

The Shepherd and His Sheep

During a Monday night football game between the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants, one of the announcers observed that Walter Payton, the Bears' running back, had accumulated over nine miles in career rushing yardage. The other announcer remarked, "Yeah, and that's with somebody knocking him down every 4.6 yards!" Walter Payton, the most successful running back ever, knows that everyone --even the very best-- gets knocked down. The key to success is to get up and run again just as hard. (Jeff Quandt, Irving Wallace, Book of Lists, 1980).

Young William Wilberforce was discouraged one night in the early 1790s after another defeat in his 10-year battle against the slave trade in England. Tired and frustrated, he opened his Bible and began to leaf through it. A small piece of paper fell out and fluttered to the floor. It was a letter written by John Wesley shortly before his death. Wilberforce read it again: "Unless the divine power has raised you up... I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that (abominable practice of slavery), which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God, and in the power of His might." (Daily Bread, June 16, 1989).

The enemy of our soul wants to knock us down and cause us to give up on the great work of God and of His Kingdom.

"Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion," Says the Lord of hosts. "Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered; Then I will turn My hand against the little ones. --
Zechariah 13:7

With those words the Old Testament prophet Zechariah predicts Jesus' arrest, trial, and death and his disciples desertion of Him . And here in Mark Chapter 14 we see these predicted events playing out. This is the calm before the storm, a brief time of respite before the passion of Jesus Christ explodes with an act of breath taking betrayal. Jesus is the shepherd, the disciples the sheep – Jesus will be stricken, the disciples...they will, as Jesus says, all will fall away.

Follow along in your Bibles as I read our passage for today,

Mark 14:27-42

- 27 Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered.'**
- 28 "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."**
- 29 Peter said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be."**
- 30 Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times."**
- 31 But he spoke more vehemently, "If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all said likewise.**
- 32 Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray."**
- 33 And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed.**

- 34 Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch."
- 35 He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him.
- 36 And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."
- 37 Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour?"
- 38 Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."
- 39 Again He went away and prayed, and spoke the same words.
- 40 And when He returned, He found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him.
- 41 Then He came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.
- 42 Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

Jesus and his disciples are walking from the place they celebrated the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane. As they walk together, Jesus predicts that all of them—each and every one—will stumble, will fall away. The word “stumble” is the Greek word from which we get our English word “scandalize”. It means to “stumble” or to “trip, to cause to fall down.” It’s a word that describes failure, when you stumble and fall on your face.

All of Jesus’ closest apostles will be scandalized; each one will trip and fall. Jesus sees this fall as an absolute certainty, because its predicted by the ancient prophet Zechariah. Jesus is the shepherd, and His closest followers are His sheep. Once Jesus is struck down, the sheep will scatter, just as Zechariah predicted. But Jesus does not leave them without hope. Whenever Jesus predicts His suffering and death, He also predicts His resurrection. And in v. 28 He tells them "**But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.**"

Peter, full of self-confidence and bravado, protests that he’ll never fall away. Peter’s words in v. 29 are a subtle slap in the face of the other apostles, as if he’s saying, “of course these guys might stumble and fall, but I never will.” “You and I both know these other eleven guys are flaky and weak, but not me Jesus, not me.” Peter sees himself as a rock of faithfulness; after all, Jesus nicknamed him Peter, the Rock.

But Jesus saw far more clearly than Peter. He saw that Peter's confidence was resting upon his own human determination, his own will, and Jesus knew the weakness of it. Jesus insists that before the dawn breaks—before the rooster crows twice—Peter will have denied Jesus three times. To deny someone is to disown him, to deny that you know him, to distance yourself from a person because you’re afraid of how people will react to your relationship with that person. Peter protests that he’s ready to die with Jesus, that no amount of intimidation or danger could cause him to waver in his faith. All the other apostles chime in with Peter, that they’ll never fall either.

Then Jesus takes his disciples to a private garden called Gethsemane. This patch of olive trees is across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Gethsemane means olive press. As the olives are crushed and pressed here in this garden so will our Lord Jesus be pressed. Apparently this is a common place where Jesus went with His disciples to pray.

Jesus tells His disciples to "**Sit here while I pray.**" The disciples sit, Jesus prays. Then Jesus invites Peter, James and John to join him a little further into the garden.

Now remember Peter has just promised to face death before he'd turn his back on Jesus. And four chapters earlier in Mark, James and John promised the same thing. You might remember that James and John came to Jesus back in the tenth chapter of Mark, asking to sit at Jesus' right and left hand. Jesus asked them, "**Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?**" That was a reference to Jesus' suffering, as Jesus asks them if they're prepared to face the kind of suffering Jesus will face. James and John answered, "**Yes, We are able,**" (Mark 10:38-39).

Mark tells us that at that point Jesus becomes deeply distressed and troubled. The Greek words Mark uses describe intense emotional upheaval and turmoil. Jesus' words here echo the prayers of lament in the Psalms. In fact, in v. 34 when Jesus says, "**My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death,**" He echos the language of Psalm 42, a psalm of lament.

