

Trusting Jesus in the Hour of Temptation

Mark 14:27–31
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Considering that Jesus had just observed the passover and instituted the Lord's Supper, in which he not only foretold his death but also declared himself to be his people's redeemer, we would expect to see humility in his disciples. Instead, we find an overwhelming amount of self-confidence, arrogance and boldness. They assumed they could do for themselves what Jesus alone can do.

We all face this temptation every day. Some of the great church leaders of the past have faced it and failed, at least temporarily. For example, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, staring at Bloody Mary's bitter persecution of Protestants, signed a recantation of his Biblical views concerning the Lord's Supper. Thankfully, he later recanted his recantation and suffered martyrdom, while cursing the hand that raised a pen against the Lord. Like Peter, he denied Jesus. And like Peter, he repented and found restoration.

We must always be on guard. Jesus said, *But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven* (Matt. 10:33). He then reminded us that he came to bring a sword, not peace. He said that he would set men and women against each other, even within a single family. Tests of our faith are inescapable, but will we trust Jesus to steer us through them? That's the question.

The Offense of All

After Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he led his disciples to the mount of Olives and warned that each one of them would fall away that very night. Mark tells us later — in verse 50 — that this is exactly what happened: *And they all forsook him, and fled.*

The prophet Zechariah predicted this several centuries earlier. He wrote, *Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones* (Zech. 13:7). Jesus cited this passage in verse 27, but he didn't quote it exactly as the prophet wrote it. Zechariah wrote that God commanded the sword to smite the shepherd without identifying who would bear it. But Jesus used the pronoun *I*, alluding to his Father. God himself would smite the shepherd. But even in Zechariah, God is the one who acts. He brings, refines, tries, hears and speaks. And the idea that

God would strike his own shepherd for us appears throughout Scripture. What did Isaiah write, except that *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isa. 53:6). Verse 10 of the same chapter adds, *Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief*. And Romans 8:32 reminds us that *God spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all*.

The shepherd that would be smitten is, of course, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and the sheep that would scatter as a result of the shepherd's smiting were his disciples. This is how sheep behave. When the shepherd's out of the picture, the sheep flee in every direction because they no longer have someone to keep them together. Panic and flight set in.

There was never any doubt that the disciples would flee because Zechariah, writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, prophesied it. And the fact that Jesus, the sovereign Lord, affirmed it made it doubly sure. But Jesus didn't stop there. In verse 28, he promised that the sheep would come back into the safety of the fold again. How? Just as his suffering and death made them flee, his resurrection would reunite them. The disciples would gather with Jesus in Galilee.

This, too, happened exactly as Jesus said it would. After he rose from the dead, a heavenly messenger told the three women who went out to his tomb to *tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you* (Mark 16:7). Matthew 28:16 says that they did so: *Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them*.

Peter's Fall

Peter disagreed. He refused to accept Jesus' word, saying, *Although all shall be offended, yet will not I*. Jesus then told Peter exactly what he would do. Verse 30 says, *And Jesus saith unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this day, even in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice*. Even with this sober rebuke, Peter persisted in his foolishness. Verse 31 says, *But he spake the more vehemently, If I should die with thee, I will not deny thee in any wise. Likewise also said they all*.

What do we see here? Peter didn't just brush off Jesus. He vehemently denied the truth of what he said. Here the Greek word translated *vehemently* means that he went beyond the normal limits. He was extraordinarily emphatic, adamant and probably very loud. He insisted he would rather die than deny Jesus. In Luke 22:33, he said he would go to prison for him. He rejected the Word of God on this point.

We sometimes say that people can be sincere but still wrong. No doubt, Peter was sincere and wrong. People can also be adamant and extremely vocal, as Peter was, and still be wrong. Only the

Lord is always right. That's why we need his Word. Only there do we find God's righteous judgments about ourselves.

All sin begins with the rejection of God's Word. Adam and Eve questioned it and brought sin and misery to the whole human race. Years later, King Saul found he could reject God's Word only to his own hurt. When he disobeyed the Lord and spared the Amalekite king, Samuel said to him, *Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king* (1 Sam. 15:23). The only safe ground for any man is to believe God without reservation, as Martin Luther did when he stood before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms. His opponent demanded that he repudiate his books that reflected solid Biblical teaching, but Luther replied,

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen

Each of Jesus' disciples would forsake him, but Peter's denial would put him in an especially precarious situation. He wouldn't deny Jesus just once — that would have been bad enough — but three times. And he would do this within hours of denying that he would, i.e., before the cock crowed twice or roughly 4 AM. How frail men are!

