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Matthew 26:1-46

God's Sovereignty and the Substitutionary Atonement of Christ

Last December, about 10 months ago, we started this sermon series on the book of Mathew. We're now coming close to the end of our series; after today, we only have 4 more weeks left. We're finally here, in the last three chapters of the book - approaching the climactic moment that it's all been building towards! Along our journey through Matthew, Jesus has clearly been shown to be the promised Messiah - the promised Son of David, God's promised King over His people, the promised savior! In fact, we've even seen that He is the very Son of GOD, the God-Man! He is the very fulfillment of the Old Testament; the entire storyline of God's plan of redemption building up to this moment! And yet, when we get to it - we find a moment of sorrow, suffering, intense pain, betrayal, corruption, injustice, climaxing in death on a cross!

All throughout this passage, we see increasing references to Jesus's coming suffering. Right off the bat, in verses 3-5, the chief priests and the elders are plotting to stealthily and unjustly arrest and kill Jesus (vv.3-5). Then Judas, one of Jesus's friends and devout followers - one of the Twelve disciples, his inner circle! - betrays Jesus in a disturbing and outrageous way, in verses 14-16; he goes to these scheming chief priests, of his own volition, and coldly asks, "What will you give me if I deliver him [Jesus] over to you?" (v.14-15). He sells out Jesus, the very man he claimed to follow as the Messiah, for 30 silver pieces - not a fortune by any means.

A little later in the passage, in verses 30-35, Jesus even predicts that *all of the rest* of His twelve disciples - all of His closest friends and followers - will abandon him that very night as He is arrested: "You will all fall away because of me this night." (v.31). Peter gallantly proclaims, "Not me! Even if everyone else falls away, I'll stick by you! I would rather *die* than abandon and deny you!" (paraphrase of vv.33, 35). Yet Jesus tells him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (v.34). Yet Peter insists he won't fall away; he and all the other disciples keeping insisting that they are loyal to Jesus, even to death.

But Jesus is never wrong. Unfortunately, they would all soon fall away, just as Christ warned. Even after Jesus warns and invites them to earnestly pray with Him, in preparation for the long trials ahead of them that night, they don't do it - they fall asleep! He wakes them up and

says “So, could you not watch with me me this one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (v.40-41). And, sure enough, as we’ll see next week in the rest of chapter 26, Jesus’s prediction is right: all of the disciples do fall; Judas betrays him; the chief priests and elders arrest him and give him a secret, unfair, corrupt trial; Peter denies him; and in chapter 27, Jesus is brutally beaten, mocked, and even crucified - publicly executed on the cross, condemned by the Roman government as a criminal, and by the Jews as a blaspheming heretic and religious phony.

This is a heartbreaking story, isn’t it? One tragedy follows after another. So we might be tempted to think: God’s plan has failed. Or at the very least, things haven’t gone as planned, and now GOD has to fix things somehow. But Matthew cuts that kind of thinking off. Right from the beginning, we see very clearly that *this was all according to God’s sovereign plan*.

That’s what this passage powerfully shows us. God doesn’t make mistakes. God isn’t sitting there with his hands tied behind his back, watching evil things happen and just wishing He could do something about it, but finding Himself unable - no, of course not! He’s God! He’s all powerful! He’s in control! Nothing happens outside of His will! Not even the most evil, unjust suffering ever to occur - the death of Jesus Christ, the perfect, spotless, righteous God-Man.

This text gives us a theological framework to understand what’s coming in Jesus’s betrayal, arrest, death, and burial. This text shows us that this is the sovereign plan of God; and it tells us why it is necessary - because Jesus is the passover lamb, by whose blood we are offered forgiveness from our sins. This passage shows us that the centerpiece of God’s sovereign plan of redemption for sinful humanity is Jesus Christ, who voluntarily embraced suffering and death in our place, because of His great love for us. And so this text also shows us that *we can trust God*. We can trust in His sovereign plan over all things - even over our lives, even when following Christ means walking with him through sorrow and suffering as well. We can trust Him with His plan for our lives, no matter what, because He Himself *suffered and died to save us from our sins!*