Jesus commands his three closest apostles—those who've promised to never turn away—to keep watch while Jesus goes and prays alone. The command to "**keep watch**" is more than a command to stay physically awake. One chapter earlier in Mark Jesus said a similar thing to them about watching for His second coming, "**Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming--in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning-- lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!**" (Mark 13:35-37).

Clearly what Jesus is commanding there and here in v. 34 is not just for them to stay awake physically, or to simply watch the time. He commands spiritual watchfulness, alertness to spiritual danger.

Then Jesus collapses on the ground in desperate prayer for relief from His impending suffering. He asks that if it's possible, the hour of His suffering might pass from Him. He addresses God as "**Abba,**" which is an Aramaic word for "my father" or "daddy." Jesus confesses that everything's possible for God, a teaching he's taught others earlier in Mark (10:27).

He asks God to "Take this cup from me." The word "cup" isn't just an ordinary metaphor for His suffering and death. The concept of the cup goes back to an Old Testament concept of the cup of God's wrath. Often in the Old Testament God's judgment against sin is described as a "cup" of God's wrath, and it represents the fullness of God's complete judgment poured against human wickedness and sinfulness.

What deeply troubles Jesus here isn't just the physical suffering, but His knowledge that He's about to take upon himself the full extent of God's wrath against sin. The physical suffering, the scourging, the nailing of hands and feet, the mocking...these things are nothing compared to the crushing weight of God's wrath against human sin.

When Jesus returns he finds Peter, James and John anything but watchful. They're sleeping, and Jesus has to wake them up. Then in v. 38 he commands them to not only watch but now also to pray. In other words, Jesus is instructing his three friends to do what Jesus himself has been doing. Only through

watchfulness and prayer will they avoid falling because although inwardly they're willing, outwardly they're weak.

Jesus goes back, prays some more, and then comes back to his disciples, only find them sleeping again. They've failed to watch, failed to pray, and now time is up. Their time of testing has come, as Judas the betrayer approaches.

In this remarkable story I just want to point out a couple layers of meaning for us. First, we see

1. The Shepherd Cares for His Sheep.

In v. 27 he says, "You will all fall away." No if's, and's, or but's about it. They will fall, in fulfillment of scripture. Yet in v. 28 Jesus is sure that they'll meet Him back in Galilee after his resurrection. Despite His knowledge of their future fall, Jesus is still confident in their future obedience. That's amazing. The shepherd cares for His sheep, even when they stray.

Even when Jesus knows we will fall, He cares for us anyway.

I have learned to never say what the apostles say in this story: "I'll never fall." Never underestimate what your heart is capable of doing given the right circumstances and a little self-deception.

Never say never! Maybe you are here today and you know you have stumbled, you have fallen. When you were saved, you promised the Lord that you would live for Him and that you would be faithful to Him, His church and His Word.

Now, you have little more than a passing acquaintance with the things of God. You don't pray, you don't read your Bible, you don't live for Jesus like you used to, you don't come to church like you know you should. Sunday School and Wednesday prayer meeting evening are things of the past. You never thought it would happen, but it has. You are doing things, and allowing things in your life, that would have been off limits before.

The good news is: Even when Jesus knows we will fall, He cares for us anyway.

We also see that **Even when Jesus knows we will deny Him, He encourages us anyway.**

Peter's threefold denial of Jesus later in this chapter is the crescendo of the apostles' failure. And it's ironic that it's Peter who denies Jesus, because Peter is the one who has most loudly proclaimed his faithfulness. Yet on Easter Sunday when the angel appears to the women at the empty tomb, the angel says, "**Go tell his disciples and Peter**" (Mark 16:7). The angel singles out Peter, as if to say, "Even though you denied Jesus, he still believes in you." And indeed after the resurrection Peter would be forgiven, restored and empowered to become a key leader in the early Church.

What does it mean to deny Jesus? Well we deny him when we put distance between us and Jesus because we're embarrassed by Jesus or what Jesus stands for. Whenever we try to hide our faith or try to distance ourselves from our allegiance to Jesus, we're doing the same thing. It's shameful, it's wrong, yet we're often weak. Thank God Jesus still encourages us, even when He knows we're going to deny Him.

We also see here that **Even when Jesus knows we our weakness, He guides us anyway.**

Notice that in v. 27 Jesus is completely convinced that they will all fall away, but then in v. 38 He tells them to watch and pray, so they don't fall. He knows they're going to fall, but He instructs them anyway, giving them guidance and teaching. How would you like to teach a class, when you know beforehand that all your students will fail? Would you have trouble staying motivated to teach those students each day?

Jesus knows that they're weak, that although there's a willingness inside of them, that their weaknesses outweigh their strengths. Even in his moment of pain and anguish, Jesus is still the good shepherd, caring for and nurturing his sheep. Three times he returns to check on them, to guide them, to help them.

Thank God when I'm mired in weakness, Jesus still teaches me and guides me. Can you see how this section shows us how Jesus cares for His sheep?

