



Watch & Be Alert

Mark 14:27-52

David Sunday March 22, 2020

Let's open our Bibles to the Gospel of Mark 14:27-52. You'll notice there's one central scene in this reading, flanked by two episodes on either side. In this central scene we see Jesus, our stricken Shepherd, overwhelmed with horror as His soul agonizes over what it's going to cost Him to continue on this path as the Suffering Servant, giving His life as a ransom for many.

In the scenes on either side of this central episode, we see the disciples—the scattered sheep. They will all flee from Jesus, leaving Him utterly alone, because only Jesus can do what He's about to do. Only Jesus can do helpless sinners any good.

So this is a story of a stricken Shepherd and His scattered sheep. It's a particularly timely episode for us today. Let's worship God as we hear His Word, beginning in verse 27 of Mark 14.

²⁷ *Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will fall away, because it is written:*

*I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.*

²⁸ *But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."*

²⁹ *Peter told him, "Even if everyone falls away, I will not."*

³⁰ *"Truly I tell you," Jesus said to him, "today, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."*

³¹ *But he kept insisting, "If I have to die with you, I will never deny you." And they all said the same thing.*

Speak Lord, for Your servants are listening. Please empower the preaching of Your Word. Illuminate our minds and hearts, and bring about the transformation of our lives for Your glory and our good, that we may be a blessing to our community in these troubled times. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is a timely story for us, because it's a stark reminder that in times of trouble, followers of Jesus are tempted to flee. There are dangers we face that are far more virulent than the coronavirus; spiritual dangers tempting us to abandon and desert our Savior when the going gets tough. We're all going to need to be on our guard against that, especially in these days when we

cannot gather as a church. Jesus warns His disciples and us of our weakness in verse 27. He says, *“All of you will fall away.”* It’s not just some of you, but all.

The word for “fall away” carries the sense that this is going to happen despite their best intentions. It’s not that they willfully want to abandon their Master, but there’s going to be pressure. Outside factors are going to startle them, catching them off guard. They’re going to react in cowardice and confusion. They’re going to run away to wherever they can hide. They’re going to be embarrassed of Jesus, because they do not want to suffer the fate He’s going to suffer. They don’t want to receive the treatment He’s going to receive.

So they leave Him, abandoned and forsaken, all because they failed to do what Jesus repeatedly exhorted them to do in chapter 13. Be alert. Stay awake. Watch. Be ready against the kinds of sins you don’t intend to commit, but you end up committing out of weakness. As one commentator puts it, “Sins of irresoluteness rather than sins of intention.” It’s when we don’t plan on sinning, but neither do we hold the fort when we ought.

Jesus reinforces His warning with a quote from Zechariah 13:7: *“I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”* This is a verse speaking about how God is going to bring salvation to His people, cleansing them from their sins. He’s going to rescue and ransom them. It’s going to come about through a stricken Shepherd. The Lord Himself is going to strike down the Shepherd of His people and when that happens, Zechariah says, all His sheep will flee away and look for a place to hide.

When sheep are scattered, they’re vulnerable. Right now, dear flock, we are not a gathered church. We’re scattered today throughout the Fox Valley, so we’re more vulnerable right now than when we can gather together, encouraging one another and hearing God’s Word together. But we have a living Savior.

Look at Mark 14:28. Jesus says, *“But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”* This is Jesus’ assurance that even though they’re all going to fall away from Him, He’s not going to give up on them. There’s a future after the striking and the scattering when His flock will be gathered again under His strong, loving and wise leadership. Remember this today, friends: our Shepherd is alive. He is actively tending His flock. He is going ahead of us in these strange and unprecedented times. He’s doing a work in and for His church right now that none of us can interpret. I am confident that the Kingdom of Jesus is not going to topple because of a global pandemic. Even if His sheep are all falling away, Jesus is moving forward. He’s faithfully accomplishing His purposes.

As our Pastor Brandon loves to say to me, quoting the words of C.S. Lewis, “Aslan is on the move.” Yes, He is! We can have tremendous confidence in our Shepherd, but not in ourselves. That’s where Peter went wrong and he wasn’t alone.

Look at verse 29: “*Peter told him, ‘Even if everyone falls away, I will not.’*” In other words, “Jesus, You can count on me to stand by Your side. They may fall—they will fall—but I’m not going to fall away.” Do you ever think of yourself as stronger than other Christians? Do you ever hear of the failure of someone else and think, “I would never...”? If so, be warned.

