

Strike the Shepherd, Scatter the Sheep ***Mark 14:27-31***

***Serenity's no sign of strength,
And stamina's not gauged by length
Of time that's spent in peaceful shade
Deep in some quiet forest glade.***

***For when soft winds become a gale
And rain pours down with pounding hail,
A tree that once seemed strong and straight
Is broken down as love does hate.***

***Much wiser is the clinging vine
Who understands that God's design
Is that His children would be weak
So that they are compelled to seek***

***His strength and cling to Him: the Tree
Who makes them stand eternally,
Whose roots embrace the universe,
Protecting vines from Eden's curse.***

Orange shadows danced on the walls of the upper room. But the lamp wicks were smoking now. And the flames were flickering. The oil was almost gone.

Judas was gone too. He was slinking through the silver shadows that tiger striped Jerusalem's cobbled lanes on his way to meet the wicked old men who ruled the temple.

The Passover supper was finished. The bread and wine of the first Communion were too. It was time to leave.

So Jesus and the disciples walked out the door and down the flight of stairs that descended to the street below. And as they walked the darkened streets, the Savior spoke to them.

John's gospel account preserves much of what the Master taught His disciples on the deserted streets that night. But Bible scholars believe Mark merely recorded what Peter remembered.

And one thing Jesus said on the way to Gethsemane was branded in the big fisherman's mind.

The Prediction

The words were like acid in the ears of the eleven. During the meal back in the upper room, the Savior said one of the men who shared the Passover supper with Him would betray Him. Now the Master widened that charge to include all of them.

And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away..." Verse 27

Of course, the disciples' sin was nothing like Judas' willful rebellion and deliberate betrayal. The word the Master used describes a person who is caught in a trap.

There was no malice in the failure that would ensnare the disciples. Our Savior said His disciples would merely be ambushed and overpowered by pressures far too intense for them to resist.

Precisely when the Lord they loved needed them the most, they would panic and run wildly off into the darkness. In a desperate, dangerous hour, they would be presented with a choice.

They could stand at the Savior's side, faithful to their commitment to Him, and as a result, face whips and chains, swords and spears. Or, thinking only of themselves, they could run and hide, leaving their Lord to face the wrath of wicked men alone.

Our Lord had no doubt what the eleven would choose. Yes, they had proclaimed that Christ was first in their lives. And they had promised to stand with Him: to deny themselves, pick up their cross and follow Him. But they wouldn't live out that commitment as they knew they should.

When He first chose them, the Savior smiled when those men promised to stand with Him and serve Him. Even then, Christ knew they wouldn't keep that commitment when things turned vicious and violent. Yet never for a moment did He hold that against them.

In the upper room, our loving Lord gave His disciples precious and powerful promises. He spoke to encourage them and genuinely enjoyed an evening of fellowship with them. Yet all the time, He knew they would desert and deny Him.

Peter would deny Jesus with words so ugly and unsavory, no one could doubt what he was doing. The other disciples didn't deny their Lord with words. They acted out their denial. But their actions displayed their denial every bit as definitely as Peter's swearing did.

Still, we dare not shake our heads and look down on them. Like the disciples, we may not deny we know and love the Lord Jesus with words. But from time to time, we do the same thing through the choices we make and the actions we take.

Jesus knew His disciples would deny Him. And He knows the same thing about us. But that doesn't limit His love or inhibit the fellowship He extends to us. His compassion never fails. Even our weak and wayward hearts cannot extinguish it.

The disciples were stung by the Savior's words. Even a suggestion that they might leave the Lord they loved was abhorrent to them. So when Jesus told them, plainly and simply, that they would succumb to fear and abandon Him, the idea was unthinkable.

And that is to their credit. It is a stamp of sincerity in any saint. We all ought to hate the very idea of failing to stand strong and true to the Lord who died to set us free from sin. But refusing to accept any possibility of denying Jesus is proof of pride and foolishness.

We simply must face the terrible truth that there may well be times when we will say and do things that completely contradict every Christian commitment we have made. And we must war against the temptations that arise at those times.

But when we do speak or act as if we have neither a love nor a relationship with Jesus as Savior and Lord, we must not be overwhelmed by despair. Our God knows how weak we are. And He never forgets we are but dust.

As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. Psalm 103:13-14 (NKJV)

On the way to Gethsemane, Jesus not only told His disciples they would deny Him. He also assured them their failure wouldn't be the end of their relationship with Him.

But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee. Verse 28

The same men who shared both Passover and Communion with Christ would deny they knew Jesus with both their words and their actions. But that wouldn't be the end of their personal relationship with their righteous Redeemer.

We all wander and stray like sheep. But even when we wander, Jesus is still our Shepherd. And we are still be His sheep.

The Prophecy

It is doubtful any of the eleven understood it at the time. But in a single statement, the Savior explained why they would, indeed why they must scatter into the night.

And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, because it is written, 'I will strike down the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.'" Verse 27

Our Lord's words are both a quotation and a commentary. The Scripture passage He referred to was recorded by Zechariah.

"Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate," declares the Lord of hosts. "Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered;" Zechariah 13:7

Christ's commentary on that passage is subtle yet highly significant. The prophet quoted God's command that His Shepherd was to be stricken by the sword of justice: *strike the Shepherd*.

Jesus interpreted it to mean that, by His command, God Himself would do the striking: *I will strike down the Shepherd*.

At Gethsemane, Judas would lead soldiers armed with swords and spears to capture the Carpenter. Later, those same soldiers would slug and slap the Savior. Later still, more soldiers would beat His back until it hung in bloody shreds. Finally, an execution squad of Roman legionnaires would nail Christ to a cross.

