

“Hope for the Fallen”
Matthew 26:31-46
January 12, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

It must have been shocking for the disciples to hear Jesus’ prediction that they would all fall away this very night (v. 31). They had been enjoying an intimate family dinner with Jesus, the Passover meal. Jesus had washed their feet, instructed them, prayed for them and celebrated for the first time the Lord’s Supper in a clear display of his love and forgiveness. And now the warmth of that mood was dashed with this prediction. They responded by assuring Jesus of their ultimate devotion to him, an assurance that would ring hollow within just a few hours. They fell, and they fell hard, especially Peter. He not only fell away, but denied even knowing Jesus, and did so repeatedly.

Is there hope for those who fall so catastrophically? Is there hope to prevent a fall? Should there be a fall, is there hope for recovery? Do you remember the children’s rhyme? “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together again.” It is likely that this was originally a riddle. What is it that once it falls and is broken, cannot be put together again by all manner of human ingenuity? The answer is an egg, which is why Humpty Dumpty is now associated with an egg. It is true that a broken egg is beyond human repair. It is also true that a spiritual fall is beyond human repair. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men may not be able to restore a fallen sinner. But God can do what no human can do, and that is the only hope for any of us. Who among us has not fallen? This passage is full of hope, so let’s consider it now more fully.

I. Prelude to Falling

In order to find hope after falling, we need to understand why people fall in the first place. The prelude to falling is over-confidence in oneself. After Jesus’ prediction, Peter said, **“Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away”** (v. 33). I see at least three problems with Peter’s statement. First, he is looking down on the other disciples and considering himself superior to them. It’s really an extension of a longstanding argument that had been taking place among the disciples, the argument about which of them was the greatest. It is as if Peter is saying, “I can believe you, Jesus, in saying that these other disciples will fall away. After all, they’re really not all that dependable.” And that leads to his second error, one in which he is full of confidence in himself. “They might fall away, but I never will.” Third, he contradicts Jesus, thus refusing to hear this warning. He thought Jesus’ words

of warning were for someone else, but not him. I have noticed in my years as pastor how common this is. People hear something from God's word and think that it is a warning that applies to someone else.

This kind of overconfidence that results in not hearing Jesus' warning is a subtle danger. I found myself thinking this week as I was reading this passage, "If I had been there, I would have stuck by Jesus rather than abandoning him." And then it struck me, "That's exactly what Peter was thinking. Others might fail the Lord, but not me." That is a prelude to a fall.

I have often had the opportunity to do premarital counseling with engaged couples. One of the tools I use in this is a premarital inventory that seeks to predict areas of strength and weakness in a marriage. One of the categories is called "Marriage Expectations" and seeks to determine how realistic or unrealistic an individual is about the typical challenges that all married couples face. So it asks individuals whether or not they agree with certain statements. "I do not expect that we will ever have serious problems in our marriage." "Nothing could cause me to question my love for my partner." "Time will resolve most of the problems we have as a couple." Agreement with such statements indicates an unrealistic expectation and has the potential to bring harm to a marriage. Similarly, when we have unrealistic expectations of our walk with Christ, considering ourselves beyond the possibility of falling, we are actually setting ourselves up for a greater likelihood of falling.

II. Preventing a Fall

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane teaches us that the way to prevent a fall is to find our hope in God's good will. Jesus did so here, and he is an example to us in this. The text tells us that Jesus enters the garden sorrowful and troubled. He tells his disciples that he is "**very sorrowful, even to death**" (v. 38). That sounds like depression, doesn't it? Jesus is so sad that it feels like the sorrow itself has the power to snuff out his life. Jesus is fighting temptation here, the temptation to give in to despair and just give up. I know of no other passage that does a better job of highlighting the humanity of Jesus than this one. We often fall victim to the theological error of emphasizing the deity of Christ to the point that we deny the humanity of Christ. Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. And as fully human, he was tempted just like us. The temptations were real and powerful, just as they are for us. Jesus enters the garden with a heart battling despair, and he leaves the garden with a heart full of hope and a renewed determination to the will of God in his life. This is the source of his strength that saw him through the awful sufferings of the cross.