Commentator James Edwards puts it like this:

It is of no use to protest that we have not committed the sins we self-righteously condemn in others. The question is not what sins we have committed, as much as what sins we would commit, were we faced with serious pressure, temptation, opportunity and threat.

What Jesus says next should have sobered Peter up. Look at verse 30: “*Truly I tell you...today, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.*” But Peter is not fazed at all. He kept insisting in verse 31. “*If I have to die with you, I will never deny you.*” All the disciples said the same thing.

This is a warning to us, church. When we think we are standing firm, take heed. Be careful. Any one of us could so easily fall. So how do we “take heed”? How do we stand firm in the hour of temptation? We find the answer in the central scene of this narrative. Let’s read, beginning with Mark 14:32:

³² *Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he told his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”* ³³ *He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.* ³⁴ *He said to them, “I am deeply grieved to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake.”* ³⁵ *He went a little farther, fell to 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. He said to Peter, “Simon, are you sleeping? Couldn’t you stay awake one hour?”* ³⁸ *Stay awake and pray so that you won’t enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* ³⁹ *Once again he went away and prayed, saying the same thing.* ⁴⁰ *And again he came and found them sleeping, because they could not keep their eyes open. They did not know what to say to him.* ⁴¹ *Then he came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The time*

*has come. See, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.
⁴² Get up; let's go. See, my betrayer is near."*

What we see here is a picture of the King Who is moving deliberately to the place of battle. He is entering the lines of combat. He is advancing to face the enemy. He's not shrinking from His foes. There's a fierce storm gathering on the horizon, but Jesus isn't running around looking for an evacuation route. Instead, He moves toward the lord of the storm. He falls to the ground and cries out to His Father in the most tender, agonizing lament. There's an echo of Psalm 42:5, which says, "*Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil?*" That's what Jesus is experiencing here in the garden. He is deeply distressed and troubled, deeply grieved to the point of death, but He doesn't turn away. He turns to the only One Who can deliver Him from this raging storm. He falls to the ground and cries out to His Father.

Friends, here is our hope in the face of the tragedy of human failure. Back in the garden of Eden, this hope came in the form of a promise, when the Lord God said to the serpent, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel*" (Genesis 3:15 ESV). In the garden of Gethsemane, this promise arrives in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He and He alone will remain firm through the fiercest drought and storm, but not without an intense battle.

It's not God's will for Christ to enter into this battlefield blindfolded. The Father does not want His Son to be caught unaware by the ferocity of this storm. If He chooses to engage in this battle, He must calculate the cost. He must be fully aware of the price He will pay to free His own from Satan's tyranny and save His people from the depths of hell. The victory is going to be magnificent, but the cost is going to be ghastly.

Our Savior knows this. He prays in verse 35 that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. Jesus is looking ahead to that hour when darkness reigns, the hour reserved for Satan, when he had free rein to do his very worst—and he would. In the garden of Eden, the curse for human sin was pronounced. But in the garden of Gethsemane, that curse was distilled into a potent poison and presented to the holy Son of God in the form of a cup—the bitter cup, the cup of staggering, the cup of the Lord's wrath on human sin.

In verse 36, Jesus is looking into that cup, as it were, and He cries out, "*Abba, Father!*" in the most tender, intimate words of a Son to His Father. He says, "All things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me." Foaming in that cup is the scum of all our sins, our forgetfulness of God, our selfish conduct, our foolish pride, our filthy lusts, our hypocrisy and falsehood, our hard-heartedness and deceit. All these evils are mingled into that cup, fermenting together into an awful

potion that Jesus will drink down to its very dregs. He will feel the full extent of what sin is in His holy soul. He will experience sin as sin.

We think too lightly of the judgment of God and not of the evil of sin enough. But Jesus recoiled with horror at the thought of it. Jesus knew He had to suffer, but He wasn't afraid of death. He was dreading here a fate worse than death. He was dreading experiencing the hell our sins deserve. He was horrified at the prospect of enduring His Father's holy wrath. If it were possible that He would not need to die in such darkness and desolation, with such a crushing sense of His Father's anger upon His soul—if the will of the Lord could still be done in some other way—He prays that this cup would pass from Him.

But there is no other way. There is no alternative. Jesus would have rather suffered a thousand times than to disobey His Father's will. So He stared into that bitter cup. He contemplated the agony. He knew exactly what it was going to cost Him to save us who were still His enemies, mocking Him, scourging Him, abandoning Him, betraying Him—and ultimately spitting on Him and crucifying Him. Knowing all that, He said, "Father, not My will, but Your will be done." What a Savior!

