

## How Deep is Your Faith?

“You will all fall away.” What chilling words. These are words that almost demand a reaction. Jesus and his disciples left the upper room where they celebrated the Passover Feast and where Jesus initiated something that would strengthen their unity and fortify their resolve to serve God – The Lord’s Supper. They went out to the Mount of Olives and there the words were said.

I wonder how long Peter mulled over Jesus’ statement. Knowing Peter like we do, probably not very long. This is the one who is brash and impetuous. Remember when he rebuked Jesus after Jesus told the disciples about his impending death? Or how just a short time before that he refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet? Or how in just a little while he will take his sword and try to decapitate one of the Temple servants. It is not really very surprising that Peter is the one who speaks up.

“Even if all fall away, I will not.” I believe he meant that will all his heart. He could not conceive of anything that could happen that he would “fall away.” The words were repulsive to him. He had come too far, he loved his Lord too much, far too much was a stake, for him ever to leave Jesus. Can you imagine someone standing up next Sunday morning during our worship and announcing that everyone there would be falling away from Christ before next Sunday? Would you be one who would stand and deny it? Just how well do you know yourself? Have you considered all the possibilities – everything that could happen in your life in the next week?

Jesus gently replied to his dear friend using unpleasant words, “tonight – before the rooster crows you yourself will disown me three times.” Three times! He has to be mistaken. No way! And Jesus was so emphatic about it, “you yourself.” How these words must have stung this good man. But Peter really did not know how much his soul could bear. He thought that he had considered all the possibilities, that he knew all the angles, but he could not imagine the moments that would follow. What was about to follow was worse than his worst nightmare. He had so much invested in this man Jesus. The word “die” had never even registered with him.

Life catches us unaware sometimes, doesn’t it? We lose our job or the doctor gives us a diagnosis that chills up to the bone and all the sudden our faith is shaken to the core. We sit by the bed of a loved one as they breathe their last breath or some tragic evil happens to our child and we respond, “Where is God?” We have a number of “Peter” moments in our lives.

Peter stands firm, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” Little did Peter know that even now the words were ready to form on his tongue, “I don’t know him.”

### Questions:

1. How close to the limit of your faith have you come in your life? Do you know where your limit is?
2. Can you ever imagine denying the Lord the way Peter did? Why? Why not?

## In the Garden – Alone

If the disciples were perceptive at all they must have noticed that Jesus was in deep turmoil after they celebrated the Passover. It is so hard to imagine how Jesus could face what he knew was ahead. The incredible pain and suffering that was ahead was eclipsed by his realization that in just a few short hours the guilt of every sin ever committed and ever to be committed would soon fall upon his guiltless body. He would suffer the greatest indignities, the greatest pain and suffering, and the greatest loneliness a person could possibly experience. God would turn his back on the Son. In this astounding moment in history, the unity between the Father and Son that had existed before time came into being would be torn and Jesus would die alone, not even his disciples would be with him.

It is the culmination of all this pain that Jesus bore as he walked to the Garden of Gethsemane that evening. He asked his disciples to sit in the garden and keep watch because he was so overwhelmed with what was about to happen. He was so deeply distressed with an incredible dread that enveloped his soul. Oh, if there were only another way, another plan, another path. If only he could avoid the pain. If only sin could be atoned for some other way. If only this cup would pass. He fell to the ground so heavy with grief, “Abba, oh Abba!” Like a frightened child crying for protection from his daddy, he cried out in anguish. “Everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me!” Don’t you know that the Father wanted to free him from the anguish at that very moment? My heart shudders when I even consider that possibility. If Jesus had not paid the price for my sins – I shudder at the thought.

Jesus knew the answer even before he prayed. His love and the Father’s love for you and me formed what was about to happen. Even in his time of deepest pain he considered you and me. Incredible love, is it not? It makes you want to fall to your knees in worship and adoration.

I am sure that the disciples often remembered that Gethsemane scene with a great amount of embarrassment. They had fallen asleep. It was understandable. It was late at night, their stomachs were full with Passover Supper, and they were exhausted from the events of the previous days. Simon, are you asleep?” Jesus asked. Remember that just a short while earlier Peter made it clear that even if it meant he had to die, he would never “fall away.” Peter could not even make it one hour. He wanted to be what he claimed to be but the flesh is so weak even when our spirits are so willing. We often fail to be what we truly want to be. Two more times Jesus would pray and twice more the disciples would sleep. “Enough!” Jesus said. “The hour has come.” Enough indeed.