I. God is Sovereignly in Control of All Things (Matt. 26:1-15, 30-46)

The first thing we need to note from this passage is that Jesus’s suffering here is not an accident, but the very will of God. These events do not spell failure or defeat - rather, they unfold

God's plan of redemption for sinners like us; they fulfill God's plan just as it was foretold by the Old Testament scriptures. God's plans are not being thwarted here. Jesus is not being caught in a moment of weakness and failure. No, the exact opposite is the case: what we see here is that Jesus is *completely and sovereignly in control*. All of this is *God's will being accomplished successfully, God's sovereign plan unfolding*. It was Plan A all along. So let's walk through this passage and see how this truth is clearly displayed for us.

The passage begins with Jesus predicting his coming suffering and death; He even makes this known to His disciples in vv.1-2, directly *before* we see the chief priests and elders plotting to kill him in v.3. This frames the entire passage for us: their scheming to kill him, but they aren't going to take Jesus by surprise; He *already knows about it*, and He willingly walks into their trap because *it was His plan all along*. Jesus is in control of this situation here.

The next scene, in verses 6-13, continues to show that this is all part of the plan. Jesus and his friends are dining together when a woman shows her love for Jesus by anointing him with an extravagantly expensive bottle of liquid perfume. The disciples are all indignant at the waste, but then Jesus shows them why this act is so significant, in verse 12: "In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for my burial." When Jesus is crucified as a criminal, in the very next chapter, it will be a *dishonorable death*; he will be pronounced cursed and not given an honorable burial. But this text shows beforehand that this is all part of that plan; God already arranged for him to be anointed beforehand.

Next, in verses 14-16, we come to the painful scene of Judas deciding to betray Jesus. But in the verses that follow, 20-25, Jesus makes it clear that *even this* is known to Him, saying, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." Even as the other disciples become sorrowful and worried, asking who it is, Jesus continues to make clear that *even this* is part of God's plan, in verse 24: "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him" - that is, as it is prophesied in the Old Testament scriptures that all these elements of Jesus's suffering, even his betrayal, would take place. But then He adds, "but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

Jesus is giving us here a *very significant theological truth here*: God is completely in control of all things; God is sovereign and in control *even people sin, even when things erupt into evil and suffering*. And yet, God is not the cause of the evil and suffering; God does not make people sin or delight in evil or take pleasure in our sorrow in suffering. We are each *responsible*

for our sins. In a mysterious way, these two things are simultaneously true: 1. God is completely sovereign and in control; and 2. We are morally free agents and are responsible for our actions. God isn't responsible for the evil that happens - sinful creatures, like us, are. And yet, none of those things are outside of God's control; He sovereignly allows them to happen in such a way to bring about His plans that are *perfectly good*. Now, I know this is a complex topic; this is a mystery, it's hard to put these two things together. And yet, the Bible proclaims both of these things as true, over and over again: we are responsible for evil and sin, GOD isn't; and yet, God is always in control, and brings all things under His will. As Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." No amount of sin or evil can ever thwart the plans of God - even sin and evil ends up being used by God, becoming part of His sovereign plans along to bring about His glorious purposes of redemption and grace!

That's exactly what we see going on here in the life of Jesus. It continues in verses 30-35, when he says the fact that his disciples would "scatter" - fall away and abandon him - was also part of the plan (vv.30-35). Jesus predicts it, and even declares that it is the fulfillment of scripture, in verse 31: "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered,'" quoting *Zech. 13:7*. Yet he also tells them a message of future hope, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." He tells them, once again, not only that He will be killed, but also that He will *raised up from the dead!* This is all part of God's plan. It's God's will taking place here.