The things Jesus does to fight depression and despair are available to us. I notice three facets of his fight. The first one is to resist the temptation to isolation. When Jesus enters the garden of Gethsemane, he doesn't do so

alone, taking with him Peter, James and John. This is the opposite of our tendencies when we are fighting depression. Depressed people want to be alone, but that's a dangerous place to be. I've been reading some lately on the topic of what constitutes pastoral thriving. In an extensive study done by Matt Bloom of the University of Notre Dame, he writes, "Clergy who really do work alone, without vital connections to other people, face among the most powerful challenges to sustained well-being. Our data concurs with a vast body of social science research that strongly suggests no person can withstand isolation very long without suffering serious consequences."

The second facet of Jesus' battle with depression here is honesty about his desires, seen in his prayer. **"My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"** (v. 39). The "cup" is a common way the Old Testament prophets spoke of God's judgment. Those being judged by God would figuratively drink the cup of God's wrath, and it would have the same effect on them as drinking strong alcohol, causing them to stumble and fall. Jesus is saying to his Father something that is very human, "I don't want to die." Surprisingly, Jesus' desires and the will of God the Father are two different things here. Yet Jesus did not sin in this. He is showing us that a critical part of being human and of being faithful to God is honesty about our desires. Don't miss the fact that Jesus is telling his desires to God *in prayer*.

I find that there are two common enemies of such honesty. The first one is a form of "Fake it 'til you make it." That is, we try to convince ourselves that our desires are what we think they should be rather than what they really are. So we pretend to want what we think we should want instead of being honest about what we really want. The result is that our true self never really connects with God. We bring a fake person to God instead of a real person. The second enemy to honesty about our desires is distraction. To know your desires requires some self-reflection, some quiet space in one's life to ask the simple question, "What do I really want?" Yet ours is a distracted age in which we run away from the kind of quiet, reflective moments where we might actually come to understand our desires. One of the most common forms of distraction in our age is some form of screen time, whether it be the small smartphone screen or the larger big-screen television.

The third facet of Jesus' battle with depression was submission to God's will, and this is where the hope comes in. Jesus was honest about his desires, but prayed, **"Not as I will, but as you will."** Jesus believed at the core of his being that the will of God was good, and therefore that the best possible outcome in life would always be the accomplishment of God's will. So Jesus wasn't merely resigned to the will of God, he came to pursue it with strength and enthusiasm. Notice the change that took place between his first prayer and his second. In the first, he prayed, **"If it be possible, let this cup pass from me."** In the second, he prayed, **"If this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done"** (v. 42). He came to know and accept that it was God's will for

him to drink this cup, and still he prayed for God's will. And when it came time to begin drinking this cup, he doesn't become passive and resigned, but active. **"Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand"** (v. 46). His wasn't a resigned, "Oh well, I guess I *have* to do God's will, even though I surely don't want to." Rather, it was, "I *get* to do God's will, and it is good even though it will be hard." Jesus was familiar with Old Testament stories like that of Joseph. Everything seemed to go wrong for him, but each step was by the will of God, a will that led him eventually to his place of ruler over Egypt for the saving of many lives, including those of his own brothers who had sold him into slavery. Joseph expressed it well when, reflecting back on his life and the will of God through all his trials, said, **"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive"** (Gen. 50:20).

There are times in life when we are tempted to think that it's all over and there is no possibility of a good future for us. There is the woman who always wanted to get married but is now beyond an age when that would typically happen. Or perhaps it's someone in a troubled, disappointing marriage, who feels trapped and hopeless. Maybe it's the late-middle-aged man who loses a job and sees little hope for another good job at his age. It could be an older person whose body is beginning to fail in ways that will not get better. In these situations and any like them, we are tempted to lose hope, to think that life is over before we take our last breath. What we need is to find our hope in the goodness of God's will. We need to accept by faith that God's will for us is good, not *in spite* of the bad things that have happened, but *because* of them.