### Questions:

1. Does Jesus’ dread shock you? What does Gethsemane tell you about the nature of Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus seem to single out Peter when he found the disciples asleep the first time?

## Betrayal

Can you imagine the scene? Jesus worn out from prayer, the disciples in that twilight zone before sleep and being awake, and the betrayer. I wonder if eye contact was made between Jesus and Judas. For three years they had been closer than family. They traveled together, ate their meals together, and dreamed of the Kingdom together. This man had witnessed incredible miracles. He sat at the Master's feet day in and day out, an enviable position. He watched as demons were cast out and he saw that Jesus was absolutely genuine. There was not guile, no faults, and no fatal flaws.

Why then did Judas betray Jesus? There are a number of possibilities. It could be that Judas was just so disillusioned. He might have seen Jesus as the bold Messiah who would usher in a new Kingdom that would run the Romans out of Palestine. Some people look at the "Iscariot" part of Judas' name and suppose that he was part of a notorious band of assassins called the Iscarii. While that is possible, it is more probable that Judas Iscariot meant Judas, the son of Kerioth.

More likely, Judas was not what he seemed to be. He kept the funds for the disciples and John tells us that he often "helped himself" to the funds (John 12:6). He was a thief consumed by money. Even in that poignant moment, when Jesus took a piece of bread, dipped it and handed it to Jesus, his heart was hard. He had long before made up his mind. He would rather be richer by thirty pieces of silver and have the admiration of the Temple officials and Jesus would be dead. If Judas had any love in his heart for Jesus he would not have walked up to him as he did, brazenly call him Rabbi and kiss him, thus betraying him. It was guilt, when he finally realized what he had done, that caused Jesus to decide to hang himself.

Judas betrayed Jesus, the rowdy crowd circled Jesus, and Peter whipped out his sword. The sword flashed and the dull thump of a detached ear falling to the ground was heard. Peter was not aiming for the servant's ear. Jesus picked up the ear and reattached it. Did you get that? He reattached it. You would have thought that if anything could have turned aside it would have been that. Who ever heard of anyone reattaching an ear? It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for a modern surgeon with his microsurgical techniques to be able to do what Jesus did.

The rabble did not disperse. Jesus was seized and the disciples fled. Every one of Jesus' closest disciples deserted him. John Mark tells us about a young man dressed in linen who was grabbed, left his clothes in the hands of those who were seizing him, and ran off into the darkness naked. Not one was left, no not one.

### Question:

1. Why did Peter have a sword? Look this up in the other gospels and find out if Jesus knew about the weapon.
2. What do you think? Why did Judas betray Jesus?

## Are You The Christ?

The case against Jesus was shaky at best. The entire Sanhedrin had assembled for this late night meeting to try to find a charge that would stick so that they could condemn him to death. Innocent until proven guilty – not in this court. These religious leaders were not really interested in the truth. They wanted to get rid of Jesus whatever it took. If it meant that they had to trump up charges and lie, they would. Incredible!

They discussed the evidence they had gathered. Nothing. Then they had witness after witness testify. Nothing. None of their testimony would agree. They even tried to convict him on his “destroy this Temple” speech but again the testimony of the witnesses did not agree. The Sanhedrin knew it had no case against Jesus and had Jesus refused to say a word they would have surely flogged him and set him free. Can you imagine their frustration?

Finally the Chief Priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” In essence, what the Priest asked Jesus was, “Are you Messiah?” Jesus said, “I am.” What a moment. But Jesus was not finished. He quoted two powerful prophecies from Daniel 7 and Psalm 110 – which was by far the most challenging passage for the religious leaders. In Psalm 110, the Messiah is described in royal terms, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet ... Rule in the midst of your enemies.” It was no secret who the enemies were and it was not hard for the leaders to understand what “coming in the clouds” meant. Jesus not only claimed to be Messiah but he implied that the leaders are his enemies and that the day would come when He will come with the Father in judgment.

The High Priest finally had his case. He very dramatically ripped his clothes and stopped the trial. No more witnesses! You heard the blasphemy with your own ears. What should we do? He is worthy of death. And so Jesus was condemned to die. But who is in charge here? Is it the Sanhedrin? No, because they had no case. At most, if Jesus would have remained silent, they could have punished him and set him free, but they were not able to condemn him without his own words.

Was Satan in control? Obviously he is at work. He filled the heart of Judas when Judas left the upper room, and he was determined that the Son of God be discredited and that he be killed. But Satan was not in control.

Jesus was in control. He knew exactly what to say and how to say it. He pushed the right buttons and the Chief Priest erupted. How sad. In this saddest moment of Israel’s history her leaders blindfolded the Son of God, spit on him, and they struck him with their fists. Religious, yes – godly, not at all.