And this is shown, most clearly of all, in the Garden of Gethsemane (vv.36-46). "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (v.39). "Your will be done" (v.42). This is God's will for Jesus - that He be betrayed, abandoned by His closest friends and followers, arrested, unfairly tried, beaten, mocked, crucified, and given a dishonorable burial. We're so familiar with this message that it can easily fall on deaf ears; we take it for granted. But let the sting of this sink in for a moment: Jesus, the perfectly righteous God-Man, who made all things, and for whom all things were created; Jesus, the spotless, righteous Son of God, the only one of us who has ever lived a perfect, innocent, sinless life; the only person who has ever lived who *didn't* deserve to suffer and die - this Jesus is He whom God allowed - no, sovereignly *willed and planned* - to painfully suffer such sorrow, injustice, and death! If anything were ever evil and unjust, in the history of the world, it was *that*

- the brutal, tragic injustice done to Christ our Lord, the only truly innocent man to ever live yet who suffered wrongly!

Now, we rightly want to ask: why? Why would God allow, even *plan*, for such a terrible thing to take place? We're going to answer that question; we have to, and this passage most certainly does! It shows us that Christ's suffering and death was necessary to save us from our sins!

But before we get to that answer, I think there's a powerful application here for us that's meant to comfort us, as God's people, when we, too, go through sorrow and suffering in this life:

II. We Can Bring our Sorrow and Suffering to God and Trust in His Sovereign, Loving Will for Us (Matt. 26:36-46)

As we follow Christ, we must follow Him into pain and suffering. The call to be a Christian is to pick up our cross and follow Him; it's a call to come and die with Him, that we may be raised with Him. As we follow Jesus in this life, it will be filled with moments of suffering, pain, and deep sorrow. And like the disciples here, who are warned by Jesus to keep watch and pray lest they fall away, we, too, are tempted to doubt and scatter. We, too, can resonate with the words of verse 41: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

We all have these moments of weakness. I know I do; I'm sure you can relate as well. Those kinds of moments where we fall prey to the kind of thinking that says, "*Well, I guess God doesn't love me as much as I thought He did; or if He does, He must not really be powerful enough to keep bad things from happening to me.*" Have you ever had thoughts like that before? This kind of thinking creeps in through the back doors of our minds, it stealthily sneaks into our vulnerable hearts, when everything in our life seems to be going wrong and falling apart; or when things aren't working out according to plan. We start to buy into the lie that if we're really following God's will, then that means all the doors will easily open, that the path will just be smooth before us - and if it isn't, well then surely it isn't God's will! But if we buy into that lie, then when suffering comes into our life, and when following Jesus becomes more and more difficult, more costly, more painful, and when we don't understand why such sorrow and suffering is coming our way - well, we're tempted to think, surely God must be angry with me! Surely I'm not doing what He wants! If He loved me - if God *really loved me* as His child, if He

was really my Father, and all powerful, and perfectly good - well, then surely He wouldn't let this happen to me, right?" But then this text reminds us: look at God's Son, Jesus. If God ever loved anyone, *it was surely Jesus!* Jesus is GOD's Son who took on flesh! *Jesus is God!* He perfectly obeyed the Father's will! He never messed up! We can know without a shadow of a doubt that *God was not angry with Jesus; He loved Jesus completely, and Jesus was walking in God's Will!* And yet what happened to Jesus? Was it a smooth road full of what *we* would sometimes call a life of "blessing" and "success" and "prosperity?" No - it culminated in suffering, mockery, betrayal, injustice, and *death*.

So what do we make of that? Does this mean GOD didn't love Jesus? Or that He somehow failed? Or could it instead mean that, just maybe, we have our categories wrong? That maybe God's will for our lives includes walking through suffering and sorrow, just like it did for Christ. That maybe God *really is in control* over all things; that not even evil and suffering can thwart His sovereign plans and purposes of grace! That God is allowing sorrow and suffering into our lives *because He loves us! Because it His part of His will plan for us as His beloved children! Because He is going to use it for **our good** and for **His glory!***

This text powerfully screams into the doubts of our hearts: **YES, God loves you!** So much that His will was for Jesus, His own Son, to come and willingly suffer and die in your place, in order to save you from your sins, to make you His own son, His child! God's will for Jesus, who was perfect and sinless, eternally loved by GOD, because He is GOD - GOD's will for *Jesus Christ* was to suffer and die, to face such intense sorrow He thought it would crush Him! God was sovereign over it all; He was perfectly and powerfully in control. And He was infinitely loving in it all. Jesus willingly embraced it *because He is GOD, and God is love.* AND this was God's will: for Jesus to suffer and die in our place, that we might be dead to sin, forgiven, and live!