We all like to think that we know our hearts better than we do and that we can accurately read the hearts of others. How often have we heard people say, "But so-and-so would never do that. It's just not in his nature"? How many people have we believed were rock solid for the faith but abandoned the truth or fell into sin and never recovered? How often are we wrong? It's because there's more sin in our hearts than we like to admit. Jeremiah wrote, *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?* (Jer. 17:9). He meant that we can't know the depths of our own depravity. But it usually finds its way out. Sometimes, it comes out when we're young. Other times, we don't see it till we're much older. Only the Lord knows our hearts. He knows all the sins that lurk in its darkness and the power of his grace to overcome them. The next verse in Jeremiah reads, *I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.*

Jesus knew Peter's heart better than Peter did. He knew that Peter's boast was superficial at best. He also knew that he would restore Peter afterward. And this is the really interesting thing about the cock crowing. It didn't just remind Peter that Jesus correctly predicted his fall. It was also what the Lord used to start the process of repentance. Do you remember what happened when Peter heard the cock crow? Mark 14:72 says, *And the second time the cock crew. And Peter called to*

mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. And when he thought thereon, he wept. The crowing of the cock brought Peter, who was always so self-assured, to tears before the Lord. The disciple who thought he could do it on his own wept.

The Lord is compassionate to his people, especially in our sin. He gives us the grace we need to go back to him. He gives us our Savior.

The Other Disciples

The last verse of today's text ends with these five words: *Likewise also said they all.* Peter spoke openly, often without thinking before he spoke, but he wasn't the only disciple who thought Jesus was wrong. The others all said the same thing. They chose to ignore everything Jesus just said to Peter. They overlooked his foolishness, ignorance and conceit. It was almost like they couldn't let Peter boast more than they did.

But even when the whole world unites in its opposition to God's Word, God's Word remains true. Jesus predicted that all the disciples would fall away that night, and they did. They said they wouldn't, but their denials didn't make it so. God's Word never fails.

This warns us not to embrace a high opinion of ourselves. I've seen a lot of Christians fall into nasty sin over the years, and it cost them dearly. Some of them lost their careers and families. And when their sin came to light, they were totally humiliated. We can't cling to our reputations and assumed goodness. There's no safety in it. Cling to Jesus alone. He's our only hope and the anchor of our souls.

How can we avoid falling into this great sin? Let me give you a few suggestions. First, accept the fact that you cannot protect yourself from sin. Peter and the others thought they could, but they couldn't. Second, look only to Jesus Christ, who did for you what you cannot do for yourself. Isaiah wrote, *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isa. 53:6). He bore our sins on the cross and gave us the blessing of redemption. The greater the sin, the greater the grace, as Paul wrote, *Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound* (Rom. 5:20). This should never be an excuse for sin. Instead, it should drive us to Jesus every day. And third, pray for yourself. James wrote, *Ye have not, because ye ask not* (Jas 4:2). When did Peter or the others ask Jesus for help? They didn't. They should have, but they thought they didn't need his help. Prayer doesn't burden the Lord. It delights him, especially when we cast ourselves entirely on his mercy through our great Savior.

Self-confidence — trusting in our frail arm of flesh — is a constant temptation for every one of us. But it has no rightful place in our lives. Paul wrote, *For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh* (Phil. 3:3). He then announced that, if any man ever had a reason to trust the flesh, he did. He was *circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless* (vv. 5–6). But he gave it all up. For what? The greatest prize of all — the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus is Lord. The great apostle learned to trust Jesus.

We know that we have to trust Jesus for salvation. There's no salvation without him. In fact, our catechism reminds us that we can't be saved even if we trust him for some of our salvation and look elsewhere for the rest. But we also have to trust him alone to sustain us in our daily lives, especially when we face temptation. Do we cry out to him for help? Do we look to him to guide us by his Word and Spirit? Do we trust his power to uphold us even in the worst temptations or trials?

Jesus' disciples learned the hard way, especially Peter. Let's pray that we can learn to trust Jesus in the hour of temptation and not suppose that we face it alone. May the Lord teach us this precious truth in a much gentler way! Amen.