### Questions:

1. Why didn’t Jesus remain silent? What do you think would have happened if he had?
2. For extra study – Look up Sanhedrin in your Bible Dictionary. How many members did it have? What was its function in Jewish society? How was the Chief Priest appointed?

## I Don't Know This Man

The best that Peter could do is follow at a distance. He sat with the guards in the courtyard of the High Priest's house and warmed himself in from on the fire. It was highly likely that Peter was able to hear the proceedings inside but he could not bring himself to defend Jesus. Could it be that this bold, brash man is now a coward? Is he trembling in fear, paralyzed? It is hard to imagine that Peter was afraid. Remember it was Peter who cut off one of the guard's ear. It is Peter who told Jesus that he would not fall away even if it means he must die. I don't think it was fear.

Was it lack of faith? Did he at this moment decide to renounce everything the Master had taught him? I think that is unlikely as well. Remember in John's Gospel when everyone left Jesus because of his "hard" teaching? Jesus asked his friends if they were going to leave him too. It was Peter who said, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68) No I don't think it was that Peter was renouncing his faith in Jesus.

Well, what was it then? It might be that Peter just could not see how Jesus' death could accomplish what Jesus came to do. Remember the first time that Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, there to suffer and die and be raised on the third day? It was Peter who said, "No!" Jesus rebuked him harshly, but did Peter really get it? I don't think so. I think that Peter is beside himself with concern. How can he turn this around to make it right? How can he get Jesus out of this fix?

While Peter warmed himself a servant girl passed by and recognized him. "You were with Jesus."

"You don't know what you are talking about." And Peter moved away from the fire into the entryway.

The servant girl was not finished. She pointed at him and told those standing around, "This fellow is one of them."

Peter quickly denied it.

Finally some of those standing nearby recognized Peter, "We know that you are one of them, you are a Galilean.

Peter cursed, "I don't know this man!"

Luke tells us that at this very moment two things happen. The rooster crowed and Jesus was being led out of the meeting with the Sanhedrin. Jesus made direct eye contact with Peter and Peter melted into tears. The strategy now ceased. No more pretenses. His friend was going to die and Peter could do nothing about it. He had denied knowing the one who meant the world to him. He wept as they took Jesus away.

### Questions

1. Why did Peter deny knowing the Lord?
2. Why do you think Peter was waiting in the courtyard of the High Priest after the other disciples had fled?

## A Man With No Convictions

We are really very spoiled in our country when it comes to justice. If you feel that you have been treated wrong in a lower court, you can almost always appeal to a higher authority. If you were not fairly treated, the higher court might hopefully overturn the verdict. If you are still not satisfied you could appeal to still a higher court. We take justice very seriously and even though there are many flaws in the system we expect the justice system to be filled with integrity.

Not so in Jesus' day. Integrity is not the word that you would use to describe the Sanhedrin. And integrity is not the word you would use to describe Pilate. The Roman Governor was more concerned about keeping people happy than he was in finding the truth and standing for what is right.

When the Chief Priest brought him before Pilate, he immediately asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" It might be that Pilate was amused by their pettiness. But when the accusations started flying he knew that this was a difficult situation. Pilate was amazed at Jesus because he did not try to defend himself. In fact, he made no reply at all.

What could he do? Then it hit him. The Roman Governor in a magnanimous gesture to the people would each year release a prisoner he had in jail. What a perfect opportunity. Pilate found the worst prisoner he had in jail. His name was Barabbas. He was a murderer and an insurrectionist – a really bad guy. Jesus had already been flogged so he brought Jesus and Barabbas before the people and gave them a choice. Pilate knew that the only reason Jesus was in prison was because the Jewish leaders were envious of Jesus. He could see right through their duplicity.

It could be that there was confusion in the crowd as the Priests made their way from person to person urging the people to ask for Barabbas. Incredible. Surely these people had heard the words of Jesus. Many of them had spent hours at his feet. How could they do this?

Barabbas was released and Pilate asked the crowd, "What do you want me to do with Jesus?"

"Crucify him!"

The words cut through Pilate like a sword. Crucifixion was saved for the most horrible criminals. It was a terrible way to die. "What crime has he committed?"

"Crucify him!"

It was at this point that the other gospels tell us that Pilate took some water, washed his hands and then turned Jesus over to the guards and ordered that he be crucified. Pilate knew that he was sending an innocent man to his death. Yet he did not have the conviction to do what was right. Pilate should have released Jesus. He should have scolded the Jewish leaders. He should have ruled justly. No amount of water could absolve Pilate's guilt.

