

SMITE THE SHEPHERD

by Ray C. Stedman

We return to our studies in Mark, stepping again into the infinite mystery that always gathers around the events in the closing days of our Lord's earthly life, the scenes that lead to the cross. I am sure that the twenty-third Psalm, the Shepherd's Psalm, is the best-loved psalm of all. I know thousands of people who have been helped and strengthened by those opening words, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The thought of the Lord as shepherd of his people -- watching over his flock, guarding them, protecting them, leading them into green pastures, making them to lie down beside the still water -- has comforted many of us, I know. I am sure that fulfilling this psalm was much in our Lord's thoughts as he gathered with his disciples in the upper room.

Mark indicates this by the words with which he describes the close of the supper and the progress of the Lord and his disciples on their way to Gethsemane, in Verse 26:

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he said vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same. {Mark 14:26-31 RSV}

There are two things to note in this brief paragraph:

First, the passage reveals very clearly how Jesus knew what was going to happen to him. It has been suggested before this, through various incidents, that the Lord seems to understand fully what the divine program is, anticipates it, even makes arrangements for it. We have seen how, sometimes weeks ahead of time, he has made preparation for a certain person to be in a certain place doing a certain thing, in anticipation of fulfilling a Scripture in the Old Testament. Our Lord knew what was going to happen because he pored over the Scriptures. He knew the Old Testament thoroughly. He understood what the divinely-appointed program was, as revealed through the prophets. I am sure that as he thought and meditated on these events and prayed about them before the Father, the Spirit made known to him details not recorded in Scripture, so that it was clear to him what was going to happen.

For example, the very hymn that Jesus and the disciples sang as they left the upper room was a part of the Old Testament. Unquestionably, it was the Scripture we now know as Psalms 113-118. This was the traditional hymn called the great Hallel that was sung at the close of the Passover Feast. Hallel is the Hebrew for "Praise to God" and these psalms focus on one theme: Hallelujah. It is significant that the closing verse of the great Hallel includes these words, "Bind the festal sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar," {Psa 118:27b NASB}

As they sang those words, they left the upper room and made their way down across the darkness of the Kidron Valley, into the shadows of Gethsemane's garden. And, as they went, Jesus quoted from the prophecy of Zechariah. He said to them, "You will all fall away; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" In my earlier study in the book of Hebrews, entitled, *What More Can God Say?*, I say that in my understanding Jesus did not expect what would happen in the Garden of Gethsemane. But in studying through this passage anew, I must repudiate that statement. Before, I had not seen clearly how this passage in Zechariah was intended to be a prediction of Jesus' struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, as it clearly is. Zechariah had predicted that Jehovah would say,

"Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered," {Zech 13:7b RSV}.

Now when Jesus quoted this he changed it from the imperative mode, "Strike the Shepherd," to the indicative, "I will strike the Shepherd." The words come from the lips of God himself. The full verse says,

**"Awake, O sword, against my Shepherd,
against the man who stands next to me,"
says the Lord of hosts. {Zech 13:7a RSV}**

The result of that smiting would be the scattering of the sheep. Now in Matthew's account of this, Jesus adds "this night you will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd,'" {cf, Matt 26:31}. Therefore it is very clear that Zechariah was predicting the Garden of Gethsemane. Gethsemane's struggle was the smiting of the Shepherd, and the result would be the scattering of the sheep. You can see how true that is if you look forward a bit to Verse 50, where it says of the disciples, "And they all forsook him, and fled," {Mark 14:50 RSV}. This is the scattering of the sheep. Jesus did understand what was to happen that night in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He is still thinking of himself as the shepherd when he says these words to the disciples, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Remember in John 10, where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," {John 10:11 RSV}. He says of this shepherd, "When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them," {John 10:4a RSV}. He is reassuring his disciples that after the dark event of Calvary, there will come the glory of the resurrection. He will go before them as the shepherd, still guarding his flock, still watching over them, and he will meet them again in Galilee.