2. The Shepherd Leads His Sheep.

We also see in this passage how Jesus leads His sheep. He gives them an example to follow. After all, Jesus was fully human as well as being fully God, and nowhere do we see His humanity more clearly than here in the garden. Jesus' actions provide us with an example of what to do when bad things are coming.

When Jesus knows bad things are coming,

He finds strength in intimate prayer.

"Abba, Father." What a daring way to approach God, not as King, not as Ruler, not as Master, but as Father, even as Dad. How intimate, to approach God that way. Yet as followers of Jesus, that's exactly how we're invited to come. Romans 8:15 says, **For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."**

I mentioned earlier that Jesus' prayer in the garden follows the pattern of an Old Testament prayer of a lament. A lament is a cry of deep agony or grief. A prayer of lament usually begins with a desperate plea for help, a cry for relief from some hopeless situation. Then there's usually a transition from desperation to assurance that God has heard the request and that he will respond with love. Most laments begin with a desperate plea and end with hopeful praise and a surrender to God's will.

When we see bad things happening coming down the pike in our lives, we'd do well to follow that same pattern. Too often instead of praying the kind of intimate, honest prayer that Jesus prays, we try to think happy thoughts and sing happy songs.. Jesus is our example, as he finds strength from this kind of intimate prayer.

We also see here that When Jesus knows bad things are coming,

He finds strength in community.

Peter, James and John have formed Jesus' closest inner circle. When Jesus raised a little girl from the dead earlier in Mark, these three men witnessed it (5:37). When Jesus shined with the brilliant glory of God on the mountain of transfiguration in the ninth chapter of Mark, these three men were there to see it (9:2). These three have each in their own way sworn to stay by Jesus' side no matter what, even if it meant suffering or death.

Jesus yearned for their company on the most agonizing night of his life. Like friends who sit with us in a waiting room while we await news of a loved one in surgery, Jesus needed friends he could trust just who would just sit with him. They didn't need to say anything or do anything, but to just be with him.

In his humanity Jesus sought a sense of community with His disciples. And if Jesus needed it, how much more do we? How much more do we need men and women who share our faith in Jesus to strengthen us during painful times? Do we dare think that we're stronger than Jesus, that he needed something that we ourselves don't?

This whole idea of needing community cuts against the grain of our highly individualistic culture. We're so used to idolizing the cowboy who rides out of town when he's no longer needed that we fail to see the great virtue of Jesus' need for community. For us needing community is a sign of weakness, but for Jesus it was a sign of strength.

The primary place for Christians find this sense of community is in their local church. That's a big reason why Jesus creates his Church, to create a place for community to flourish. For us to encourage and strengthen each other, to support and challenge each other, to love and forgive each other. You can't do that if you're not in community.

It's interesting too that Jesus' community lets him down. You might say the church let Jesus down; it wasn't there when he needed it the most. Having a community is no guarantee that the community will be there when you need them and do what you need them to do. Relationships with people are simply too complex and messy to be that simple. Yet despite their failure to support Jesus, Jesus still loves his community, still invests his life in them, still cares for them.

Being let down by those around us doesn't erase our need for them. I've seen many people greatly supported and strengthened in the midst of difficult circumstances by this church. But I've also occasionally seen people fail to find the support they need. Sometimes they get mad and leave, other times they just shut down and stop investing in relationships, and other times they forgive and continue to invest in relationships. And it breaks my heart when people who look for community here don't find it or when we somehow let them down. Yet as I look at Peter, James and John, I see that we're not alone in falling asleep when people need us. You and I are no stronger or better than they were. I'm just glad that this wasn't their only chance, that in the book of Acts these followers of Jesus do a much better job. Jesus models for us a need for community.

Finally we find here that We also see here that When Jesus knows bad things are coming,

He finds strength in surrender to God's will.

Jesus' prayer here echoes the prayer he taught us to pray. Remember how it goes? **"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."** Jesus is praying the same when he says, "Not what I will, but what you will" (v. 36).

Jesus prays to be delivered from death and all that his death will entail, but God's will is that Jesus be delivered through death, that is that Jesus is exalted and lifted up by way of resurrection rather than by way of avoiding the cross (Garland). And Jesus finds the strength to face what lies ahead by surrendering himself anew and afresh to God's will.

That's also where we'll find strength as well, as we face the hard things of life. Too often when people come to us with their problems and their hurts, we try to help them fix their problem and remove their pain. But perhaps the more important question to help them ask is, "What's God doing in your problem?" Maybe God doesn't want to fix it just yet, maybe the pain is serving a purpose, and to take away the pain too soon will short-circuit what God is doing. People don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear that.

But true strength is found in surrender to the will of God.

Conclusion

The story of Jesus in the Garden is truly remarkable. It's so vivid and human, that many Christians throughout church history have been embarrassed by the agony. Yet in it we find the love of Jesus and the example of Jesus. And as followers of Jesus Christ in the real world, today God is inviting us to rejoice in the love of Jesus and to live by the example of Jesus. Even in the hard things of life. Perhaps especially in the hard things of life.

Has the Lord spoken to your heart today? If He has, please come to Him right now. Trust Him and let Him do His work in your heart and life. Will you come as He calls?