless. That brings us to our next point.

### **III. Hopelessness**

Judas trusted in others and he trusted in himself. But when those two proved insufficient, he lost all hope and took his life. He had no hope in Jesus. He saw a weak Jesus, which is the Jesus portrayed in the first two verses of our chapter. **"The chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor."** Jesus is the passive victim of those with worldly power in these verses. He is convicted, sentenced to death, bound, led and delivered over. Others are active, while Jesus is passive. Judas' Jesus is a weak Jesus. The same is true for those who, like Judas, have fallen into despair.

The weak Jesus is not the real Jesus, and Matthew wants us to understand this. That's why he has this incident of the potter's field. The chief priests decide to use this unclean money to buy a field to be used as a burial place for strangers. Matthew reports how this fulfills Scripture. These enemies of Jesus think they have power over him, but their actions only serve to fulfill what God has decided beforehand should take place. Jesus might appear to be weak, but he actually stays in control the whole time, moving events to the outcome he desired. He is the opposite of a bully. Bullies seek to exert power over those who are weaker because they feel weak and powerless themselves. Jesus is willing to appear weak because he is completely confident in his great power.

This reminds me of the Old Testament story of Samson. You may remember that he was captured by the Philistines, had his eyes gouged out and was

forced to serve them for their pleasure. He seemed to be the epitome of weakness. But as his hair began to grow back, his strength returned, unseen by them. In a last fight against God's enemies, he managed to bring down an entire building filled with Philistines rejoicing in their power over him, his people and his God. Just at the point when Samson's power seemed weakest and theirs seemed greatest, they were defeated. The same is happening here with Jesus. This passage also reminds us of the great Psalm 2, where we read of the kings of the earth taking counsel **"against the Lord and against his Anointed."** But then God responds. **"He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill'"** (Psalm 2:4-6). In Matthew 27, God is setting his King on his holy hill of Calvary. Such is God's love and power that his good purposes are being carried out not by his friends but by his enemies.

Hopeless people have a small, weak Jesus. As a result, they have lost any sense that a good future is possible. They say, "I have blown it, and all is lost." But when we repent in hope, we are led into a bright future that says, "I have blown it, but by God's grace I am forgiven *and* given a bright future. My sin hasn't resulted in the end of everything, but when forgiven can be the beginning of a new life."

## **CONCLUSION:**

Are you battling despair or depression right now? Your greatest resource is to find hope in God. Jesus loves you so much that he is willing to have his hands bound that yours might be released. Even your sin, no matter how great it might be, is no obstacle for the God of all power. By his love and his power, you can experience meaning and joy in life. Your life is not over.

Please understand that I am not saying that there are not other factors involved in depression. I realize that such things as medicine, exercise, counseling, a healthy diet, sunshine, a good night's sleep and other factors can all be significant in dealing with depression and despair. What I am saying is that none of those will be adequate if hope in the gospel is lacking. We have a mighty Jesus. We can come to him and confess any sin, and he will forgive, restore and empower us for living new lives. He is not a weak Jesus, but one mighty in love. Matthew Henry said it like this: "Let us think as bad as we can of sin, provided we do not think that it is unpardonable; let us despair of help in ourselves, but not of help in God."