

“Numbered with the Transgressors” (Luke 22:31–38)

February 2, 2020

Brian Watson

Last Sunday, news of a death shocked many people. We found out that Kobe Bryant, one of the NBA’s most successful players, died in a helicopter crash along with his 13-year-old daughter and seven other people. The news of any death is shocking. But I think what shook people was the fact that Bryant was only 41. He had retired less than four years ago. He was healthy and wealthy and accomplished. People like him aren’t supposed to die this young. They are supposed to live long lives. We would expect him to go on to work on television or to coach and to die at an old age. But Bryant, like anyone else, was mortal.

Such news reminds us that life is fragile. We’re only one phone call, text message, email, letter, or police notification away from receiving devastating news, whether that’s a death or some other emergency, or having a relative or friend betray us in some way, or something lesser like being fired or finding out we’ve lost money. There’s no guarantee that things in this life are secure.

There are times when we will feel like we’re shaken. That feeling may come even when there’s not some apparent emergency. We may feel shaken when we’re depressed or anxious, overwhelmed, when the weight of the world is too much for us to bear. We may look back on our lives and have a great sense of regret and shame for what we’ve done, and we may feel like we’re coming undone. We may have great worries about how we’ll make it through another week, another month, or another year.

In short, there are times when we feel like we’re being attacked. The fact is that there are forces that we can’t see that are attacking us, forces of darkness and evil that are very real and that are stronger than we are. Yet there is still great hope. In the midst of all this uncertainty, in a world of tragedies, there is someone who can protect us from ultimate harm and failure.

Today, we’re continuing our study of the Gospel of Luke. We’re in the middle of chapter 22. It is the night before Jesus will die on the cross, nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus has taken one last Passover meal with his disciples. He has explained what his death will accomplish. He has warned them that one of them will betray him. He has told them not to strive for greatness in the world’s eyes, but to be humble and to serve one another. And now he gives one disciple another warning.

Let's begin by reading Luke 22:31–34:

³¹ “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” ³³ Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” ³⁴ Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”¹

Jesus speaks to Peter, the leader of the disciples, calling him by the name “Simon,” which is what he is called when Jesus first invited him and some others to follow him (Luke 5:1–11). Perhaps calling Peter by this name would remind him that Jesus chose him as one of his disciples. Jesus warns Simon Peter that Satan has demanded to “have you.” We can't see this in English, but in the Greek, the “you” here is plural. It's a reference not just to Peter, but to all the disciples. Satan wanted to “sift them like wheat,” to separate them from the chaff, to pull them away from Jesus. It's like Satan, the devil, wanted to shake Jesus' little group of ragtag followers to see which of them would fall away from Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago, we saw that Satan had managed to sift one of Jesus' disciples, Judas. Satan decisively influenced Judas to betray Jesus. Now, we find out that Satan has attacked the other eleven disciples, too. Satan is a mysterious and shadowy figure in the Bible. There are few references to him in the Old Testament. From his appearance in the book of Job, we understand that he was a rebellious angel, or at least some kind of otherworldly being who was in heaven. In the book of Job, Satan tries to get a righteous man to renounce God by taking away his wealth, his family, and his health, all with God's permission. Yet Satan failed in that attack. Satan is also known as being an accuser. In Zechariah 3, in a vision he accuses Joshua, the high priest, pointing out his sin. Yet God rebuked Satan, took away Joshua's “filthy garments” (representing his sin) and clothed him in “pure vestments” (representing righteousness).

We learn more about Satan in the New Testament. Though we don't know much about his origins, he's called “a murderer” and “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). We find out that he is the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, the “deceiver of the whole world,” and “the accuser” (Rev. 12:9, 11). Satan even tried to tempt Jesus, to get him to abandon his divine mission (Luke 4:1–13).

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

To summarize what the Bible says about the devil, we can say that he is real, that he is a preternatural or otherworldly force, that he delights to deceive and tempt people so that they turn away from God, that he then accuses those sinners of their sin, and that he tries to thwart God's plans. But it's important to know that Satan does not have God's power and knowledge, and certainly not his wisdom, love, and holiness. And it's also important to know that Jesus is stronger than Satan, he came "to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8), and that Satan will be defeated (Rev. 20:7–20).