This is not just a matter of passive submission. Jesus is not just saying, "Okay, let's get it over with." No, He is actively engaging with love for the loveless. As a theologian put it, "He took damnation and He took it lovingly." Because He said "*Your will be done*" in the garden of Gethsemane, now a new garden is being prepared—a holy city we can read about in the last chapters in the Bible. There will be a river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of that city. On either side of the river, the tree of life with its 12 kinds of fruit will yield its fruit each month and the leaves of the tree will be healing for the nations. Oh, how we long for that in these days!

D.A. Carson writes:

In the first garden, "Not Your will, but mine" changed paradise to desert and brought man from Eden to Gethsemane. Now, "Not My will, but Yours" brings anguish to the Man Who prays it, but transforms the desert into the Kingdom and brings man from Gethsemane to the gates of glory.

Praise the Lord! Jesus has gone through the storm and has come out on the other side triumphant. And because He did that, we have a place to stand in the midst of the storm. We can face whatever God sends, knowing that it's not an expression of His wrath against us. No, that wrath has been fully satisfied when Jesus drank the cup down to its dregs. We can stand in the

storm, knowing that the Father is for us; knowing that if we want to stand firm, we need to remember where our strength is found—and it is not in ourselves.

Jesus is telling His disciples in this passage that a severe, weighty trial is coming upon them, giving them a very simple instruction. He says to them in verse 38, *“Stay awake and pray so that you won’t enter into temptation.”* Jesus isn’t asking His disciples to pray for Him. He’s telling them they need to pray that they will be able to escape the great temptation that is going to come upon them. They need to pray for themselves, that they will not cave under it. All they need to do is call on the name of the Lord and plead with Him. “Lord, we are powerless. We don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on You. We are looking to You to be our strength” (2 Chronicles 20:12b). It’s a simple command, but they all fail the test. Three times they fail. They reveal what they’re able to handle in the face of testing—and friends, it’s not very impressive.

Let’s read the last section, the other side that flanks this central scene of our stricken Shepherd’s agony and triumph in the Garden:

⁴³ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, suddenly arrived. With him was a mob, with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. ⁴⁴ His betrayer had given them a signal. “The one I kiss,” he said, “he’s the one; arrest him and take him away under guard.” ⁴⁵ So when he came, immediately he went up to Jesus and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁴⁶ They took hold of him and arrested him. ⁴⁷ One of those who stood by drew his sword, struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off his ear.

⁴⁸ Jesus said to them, “Have you come out with swords and clubs, as if I were a criminal, to capture me? ⁴⁹ Every day I was among you, teaching in the temple, and you didn’t arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled.”

It’s dark now. They’re outside the city, away from the crowds. There’s no need for swords and clubs. Jesus has not been acting like a revolutionary or an insurrectionist. But with the kiss of death, Judas betrays Him and gives Him into the hands of those who will crucify Him. Another disciple, whom Mark leaves nameless but John will later identify as Peter, draws his sword and cuts off the high priest’s servant’s ear. Then verse 50 says it all: *“Then they all deserted him and ran away.”*

Picture this. They’ve been Jesus’ closest followers for three years. They’ve eaten with Him. They’ve seen His miracles. They’ve felt His touch. They’ve listened to the wisdom and authority of His teaching. They’ve experienced the fullness of His selfless love and friendship. But Peter has now gotten carried away with a sword and panic is starting to set in. The authorities are looking to

arrest them all and they all just flee. They run for their lives, leaving Jesus all alone. It's in this context that Mark records a strange scene in verse 51:

⁵¹ Now a certain young man, wearing nothing but a linen cloth, was following him. They caught hold of him, ⁵² but he left the linen cloth behind and ran away naked.

What's Mark's point in telling us this? Well, think about it. They were going to seize this young man and arrest him, just like they were trying to do with all the other disciples. Maybe somehow he was lagging behind. Maybe he wasn't running as fast as the rest. As he's running into the woods with the other disciples, a soldier gets hold of him. Rather than face arrest with Jesus, he manages to get away. He leaves his garment in their hands and takes off, running away naked. I love how John Piper describes how we should interpret this scene:

Now, I don't think the question we should ask at all is why didn't he have on any underwear? I don't think we should go there; that is just not the point. Surely the point is mainly he was so terrified that he would rather be running naked in the woods than be arrested with Jesus. That is how terrifying the moment was. Better to lose his reputation than to be dead with Jesus.

