

# Sunday of the Passion

## BETRAYERS AND DESERTERS, RETRIEVED AND REHABILITATED

Matthew 26:14–27:66

### Sunday of the Passion

### Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

*[Note: Because it takes two pages, this week's Gospel lesson is not printed here.]*

### DIAGNOSIS: Betrayal, Denial, Desertion

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Betraying, Denying, Deserting*

In this Passion narrative, Matthew uses the words “betray,” “deny,” and “desert” 21 times to describe Judas and Peter. That is striking because we would expect them, as part of Jesus’ inner circle, to show the most fidelity. Judas (Greek for Judah, also the only disciple from Judah, the others are Galileans), could easily represent the people of Israel-God’s chosen, covenant people. Jesus considered him “friend”-bosom companion. If any disciple should have the heritage to recognize Jesus as Messiah, it should be he. Then there’s Peter, the number one disciple-the one who had gotten it right before (16:16), the one to whom Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom of heaven (16:19), the one who had vowed his unquestioning loyalty (26:33). So why is it that the ones who appear to be the closest, most faithful, turn out to be THE betrayers, THE deniers, THE cowardly deserters? Shouldn’t that give us pause-us good, faithful, close-to-Jesus church people, who casually assume solidarity with him (without counting the cost)?

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Arrogant Hearts**

When Jesus predicts that one of the disciples will betray him, Judas is incredulous: “Surely not I!” (26:25). Peter too protests vehemently, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you” (26:33). Their arrogance, their presumptions of fidelity (which they further assume merits God’s reciprocating good favor), sets them up for their giant falls. Is this same arrogance, this appropriation and presumption of God’s favor still alive today? How about in our country? How about in our hearts? Is our faith a reliance on faith itself, or is it a trust that willingly follows (as opposed to deserts) Jesus when that way becomes costly, such as going to a cross?

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Deserted**

Matthew’s depiction of God’s response to the murder of His Son is anger unleashed on the cosmos. Judas stares that wrath in the face after his betrayal of Jesus and, unwilling to linger under God’s judgment, he judges himself unforgivable and takes his life. God’s anger is so intense that He deserts the world: The heavens turn black, the earth quakes, rocks split apart, and the netherworld cracks open, releasing its captives (27:51-52). What is more, the temple curtain rips in half and God leaves (deserts) the temple (27:51) and those who have staked their futures on temple worship. In short, God deserts deserters, those who fail to trust and follow His Son.

## **PROGNOSIS: Retrieved and Rehabilitated**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Retrieved by the Deserted One**

Not only is Jesus deserted by his own followers, but on the cross, God too deserts him. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he cries (27:46). Without God, Jesus dies. But Matthew has carefully shown us that Jesus willingly drank this “cup of wrath.” Why? He is the Son of Man (26:24; 26:45; 26:64),

God's own divine agent sent to retrieve and restore exactly those people who deserve it the least: betrayers, deniers, deserters (and everyone else, in case there are any left who don't fit these categories). How? By drinking "the cup" himself, literally absorbing that wrath with his own body. This transaction is not complete, however, until we jump ahead two days to that time when God showed his great pleasure in Jesus by retrieving him from death and giving him life (28:6).

#### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Changed Hearts***

Earlier on, Jesus had explained that what he was about to endure would be on behalf of "many": He came, he said, "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). His blood is the "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). That life, that blood, is the basis of the forgiveness offered unconditionally to Peter and the disciples in the simple words, "go to Galilee; there they [you] will see me" (28:10). Now, trusting Jesus, they do follow him to Galilee. And, led by our changed hearts, so do we.

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *The Retrieved and Restored Retrieve and Restore***

Following Jesus changes Peter and the rest of the disciples. In Galilee, Jesus gives them the mandate to go and get involved in the family business, i.e., the retrieving and restoring of lost people: deserters, deniers, betrayers. We know, from the Acts of the Apostles, that they do involve themselves in that work, and they do so joyfully. Peter becomes a premier confessor of Christ-crucified, emboldened so much that he gladly follows Jesus all the way to his own cross. That's because being a Jesus-follower is no longer a matter of arrogance and assumed favoritism, but rather a matter of heartfelt gratitude and a desire to share with others the great, life-giving gift: Jesus.