Here, in Luke 22, Jesus warns Peter that Satan has attempted to separate him and the ten other disciples. (Satan already managed to separate the twelfth.) But Jesus has protected Peter. He has prayed for him. (Jesus then uses the singular form of "you" to refer specifically to Peter.) Jesus has prayed that Peter's faith would not fail—at least not in the ultimate sense. That doesn't mean Peter wouldn't fail in smaller ways. In fact, he predicts that Peter will deny him.

What's interesting is that Jesus first says that to Peter that after he has "turned again," he should strengthen the other disciples. This implies that Peter will fail, not in the ultimate sense that Judas failed, proving himself faithless, but sinning in some significant way. Peter doesn't seem to think he will do that, because he claims that he is ready to go to prison and to death with Jesus. Peter will eventually go to prison for being a Christian (Acts 12), and according to Christian tradition outside of the Bible, Peter would eventually be martyred in Rome. But those events would come much later. First, Peter will deny even knowing Jesus. We'll see that in a few weeks.

I want to drop a little footnote here. Some people don't believe that the Bible is the truth. They don't believe that the Gospels and the other historical books of the Bible tell what really happened. They assume that people fabricated these stories, or that they're some kind of myth. One of the reasons to believe they are true is that they report details that you wouldn't make up if you were creating a story. Peter, along with Paul, is one of the two great leaders of the early church. If you were making up a story about him, you wouldn't tell a story about his failures. But Peter's faults are clearly displayed. He and the other disciples sometimes come across as foolish and thick-headed. Other great figures of the Bible, like Noah, Abraham, and David, are presented warts and all. Compare that with Islam. Islam presents Muhammad as a perfect man. The Qur'an tells stories about biblical figures. (Keep in mind that the Qur'an was written hundreds of years after the Bible was completed.) But in the Qur'an, "David does not . . . seduce Uriah's wife; Lot

does not sleep with his daughters” and acts of violence are expunged from the record.² If you’re making up a story, you don’t share embarrassing depictions of that story’s heroes. But if you’re telling the truth, you have nothing to hide.

Think about this for a moment. Jesus chose the twelve disciples. He did this after a long night of prayer to God the Father (Luke 6:12–16). This means that Jesus’ choice of these particular twelve men was God’s choice. This was all part of God’s plan. God knew that Judas would betray Jesus. He knew that Peter would deny him. Yet Jesus chose them still. And Jesus knows that Peter will deny him. Yet he tells Peter in advance that he will repent, that he will have a role in strengthening Christians.

What does this have to do with us? If you are a Christian, know that God chose you before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3–14). God didn’t just choose to create us. God chose to adopt us into his family, to save us from our sins and the condemnation that sinners deserve, through the sacrificial death of Jesus. (If you don’t understand what that means, hang on; I will soon explain what Jesus does to save us.) God did this knowing all the sins that we would ever commit. Jesus, in his divinity, knew what Peter would do. Yet Jesus chose him anyway. And Jesus protected Peter from Satan. He interceded for Peter. He prayed for him. He promised Peter that even though he would deny Jesus, which is a serious sin, Peter would still have a role to play as the leader of the disciples.

This is a picture of grace. Jesus gives things to Peter that Peter doesn’t deserve. On his own, Peter would not only deny Jesus, but he would come under Satan’s sway. He would believe lies. He would fail. But not with Jesus in his corner. The same is true of us. If it were not for Jesus, we would be lost. We would believe lies and fall away from God. But nothing can remove us from God and his love for us.

I’ll come back to this idea in a moment. But first let’s read the rest of today’s passage. Here are verses 35–38.

³⁵ And he said to them, “When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?” They said, “Nothing.” ³⁶ He said to them, “But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. ³⁷ For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’”

² Timothy Winter, “Islam and the Problem of Evil,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 234.

For what is written about me has its fulfillment.”³⁸ And they said, “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” And he said to them, “It is enough.”

Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, we’re told that Jesus sent out the twelve disciples on a mission to preach and to heal people (Luke 9:1–6). He told them not to take provisions with them. Later, he sent out a larger group of seventy-two people to preach (Luke 10:1–12). Again, he told them not to take provisions, but to trust that God would provide for them through the kindness of others. Now, Jesus tells them to take provisions. They should bring money and a bag. He also tells them they should have a sword.

At the least, Jesus is telling them that something is changing. Earlier, they were not met with much resistance. They preached and they had success. But now Jesus is warning them that times will be hard. In John’s Gospel, he tells them that the world will hate them because it first hated him (John 15:18–25). “The world” refers to the powers of the world that are opposed to God. The disciples will need to be prepared to face such adversity. Things will not be easy for them.

Still, it’s odd that Jesus tells them to buy a sword. Why does he do this? This command is debated. I have seen some people use this passage to justify carrying weapons, as if Jesus were telling the disciples something about the Second Amendment. I’m not opposed to the Second Amendment in principle, but I think it would be a mistake to justify carrying weapons for self-defense based on this passage. And this is why: Jesus tells them to buy a sword. They tell him they have two swords. Two swords would not be enough to defend twelve men. It won’t be enough to defend them from soldiers. Soon enough, they will come to arrest Jesus. Peter, ever the impetuous disciple, attempts to defend Jesus by swinging his sword at a servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear (Luke 22:50; John 18:10). But Jesus miraculously heals that man’s ear and says, “No more of this!” (Luke 22:51). We should also notice that in the book of Acts or in the rest of the New Testament, there is no account of the disciples brandishing weapons or defending themselves physically. So, if Jesus is telling them to literally carry swords wherever they go, then they didn’t obey him.

Also, in this passage, when the disciples tell Jesus they have two swords, he says, literally, “It is enough.” That could mean, “That number will suffice.” But it won’t be enough to defend themselves. Jesus could also mean something dismissive. He could have been referring to a sword in a figurative or metaphorical way, warning them about the danger and divisions that

will come their way. When they show him their swords, Jesus could be saying, “Enough of that. You obviously don’t understand exactly what I mean.”

Just about every commentator believes that Jesus is referring to a sword in a figurative or metaphorical way. He does do that elsewhere, when he says that he came not to bring peace to the world, but to come with a sword, metaphorically separating his people from those who reject him (Matt. 10:34).

But perhaps he does want his disciples to have literal swords for another reason. Jesus gives us a reason for having swords in verse 37. He says, “For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors.’” He’s quoting Isaiah 53:12, part of a passage that talks about God’s servant, who will suffer and be crushed for the sins of his people so that they could be healed. In fact, right after that portion of Isaiah 53:12, it says, “he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” We have already seen that Jesus intercedes for sinners, people like Peter. We will soon talk about his bearing the sins of many. But it’s important to see that Jesus is numbered with the transgressors. Perhaps part of the reason why the disciples need to have swords is so that they will appear to the unbelieving Jews and Romans as if they are treasonous. Jesus will be accused of being a threat to the Roman Empire, challenging the rule of Caesar (Luke 23:2; John 19:12). Similar charges will be made against the disciples (Acts 17:6–7).

Whatever the exact meaning of the sword is, it’s important to see that Jesus is regarded as a sinner. That, too, is part of God’s plan. Sin is a turning away from God. It his rejecting him. It’s a failure to love him, trust him, and obey him. It’s really a failure to embrace the purpose for which we were made. God made us to know him, to represent him, to reflect his glory, to love him, obey him, and serve him. But we don’t want that. We want to determine our own purpose in life. Instead of accepting God’s terms for our lives, we want to live life on our own terms. Sin is a great crime, one that deserves punishment. That punishment is just repaying evil. It’s also a form of protection, removing evil from God’s world so that it doesn’t further contaminate his creation. God would be right to remove all of us from his world.