And if that's true, then of course we can trust GOD with our own sorrow and suffering! Because this means that God is sovereign over our own lives; that His will for your life will include sorrow and suffering - *but you can always trust that it is for your own eternal good and salvation! YOU can always trust it is part of GOD's sovereign plan for you, that it is part of GOD working out His love for you!* God has promised this! As Paul says in Rom. 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God *all things work together for good*, for those who are called according to His purpose."

So we, too, must follow Jesus's example and heed his warning. We must "watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation." Jesus gives us the example of how to respond when we're crushed with sorrow, despair, and suffering in this life. The answer isn't to doubt GOD's love for you or turn from Him; it's exactly the opposite! God wants us to *run to Him* in those moments! He wants us to cast our sorrow and pain on Him, and He will bear it for us! What we see here is that we can trust God with the pain and suffering in our own lives. So let us *earnestly bring our fears, our sorrows, our pain and suffering to the Lord in prayer*. Let us rest in Him as He bears our burdens for us! Let us cry out to the Lord in prayer, laying our burdens at His feet! Let us say, with Jesus, "Not my will, but your will be done!"

Let us rest in God's sovereign, gracious will for our life - even though it involves sorrow and suffering!

And we can rest in God's love for us by seeing it displayed in this truth...

III. Jesus Willingly Suffered and Died as a Substitute to Bear God's Wrath For Our Sin (Matt. 26: 17-29, 36-46)

So we come back to our question, then: why did God plan for Jesus to be betrayed, wrongly arrested and unjustly tried, to suffer mockery and beatings, and even to die condemned and cursed? Why did He plan for this to happen to the *beloved Son of God, the King of Kings, the Lord of Glory*? The answer is because it was necessary to *save use sinners from our sin, from the wrath of God we deserve!*

We see this clearly in verses 17-29, because they show us that Jesus is the *true Passover Lamb*. Verse 17 tells us that it was the first day of "Unleavened Bread," which is the Passover festival. Verses 18-19 tells us that the last meal Jesus had with His disciples before He died - what we call the "Last Supper" - was a Passover meal. The Passover refers to when God delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt, in the book of Exodus; He did so through pouring His judgment out on Egypt, which His people were safe from if they sacrificed a lamb and painted the blood over their front door. Afterwards, God commanded Israel to keep the Passover festival, including the Passover meal, every year, to remember this.

But in verses 26-29, Jesus *transforms* the Passover meal into the *Lord's Supper*. He shows here that the Passover was always meant to point us to *Jesus Christ* - the true Lamb of God, come to be slain for us in order to save us from God's wrath against our sin! As they are eating

this meal, in verses 26-28, Jesus transforms it to symbolically represent the meaning of what He is about to do in His suffering and death on the Cross. So he “took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

When Jesus suffered and died on the cross and He shed His blood, He was doing so *in our place*; He was bearing the wrath of God against our sin that we deserve, as *our representative*. This explains the *deep sorrow and anguish* Jesus expresses in the Garden. In verses 37-38. He says, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.” His sorrow was so great he felt like it would kill him! What made him so sorrowful? It wasn’t mere fear of death - it is the unique, agonizing pain of Jesus, the spotless lamb of righteousness of who was about to take on the sins of the world and bear the wrath of God for them! THE agonizing pain of the One who was about to stand in the place of ruined, condemned sinners - and take their place! This is why Jesus prays, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (v.39). All throughout the Old Testament, there are many rich metaphors and imageries where a “cup” of wine represents God’s wrath, resulting in curse, suffering, or death because of their sins. One of the clearest examples is **Isa. 51:17**: “Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have *drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of His wrath*, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering.” That’s exactly what the “cup” Jesus refers to here is picturing: it is the cup of God’s wrath that Jesus is about to drink down to the dregs - he’s going to *drain it to the very last drop*. But it’s not God’s wrath against Jesus’s own sin - He has none! Jesus is perfectly righteous, blameless, and sinless! No, he willingly drinks the cup of GOD’s wrath *against sinful humanity* - in particular, the sins of His people. He drinks the cup of God’s wrath by shedding His own blood in His sacrificial death on the cross. And in doing so, he fills a new cup - the cup of the blood of the New Covenant! And everyone who drinks Jesus’s cup is forgiven completely of their sins! Everyone who trusts in Jesus is part of Jesus’s New Covenant; everyone who believes this gospel is cleansed by the blood Jesus shed, so that we really are forgiven! And this is the *only way* we can be forgiven - that Jesus died in our place, as our substitute, our sacrifice, bearing our sins upon Himself and God pouring His wrath against our sin out on Jesus.