It is interesting to think that never once did Jesus speak of his cross to these disciples without setting it against the dawning light of the resurrection. And yet they never seemed to grasp it. Not one of them believed Jesus would be raised from the dead. I think that because they did not want to hear about his death, they would not believe in his resurrection. And so, though he tried to comfort them, his words were of no avail at that moment.

The second thing to note about this passage is the confident bravado of Peter and the disciples. Peter said to Jesus, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." Notice the contrast between "they" and "I." "They will all deny you," Peter said. "I know these fellows, Lord, and you can't trust a one of them! They'll all deny you, you're right about that! But, Lord, you're wrong about me. I will not!" Peter is confident that he will not do what the rest will do. He is not at all hesitant to point out that he expects the others to fall, but it is going to be different with him.

But Jesus saw far more clearly than Peter. He saw that Peter's confidence was resting upon his own human determination, his own will, and Jesus knew the weakness of it. So he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." It is interesting to see how Jesus narrows down the time. Literally, in the Greek, he says three things. He says, "Truly, I say to you, today..." Then he narrows it further, "this very night", and still further, "before the cock crows twice." In just a few hours, Peter, all that firm resolve, all that confident arrogance, all that clenched-fist determination you have manifested in saying you will not deny me, is going to melt away, leaving you with no ability to stand. And it will happen before these few hours have passed.

I am always amazed by the symbols that Jesus employs. They are so apt, so characteristic. And here is the symbol that he employs to depict this arrogance and confidence of Peter and the other disciples: that of a cock, a rooster. It stands forever as a symbol of an attitude like Peter's. We speak of somebody who is cocksure. We call somebody who is almost arrogantly confident "cocky." These terms come from this story about Peter and the symbol Jesus employed. He does not say this, but I am sure he intended for Peter to think about the fate of most cocks. They lose their heads.

So Peter insisted that Jesus was wrong. He said vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you. Lord, I'm prepared to go the whole way! How can you say I will deny you when I am ready, yea, even eager, to give up my life for you?" Peter is so sure that Jesus is wrong.

Have you ever felt that way? I have. I have been so sure that something the Word says could not happen. I

have been sure that by sheer determination and force of will I could work it out on my own. I have said the same thing Peter did, and so have you. Jesus says the next time you think like this, just remember that cocky little rooster you saw strutting around in the barnyard. That's the same rooster you had for dinner last week!

Now back to Gethsemane, Verse 32:

And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." {Mark 14:32-36 RSV}

Here begins the terrible smiting Zechariah had predicted. Jehovah called for a sword: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd. I will strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered," {cf, Zech 13:7a}. God would do it himself; he would strike his own shepherd, "this man who is my fellow," and the sheep would be scattered. Now a sword is an instrument designed to sever, to separate. I think that figure explains why here, for the first time in the ministry of our Lord, we have the sense of division between Jesus and the Father. This separation is manifested when Jesus says, "Not my will, but thine be done." Up to this point in our Lord's ministry he knew clearly that he was going to the cross. But this is the first sign that he was not willing and ready to go to the cross. He spoke of it, he understood what it would involve, yet before this point there is no indication that he was in any way reluctant to go. He had said, "I delight always to do those things that please the Father," {cf, John 8:29}. Even though it involved some degree of hardship or difficulty for him, he wanted to do it. In the same way, a young man is challenged to do a dangerous or arduous task, and delights to do it, though it costs him greatly. So Jesus went toward the cross with a confident sense that he was in the Father's will. And though it would be hard and dangerous and difficult, yea, even deadly, he was willing to do it.