How are we going to come to see that? The same way Jesus did, through prayer. I notice that Jesus here likens prayer to the work of a watchman. When he tells his disciples to watch with him, it becomes clear that he means by "watching" that they are to pray. Why does Jesus use that metaphor? How is prayer like the work of a night watchman? It is similar in that in prayer we come to see what we need to see, just as the night watchman must see the things in the night that the sleeping world will not see. In prayer, we come to see the goodness of God's will, and the hope this gives us is what keeps us from falling.

III. Recovering from a Fall

The truth is that all of us have lost hope and have fallen at one time or another in our lives, just as these disciples did. Though "all the king's horses and all the king's men" may not be able to restore a fallen, broken sinner, Jesus can. This passage is full of gospel assurances to that effect. Consider, for example, Jesus' words to his disciples right after his prediction of their fall. **"But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee"** (v. 32). This is a

promise of forgiveness. Though they will abandon him, he will not abandon them, but will make sure that they are reunited after his resurrection.

The cup of judgment that Jesus drank also assures us of God's purposes to forgive and restore. Note that it is God's will that this cup of judgment go away by Jesus drinking it. When Jesus drank this cup, it really did go away. It went away not by God saying, "Let's just pretend that this sin never happened." No, it went away by the death of the beloved Son. As Frederick Bruner wrote, "Jesus drank the poison cup, and the world was detoxified." We have a cup to drink as well. Jesus had just spoken of that cup in the previous passage. **"And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'"** (26:27-28). Jesus drank the cup of judgment; we drink the cup of blessing.

The final verse of our text is full of the grace and mercy of Jesus, seen in the phrase "let us." **"Rise, let us be going."** After letting Jesus down by sleeping through the Gethsemane prayer meeting, we would expect Jesus to say something like, "I'm going; you stay here and sleep, since that seems to be what you are so determined to do." It wasn't that Jesus felt no pain at the abandonment of the disciples. Peter, James and John were his three closest friends. Jesus was fully human, and it is a common trait of all humanity to feel deeply wounded when one's closest friends prove so unreliable at a time of personal crisis. They had abandoned Jesus, but he refused to abandon them. Praise God that there is forgiveness for failing, unfaithful disciples.

CONCLUSION:

Perhaps you are in a place in your life where you are struggling to find hope. You see little reason to be encouraged and you just want to give up. The Gethsemane story brings us assurance that all will be well. It won't be well because Jesus' disciples are able to tough it out and persevere. It will be well because of God's faithfulness. So let me encourage you to find your hope in Jesus. Don't isolate yourself. Be honest about your desires and tell those desires to God. And then continue to talk to God until by faith you come to see the will of God as good, even when it is hard.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 26:31-46

1. Jesus here predicts the falling away of his disciples. As you think about people you know who have fallen away, what causes have you been able to identify for their falling away?
2. Peter's response to Jesus' prediction is telling. He says, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." What problems do you see with this response? What would have been a more healthy response?
3. Do you see in yourself a tendency to think Jesus' warnings are for others instead of you? Even when reading this passage, do you have an inward conviction that had you been one of the disciples, you would not have fallen?
4. In verse 35, Peter declares his devotion to Jesus. "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" Of course, those words proved hollow and empty, revealing an inherent weakness to our statements of loyalty or devotion to God. What might be a better way to pursue loyalty and faithfulness to Jesus? [Answer: statements of loyalty to Jesus focus on what we do. A better foundation for faithfulness is to focus on what God has done for us. We must move from self-confidence to confidence in God]
5. Jesus was facing sadness to the point of death. He was battling depression. One of the things he did in this fight was to resist the temptation to isolate himself. He took Peter, James and John with him. Do you see the tendency to isolate yourself when you're feeling a little down? What might resisting this tendency look like for you?
6. Jesus was honest about his desires. He asked God to take this cup from him, and the cup referred to his coming sufferings and death. Do you find it difficult to be honest with yourself and God about your desires? What is the greatest obstacle to such honesty for you?
7. Jesus kept praying until he came to see the will of God for him as good, with the result that he was able to enter into it with strength and a whole heart. This was the case even though God's will for him would bring him to a place of exquisite suffering. Have you seen a time in your life when God used suffering to bring you to a better place?
8. Is there any place in your life right now where you are struggling to hold on to hope?