Here's what I believe God is wanting us to see today, New Covenant. Clearly and with great conviction, He wants us to see that we are not any different from any of these disciples. If we were left to our own strength, wisdom and resolve, we'd rather run naked through the woods than suffer with Jesus.

If we are going to stand firm in the days of testing, whenever they come—the days of testing we are presently in—we're going to need to rely on a strength that is not in ourselves. We need to know our weakness and we need to know where our true strength lies. We need to stay awake spiritually and pray we will not fall into temptation. Let us not fool ourselves into thinking we are stronger than we are. Friend, do you know your weakness?

I heard a report from Rebecca Pippert who was at Harvard University, visiting two different events on the same day. One of the events was a graduate level psychology class at Harvard; the other was Bible study for Christians adjacent to Harvard University. Here's what she observed about how the two groups addressed or failed to address their faults, problems and sins:

First, the students in the graduate level psychology class were extraordinarily open and candid about their problems. It wasn't uncommon to hear them say, "I'm angry. I'm afraid. I'm jealous." Their admission of their problems was the opposite of denial.

Second, their openness about their problems was matched only by their uncertainty about where to find resources to overcome them. Having confessed, for example, their inability to forgive someone who had hurt them, they had no idea how to resolve the problem by forgiving, being kind and generous, instead of petty and vindictive.

One day after the class I dropped in on a Bible study group in Cambridge. The contrast was striking. No one spoke openly about his or her problems. There was a lot of talk about God's answer and promises, but very little about the participants and the problems they faced. The closest thing to an admission of sin or a personal problem was a reference to someone who "was struggling and needs prayer."

Here's how she draws insight for us from this experience. "The first group, the psychology class, seemed to have all the problems and no answers. The second group, the Bible study, had all the answers and no problems." I wonder why that is so often the case amongst us Christians. I think it's because we either imagine ourselves to be stronger than we are, or it's because we are afraid there is not a grace that is strong enough to hold us through and save us from all our miserable failings. We either think we're stronger than we are or we think the grace of God is not nearly as strong as it is. The sobering news of this passage is that those who follow Jesus are just as weak, just as vulnerable to temptation, just as prone to sin and failure as any other person.

We, along with the rest of our community, may be tempted to hoard groceries. We may be just as fearful and just as afraid right now as other people are because the stock market is falling. We are just as prone to sin and failure as anyone else. But the good news of this passage is that we follow a Savior Who has gone into the center of the storm, faced the full fury of the wrath of God against our sin and has come to the other side victorious. Jesus has risen and has gone ahead of us, our Pioneer in battle. He has fought the fight and has prevailed. So when we stay alert to danger, when we recognize our weakness, when we watch and pray, looking to Him for strength, we too can stand firm in the battle. Jesus has gone through what He went through in Gethsemane and at Calvary to give you and me a place to stand.

But there's more good news. Because Jesus stood firm in the storm, He is able to save us to the uttermost when we have failed and when we have fallen. So as the song says:

So teach my song to rise to You
When temptation comes my way,
When I cannot stand I'll fall on You
Jesus, You're my hope and stay.

Lord, I need You, oh, I need You
Every hour I need You;

My one defense, my righteousness
Oh God, how I need You.

Let's look to Him together in prayer.

God, hear Your people praying now out of our weakness, out of our need. God, we do not know what You are doing in these days of trial that have come, not only on our nation, but on the world. We've never quite experienced anything like this, being scattered and unable to gather for perhaps weeks. Lord, that makes us vulnerable, but we thank You that You are our Shepherd and that You are working actively on our behalf. O Savior, like a Shepherd lead us. Keep Your flock from sin. Keep us close to You. Keep us connecting with one another through these days. Thank You, Jesus, that You stood in the storm and are giving us a place to stand. Thank You that when we fall and when we fail, we can continually return to You, the Shepherd of our souls, knowing there is mercy and grace abundant because of all You've accomplished for us in Your death on the cross.

So now to You, the Lord Who is able to keep us from stumbling and to make us stand in Your presence faultless and with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be blessing and honor and glory and power, now and forevermore. Let all God's people say, "Amen."

Families, there's a worksheet that Tracy has provided for your children to answer questions about the sermon or to talk with one another about. Love one another, love your neighbors, go in peace.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

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