### Question:

1. For deeper study read about Pilate in a Bible Dictionary.

## “And I, If I Be Lifted Up”

The trial is finished. All has been said. Hands have been washed. Jesus has been condemned. The eternal Son of God is handed off to soldiers who begin belittling and mocking the condemned man. You can almost hear their jeers, “King of the Jews? Is that what he is? Let’s give him the royal treatment.” They put a purple robe on his back. Purple was the royal color. And they took some thorns and wove them into a crown. They put it on his head in such a way as to inflict the most pain. They continued their mocking, striking our Lord again and again. How he must have winced with pain as they struck the crown of thorns driving the thorns deep into his flesh. Spit dripped from his face from the mocking guards. They laughed as they inflicted pain and fell to their knees in derision, “Hail King of the Jews,” in mock homage. The robe was removed and his own clothes were placed on his back and he was taken off to be crucified.

So many things happened in quick succession now. The cross was laid on the shoulders of Jesus but he fell beneath the weight and a man named Simon from the region of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross the rest of the way. Women were weeping and crying out. Some were cheering, others jeering. The leaders were smug. They finally were getting rid of their “problem.” The guards offered the customary anesthetic, wine mixed with myrrh, but Jesus refused it. As much as he hurt, it was important that he feel the full impact of the punishment for our sins. And anesthetized Christ would not work.

Four simple words that have incredible, everlasting impact, “And they crucified him.” We know the mechanics. They laid him on a wooden cross. It was probably shaped more like a capital “T”. They took large, rough spikes and after crossing the ankles they drove the spike through both ankles into the wood. Each arm was stretched on the cross bar and the same kind of rough spike was driven through his arms at the wrists. Every muscle in his body tensed with pain as the cross was lifted between heaven and earth and dropped into the hole. Braces were affixed and a mocking sign was attached, “The King of the Jews.” If they only knew.

The mocking and the insults continued. Two robbers who were crucified with him insulted him; those passing by mocked him, “You who are going to destroy the Temple and build it again in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself.” “He saved others, but he cannot save himself?” “Come down so that we can see and believe.”

What self-control God exhibited that day when he did not send down the fire of heaven. “God so loved,” can we ever comprehend these words? Can we ever really understand what happened on Golgotha that day? On that day he was lifted up and in that moment salvation came. Hallelujah, what a Savior!

### Questions:

1. How do you deal with the seeming contradiction that the robbers who were crucified with him mocked him?
2. What time of the day was Jesus crucified?

## The Saddest Day in History

There he is. Hanging on a cross. Three hours of the most incredible suffering imaginable has passed – three more will come. At the sixth hour the sun stopped shining. Darkness enveloped the land. For a while Satan danced with joy as his nemesis writhed in pain. He believed that this day is the beginning of darkness; little did he know that it was the end of darkness. The mockers have walked away and Jesus cries out in agony, “Why, my God, have you forsaken me?” Six hours passed. Jesus chest heaves for each breath and in one incredible moment his voice booms, “It is finished!” The debt has been paid. The suffering is over. The Son of God paid the ultimate price for the sins of the world. He was a lamb without blemish, our Passover lamb. He was the sacrificial lamb, given for our sins. His breath is now gone, his heart has stopped, the heavens weep with sorrow. But it is Friday, Sunday’s coming.

Priests serving in the Temple that day witness an incredible sight. The earth shook violently. The large curtain in the Temple that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn in two from top to bottom. A Centurion standing near the cross was overwhelmed with wonder. The darkness, the words of grace from the dying man’s mouth, the earthquake, and the whole scene caused this man of great authority to cry out in amazement, “Surely this man was the Son of God.”

It was late afternoon when the body of Jesus was gently removed from the cross. Joseph of Arimathea provided the tomb. Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews who sought Jesus out at night and some of the women asked for the body, prepared it, and quickly placed it in the borrowed tomb. They would do a better job after the Sabbath but they had to hurry so as not to violate the law. What a sad task. The face was now still, the limbs were stiffening. The mouth that once brought so many words of blessing was not silenced. The eyes that saw so much more than others ever seemed to see were now fixed. The hands that used to bless so many, now were folded. Jesus Christ, the Son of God was dead.