But God is gracious. He has provided us a way to be forgiven. He doesn’t sweep our sin under the rug. No, sin must be punished. God is a perfect judge, one who sees all the evidence and must issue a sentence for the crime, which must be punished. But he takes the punishment that we deserve and puts it on his Son. As the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our

sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” And God the Son takes this punishment upon himself willingly. He lays down his life to save his people, all who trust in him.

To see all how Jesus sacrifices himself for his people and how he protects them from Satan, it’s worth looking at another passage of the Gospels. In John 10, Jesus is teaching about his identity and the role he plays in saving his people. He says that he is a good shepherd who protects his people, his sheep. There is a thief who comes to harm the sheep—this must be Satan. But Jesus protects his people from them. Here is what Jesus says in John 10:10–18:

¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.

Jesus protects his people and gives them abundant life. He’s not a hired hand who abandons the sheep when things get difficult. No, he risks life and limb to protect them. In fact, he lays down his life for them. There is one flock of God, both Jews and Gentiles, anyone who puts their trust in Jesus. They will listen to his voice, and no one can take them from him.

A few verses later, Jesus reinforces this idea. Look at verses 27–30:

²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one.

What does it mean to be a Christian? You follow Jesus. You hear his voice in the pages of the Bible and you follow him. This begins by trusting in Jesus and his ability to save you from sins and the attacks of the enemy. It starts with believing that he is the Son of God, the perfect God-man who lived a righteous life and died an atoning death. But such faith will lead to obedience, even the imperfect obedience of someone like Peter.

But the good news is that if you are a Christian, no one can take you out of God's hand. Satan can try to deceive you and attack you, but he won't succeed. Satan could decisively steer away Judas because he didn't have real faith in Jesus. But Jesus protected Peter, and he protects all his other sheep.

There are other passages in the Bible that express this great truth. In the book of Romans, Paul gives his most systematic account of this good news message of Christianity. He discusses the universal problem of sin and how it brings condemnation, God's righteous wrath. But he also tells us that God sent his Son to redeem sinners, and that those who trust in Jesus will experience no condemnation.

At the end of Romans 8, Paul writes these powerful words. Here are verses 31–39:

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you are a Christian, you have God on your side. If God is for you, no one can ultimately be against you. If God gave you his own Son, knowing all the sins that you have committed and will ever commit, will he not give you everything you need? He will. If God has covered your sins with the sacrifice of Jesus, can anyone bring charges against you to condemn you? No. Jesus died for your sins and rose from the grave, showing that he paid the penalty in full. And he is now in heaven, interceding for all Christians, pleading his sacrifice to the Father, praying for us.

If you are a Christian, nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing! Though Christians will experience trials and tribulations, distress and persecution, and even death, all of those things can't separate them from God. Death can't remove you from God. No emergency or

crisis can remove you from God. Your own sin can't remove you from God. Satan and demons can't separate you from God and his love for you.

That is, if you're a Christian. If you are not a Christian, you are not protected from these things. The fact is that you will die, and you will stand before Jesus one day. And if you have rejected him, he will not protect you on that day. He will judge you. He will condemn you. You will be removed from God's creation and you will experience a literally hellish existence. The only protection from the trials of this life, from all kinds of emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress, from death, and from condemnation, is Jesus. The only protection from all our own failures is him. Turn to him now. If you don't know who Jesus is and want to know more, I would love to talk to you. If you don't know what it looks like to hear his voice and follow him, please talk to me.

Christians, this should be a great comfort to you. You may feel like your life is being shaken. You may be reflecting on your own sins. You may feel like you're coming under attack. You may be overwhelmed by forces that are greater than you. You may be looking at many problems that you can't solve, broken situations that you can't fix. When that happens, look to Christ. He is praying for you. He is protecting you. He knows all your sins and yet he still died for you. He loves you and cares for you. And he will preserve your life, all the way to that day when you will receive a resurrected body and live in a perfect world with him forever.

I want to close this message with one more passage of Scripture. It's a great commentary on this passage, just as it's a great commentary on the book of Job. Not surprisingly, it's written by Peter himself. This is 1 Peter 5:6–11:

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.