This is the glorious heart of the gospel message - the good news of our salvation by grace alone through faith alone in the finished work of CHrist alone! The news that we really are

utterly hopeless sinners who deserve eternal damnation in Hell; that God is perfectly good, holy, and righteous, and that His judgment is coming upon all the wicked; and that Jesus really did come to live a perfect life in our place, to even take our place on the cross, as a sacrifice, stepping in between us and God's wrath against our sin, and actually took our sins upon Himself as God poured out all of His wrath against our sin *on Him!*

If you're trusting in Christ, that means Jesus died *for your sins!* Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath *against you!* He drank it to the dregs - to the very last drop! That means there is absolutely none left! No matter how sinful you are, no matter how much guilt and shame you've felt in your life, if you're in Christ through faith, then *God is no longer angry with you and never will be; God has absolutely no wrath left towards your sin and will never judge you for it - because Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath against your sin to the very last drop!*

And this brings us to the beauty of what He gives us in the Lord's supper. He gives us a beautiful, visible picture of this reality: he takes the cup, and says that it represents His blood, poured out on the cross for us - in our place, to pay the penalty for our sins, in order to secure our forgiveness, justification, and eternal life. He drank the cup of God's wrath for us, so that we never have to. Instead, we get to drink Christ's cup of the New Covenant - the cup of grace! The cup of Christ's shed blood, that says, "You are forgiven!"

Everytime we come to the Lord's Table, that's what we're doing: we're corporately and publicly *remembering* that Christ died on the cross in our place, as our substitute, our sacrifice; that He shed His blood to take away our sins; paid the penalty we deserved to pay, died the death we deserved to die! We drink this cup to remember the cup He drank for us! Everytime we come to the Lord's table, we're *proclaiming* our faith and believe in this gospel, publicly and visibly; we're proclaiming to everyone: "We *still believe* that this gospel is true and it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes! We're trusting in Christ alone to save us from our sins! We believe we are part of God's righteous, covenant people purely by grace, purely because of what Christ has done for us!" Everytime we come to the table of the Lord's Supper together, we're proclaiming: *we are God's people, Christ's church, redeemed by the blood of the lamb!* We proclaim our belief in His death for our sins and resurrection from the dead until He comes again!

That's why we continue to observe the Lord's Supper - because we believe and proclaim that Christ shed His blood to pay the penalty for our sins, so that we are forgiven in Him! And

that's also why this is only for *Christians* - for those who truly believe this gospel message. So in a few moments, we're going to come to the table and visibly proclaim our faith in this gospel as we remember together, in faith, what Christ has done for us. So if you're a baptized believer and a member in good standing of a gospel preaching church, we invite you to respond to this gospel by joining us at the Table.

But if that doesn't describe you this morning, there's a *different* way for you to respond. We invite you to simply trust in Christ alone, believing He did everything necessary to save you from your sins! Turn to the Lord in faith and rest in His grace! Then, make your faith public by being baptized, and joining a gospel-preaching church as you begin your walk with the Lord! If you have any questions about doing that, I would *love* to speak with you! You can even come now and sit on the front row, or find me after the service.

Let us have a moment of silence before we pray.