Now all is changed. Suddenly, and it seems to be for the very first time, Jesus does not want to do what the Father wants him to do. There is a sense of distance, of deviation. This is why there came upon his spirit this deep sense of struggle, distress. The disciples sense this, and he does not try to hide it from them. He says to them, "My soul is deeply sorrowful within me, even to the point of death." Now very few of us have ever stood at the place where we were so troubled, so hurting within, so deeply distressed that we feared it might take our life. But Jesus was. There was this unwillingness to do the Father's will, even though he knew it was inevitable. He prays, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." There are some who think that the cup refers to the agony of Gethsemane itself. But I do not think so, because at the end of this account, when Jesus is arrested by the soldiers who come with Judas, Peter strikes a sword in his defense. But Jesus says, "Put up your sword, Peter; shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" That cup is still ahead, the cup of agony and terrible separation that he knew awaited him on the cross.

I know there are some Christians who are very troubled by the idea that there ever was a time when Jesus did not want to do the Father's will, and they are upset when you suggest this. A man wrote me a letter just a week or so ago, saying that he was very troubled by statements in my study in Hebrews which said that Jesus did not want to do the Father's will. He says Jesus' statement, "Not my will, but thine," is the acme of perfect and voluntary submission on his part. It is. Jesus does want to do the Father's will, ultimately, and he does choose to obey. But the language is evacuated of its content if you take out all the sense of division and conflict that is in these words, "Not my will, but thine." Jesus did not want to obey. Something within him made him dread it, and we can understand why he did not want to go ahead, why he wanted to escape it. He asked for a way out, "if it were at all possible"; yet he added, "not my will, but thine be done."

I am greatly helped by this trembling on Jesus' part. And I think the account in Hebrews 5 helps us greatly at this point. Hebrews tells us that this agony was so intense, so severe, that as Jesus fell upon his face, blood was forced from his veins by the agony and pressure within, so that his sweat fell in great drops of blood upon the ground. His mouth was opened in involuntary cries of anguish. Hebrews 5:7 says that with strong crying and tears he pleaded with his Father, the one who was able to save him from death; and he was heard. I think

that is why Luke's account says an angel appeared to strengthen him. He was heard for his godly submission. Hebrews 5:8 says, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." That is the meaning of this smiting of the shepherd in Gethsemane. Hebrews tells us, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning," {Heb 4:15 RSV}. If he had never felt that divergence of will, that unwillingness to do what he ought to do because the Father wanted it, he could never have sympathized with me, because in my weakness I am frequently unwilling -- and so are you. Jesus did not want to do what the Father wanted him to do. He had to compel himself to go on. And he did it by casting himself anew upon his Father's enabling strength. That is what his prayers in Gethsemane mean. There is much of mystery here. I can go no further into it than that. But yet I see tremendous help here for those of us who struggle with the will of God.

There is in this congregation a young couple who separated from one another some years ago, when they were first married. They had a little baby. But after an angry session, the young man took off and left his family. I talked with him at that time and he told me he hated his wife and she hated him. He did not want to go back -- ever. We talked a bit about the responsibility he had as a Christian, but he rejected it and went off angry and distressed. But the Spirit of God spoke to him and made him aware that he could not expect God's blessing on his life, or any happiness, if he deliberately refused to obey what God told him to do. So, with every fiber of his being shrieking out against it, he determined that he would obey God and go back to his wife and baby. It was not easy to do, but he did it. And he found that God had done a similar work in his wife's heart, so they came back together with some degree of humility and a willingness to work it out. Gradually God restored the home and this couple's love for one another. They are still members of this church family and have a beautiful marriage. The husband said he knew he had to go back to his family, though it was contrary to every feeling he had. Jesus understands that.

And there will come a time when, no matter what the Word of God says, you do not want to obey. And as Jesus himself has shown us by example, the answer is to cast ourselves afresh upon the mercy and grace of God, knowing that if God does not go with us, it won't work. But we determine to obey on the basis of God's character.

In Verses 37-42 we see the ease with which Peter's fierce resolve and determination is overcome.