The Jews were afraid that some of his disciples would try to steal the body, so the stone that was rolled across the tomb was secured, sealed, and a guard was posted. The disciples left. One can only imagine what was going through their minds. His is really dead. It can’t be. This, the darkest of days, ended with the darkest night in history. The hope of all humankind lies in a borrowed tomb. They thought that all was lost; little did they know what was gained. They thought that it was all over; little did they know that it was only the beginning. They thought that Jesus had been defeated; little did they know! The darkest night did turn to day. Jesus did not stay in that grave. It’s Friday! Sunday’s coming!

### Questions:

1. What is the significance of the Temple curtain being torn from top to bottom?
2. Why is it so urgent that Jesus was buried quickly?

## The Greatest Day in History

I wonder what was going through the minds of the women that went to the tomb early that Sunday morning. They probably discussed very little. It had been a terrible few days. Visions of the trial, the mockery, and the suffering Jesus filled their souls. What a terrible loss. In one final act of love these ladies planned to clean and prepare the body for burial, anointing it with spices and wrapping it properly.

As they approached the tomb they were shocked at what they saw. The large, heavy stone had been moved. They walked into the tomb and sitting there on the right side was a young man dressed in a white robe. What could this be? It was obvious that they were afraid. They were about to leave when the young man told them that the one they were looking for, Jesus of Nazareth, had risen from the dead. A mixture of shock, amazement, disbelief, and desire to believe must have overwhelmed them. Surely they had heard Jesus talk about how he must die and be buried and on the third day rise from the dead. Why now would this be such a shock to them? Surely at least a couple of these women had been at the grave of Lazarus when Jesus called him to come out. But this is different.

“He has risen!” The words the angels spoke early that morning reverberate throughout history. In one moment God defeated death and ushered in hope for the entire world. In one moment salvation was made available to every human being. The women who talked with the angel that morning could not have imagined the significance of the moment. In fact, it takes a while for us to soak it in. He has risen! And now we have a future! He is risen! And we are forgiven! He is risen! And our hearts are filled with joyful anticipation! He is risen! And now we will too – arise!

The angel gave the women some instructions and they left the tomb “trembling and bewildered.” I think we would have been trembling too. At first they said nothing. It was just too wonderful to be true. All the sudden the day seemed brighter. They didn’t know what the future held but they knew that the tomb was empty. And that was enough for them. There were exciting days ahead. They would see Jesus again. They would see his ministry duplicated in the lives of countless believers. The work has only begun. This is only the beginning. The trembling would pass and their hearts soon would be filled with incredible joy.

The early church had a practice that in some churches continues to this day. The speaker says, “He is risen!” The congregation responds, “He is risen, indeed!” What precious words.

### Questions:

1. What do you make of the difference in the accounts about what happened Sunday morning? Was it one angel or two, etc?
2. Why do you think the disciples did not understand Jesus when he said that he would rise from the dead?

## Tying Up Loose Ends

There are some who do not consider these verses a part of the original Gospel of Mark. I agree that they were probably not originally a part of the body of the manuscript when it was first written. None of our earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark have these last eleven verses. From where did these verses come? They were probably written as a kind of appendix to the main manuscript. It might be that Mark wrote these words on the cover of the scroll. Whatever the case these verses are Scripture and must be treated with respect.

It seems that Mark feels it necessary to tie up some loose ends concerning the resurrection of Jesus. He tells us that it was Mary who was the first to see the risen Lord. This must have taken place a while after the early excursion by the three women on resurrection morning. Mary Magdalene must have gone back after the others left and there she encountered Jesus. She then ran to tell the disciples, but they at first did not believe her.

Also Mark mentions in passing the encounter that Jesus had with the two men on the road to Emmaus. A fuller account of this event can be found in Luke's Gospel. When these men reported what they had happened the disciples still did not believe.

In addition, Mark recounts one of the appearances that Jesus made to his disciples shortly after his resurrection. He informs us that during the appearance Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith and stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him.

One of the most important parts of this final passage has to do with the Great Commission and the powerful work of God's Spirit among his people. We are told that the church will be empowered by God's Spirit. We don't have that information in the other Gospels.

Mark ends with Jesus being taken up into heaven. He tells us that the disciples went out and preached everywhere. There was an explosion of activity because Jesus was raised from the dead and because the Lord worked with them. What an incredible thought – God working side by side with his people. He gave them all the power they needed. He filled their hearts with hope. He gave them incredible joy. He filled them through and through. The close of this Gospel is not the end of the Good News. Because Jesus is alive, we have purpose, hope, power, and his presence. The gospel of Jesus is still vibrant in the lives of believers all over the world. He is risen! Hallelujah! Christ Arose!

### Questions:

1. How are these verses different from the rest of Mark?
2. What about verses 17 and 18? How do you deal with these verses?