Nevertheless, Jesus insisted His suffering would be at the hands of God, not men. His agony and execution, He said, would be precisely as Isaiah predicted it would be.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted...But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, Isaiah 53:4,10

Sin cannot help but cause suffering and sorrow, anguish and agony. So our righteous God's holiness and justice demand that sin be punished. And the penalty is blood and death.

For the wages of sin is death... Romans 6:23

...and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Hebrews 9:22

Someone had to pay the terrible penalty of blood and death for the sins we have savored and the sins we have served. And our gracious God couldn't bear the thought of shedding our blood and taking our lives.

So He sent His one and only Son into the world, not to live but to die. Each day, temple priests shed the blood and took the life of innocent lambs as sin offerings. Now God Himself was the priest. And the lamb was His own Son.

The verse Christ quoted also makes it clear that God's great Shepherd was much more than a mere man. God also called Him *My Associate*. Literally, the Hebrew word means *the man of my union*.

It describes one who is intimately joined with God, and can be translated *My equal*. That is precisely how Paul described Jesus.

Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Philippians 2:6-7

The Baby born in a barn at Bethlehem was God in the flesh. He had to be the pure and perfect Son of God to carry the sins of all mankind to the cross.

That is one reason why the disciples had to scatter into the darkness and leave their Lord to

suffer alone. They couldn't share in our Savior's suffering. He alone could carry the crushing weight of all the sins of mankind.

So when the soldiers surrounded God's Son in the garden, He interceded for His disciples to make sure they wouldn't get caught up the violence that would wash over Him.

Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way," John 18:8

Zechariah's prophecy wasn't merely that the sheep *would* scatter. As surely as God commanded the Shepherd was to be slain, He also commanded the sheep were to scatter away to safety.

Yes, the great Shepherd of souls would be slain at the command of God Himself. But that wouldn't be the end of Him.

Death wouldn't be able to keep Him, a lifeless corpse in a borrowed grave. He would rise again. And as God's great Shepherd, He would lead His sheep as before.

But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee. Verse 28

Yes, the disciples would give in to fear and abandon the Lord they had followed so faithfully for three years. But, the Lord reminded them, very soon they would follow Him again.

The disciples' denial of our Lord was predicted and decreed by God Himself. But our denials never are. Still, we must remember what Jesus told His disciples.

No act of unfaithfulness is final. We can, indeed we must return and follow Him again. He goes before us like a Good Shepherd. And if we belong to Him we will follow.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; John 10:27

The Protest

The Master's promise that, after His suffering, He would lead His disciples again was both precious and powerful. But it didn't calm Peter's mind.

But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times." Verses 29-30

Luke wrote Jesus not only predicted precisely how and when the big fisherman would deny Him. The Savior also assured him that his denial wouldn't be final. Ambushed by fear, Peter would deny he knew Jesus. But he would return and trust Christ again.

Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren. Luke 22:31-32 (NKJV)

Nevertheless, Peter was unmoved. The other ten disciples might and probably would deny Jesus. But not him. He was absolutely and unalterably persuaded that would never happen.

But Peter kept saying insistently, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all were saying the same thing also. Verse 31

Never in all the time Peter followed Jesus had the Master been wrong. Everything the Savior said proved to be true. And everything He predicted came to pass.

Nevertheless, Peter was so confident in the strength of his own resolve, he refused to believe his Lord. Every bit as bad that, the fisherman also refused to believe the Holy Scriptures were true.

If the prophet Zechariah said he would deny Jesus, Peter insisted, then the prophet had to be wrong. And as Peter voiced his protests, the other disciples joined him. They too refused to believe both their Lord and God's Word.

The mistake the disciples made was in neither their desire nor their determination. It was more than merely good; it was commendable that they were so fiercely determined to stand with the Lord who loves them.

Their fatal error was that they trusted in the strength of their own resolve, the power of their will, and the courage of their conviction to keep their commitment to Christ. And that, Solomon

wrote, is the identifying mark of a fool.

He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, Proverbs 28:26

The lesson for Christians today is obvious. If we would resist the powerful pressures the world can exert upon us, we must never attempt to do so by relying on our own strength.

Rather than believing the fantasy that we are strong, we must confess that we are as weak as a leaf in a windstorm. That, Paul said, is the key to spiritual strength.

...when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:10

The disciples' love and faithfulness for Jesus was tested when they least expected it. Suddenly and without warning, they were ambushed by powerful pressures that compelled them to deny their commitment to Christ.

Our own trials will come just as unexpectedly and suddenly as theirs did. In an hour when we least expect it, we will be ambushed by the temptation to speak and act as if we don't know Jesus at all.

So we dare not wait until that moment to prepare. We must live each day in the undeniable knowledge of our own weakness.

Indeed, we must constantly and continually remind ourselves we are so weak and wayward that if we are left to ourselves, we will deny the Lord who loves us just as Peter did.

Knowing our weakness, we must rely only, absolutely and utterly upon our Savior's Spirit within us to stiffen our knees and straighten our back to stand boldly for the Lord we love.

Knowing we have no strength of our own, we must depend upon our Savior's Spirit to give us the strength we need to stand for Him regardless of the pain or problems it might bring to us.

In the longest night in all of Peter's life, he learned by bitter experience that he was just as weak as Jesus said he was. And we are much weaker still.

So we must do what Peter didn't do. We must depend upon our Lord's strength to stand faithfully for Him in life's darkest hours.

If we don't, our failure is merely a matter of time.