And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come; the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand." {Mark 14:37-42 RSV}

The enemy has very little struggle with Peter. It is not even necessary to threaten to throw him to the lions or burn him at the stake. His resolve collapses by the simple expedient of making him too sleepy to pray. That is all; and that tremendous determination of will, that firm resolve, dissolves, and Peter is as weak as putty when the moment comes. He is weak because he lacks the strengthening of prayer. The devil only had to make him sleepy, that is all. I am sure this was a satanic attack. The sword Jehovah was wielding, and which hurt and distressed the Son of God, was now affecting the disciples, and Satan was allowed to appear as a stealthy sandman, dropping sleep into their eyes. So they fell asleep instead of praying.

Jesus analyzes the situation. He comes and finds them and there is almost a touch of humor here. After he wakes them up, he says to these disciples, "Peter, couldn't you watch one hour? Couldn't your resolve and fierce determination last at least that long?" Then he tells us why Peter could not do it. "The spirit is willing, Peter, I know your heart. I know you love me. Your spirit is perfectly willing. But Peter, you relied upon your flesh. The flesh is weak."

We have all felt this, have we not? We have been asked to do something and we say, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is ready for the weekend." The flesh is weak. Jesus says that is the nature of the flesh. That human

sense of independence, the confidence we have in ourselves, is always weak in the hour of testing. It cannot stand the test. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 7 using another example, that of building a house: "He that hears my word and does my will is like the man who builds his house upon a rock. But he who hears my word and forgets it is like the man who builds his house upon the sand," {cf, Matt 7:24-27}. In the hour of testing, the house built upon the sand will collapse. It cannot stand the test. The spirit that is confident it can carry through on the basis of sheer grit and determination is going to fail. The arm of flesh will fail you.

This is the analysis Jesus gives of Peter's problem. The key is prayer. If Peter, like Jesus, feeling sleepy and weak, had cast himself upon the Father and had told him the problem, the Father would have carried him through, and he would not have denied his Lord.

You see, it is our weakness that is our security, not our strength. That is why I am not terribly impressed when young people tell me how much they are going to do for God and how certain they are that they can carry it through. I have learned, out of sad experience in my own life as well as by the testimony of Scripture, that in the hour of testing, this self-confidence will all wash away. But I have confidence in the man or woman who says, "I'm scared. I don't think I can do this, but I'm going to try, because God tells me to. I'm looking to him to strengthen me."

Prayer is a simple principle, but what a transformation is obtained in our lives when it is practiced! Prayer -- what a difference it makes!

Just a couple of weeks ago my wife and daughter and I walked around in the great cathedral at Worms, Germany, along the Rhine River. As we walked beneath that imposing gothic structure, we tried to visualize in our mind's eye that scene so long ago when all the powers of Europe were assembled in that place: the Roman emperor, in all his robes and dignity; the papal delegates, the bishops and archbishops of all the Catholic realms of Europe. It was the most imposing array of power possible on the face of the earth of that day, all gathered in that great cathedral against one lone man, Dr. Martin Luther, on trial for his life. The account tells us that the night before, someone overheard Martin Luther praying and wrote down the words of his prayer. It was a long, rambling, disconnected prayer of a soul in deep distress and fear, crying out to God for help, casting himself anew, again and again, upon the strength of God and reminding himself that there is no source of hope or help except God. All his reliance upon the princes of the German state disappeared. Martin Luther cast himself in naked helplessness upon the grace and sustaining strength of God. I am sure that is why, at that very moment, he received strength to stand and say, "Unless someone can show me from these books and from Holy Scripture the error in my thinking, I will not and cannot recant. Here I stand. I can do no other, God help me!" And though he was condemned as an heretic, it was then that the torts of the Reformation began to spread throughout all of Europe. Nothing could stop the shining forth of the light.

Strength is what prayer provides, and that is what Gethsemane teaches. Jesus prayed when the flesh quailed. And though he sweat drops of blood, he stood firm and did the will of the Father. Peter slept.

When the flesh was bold and confident, Peter slept. And the results are what follows in Verses 43-50.

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him and lead him away safely." And when he came, he went up to him at once, and said, "Master!" And he kissed him. And they laid hands upon him and seized him. But one of those who stood by drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." And they all forsook him, and fled. {Mark 14:43-50 RSV}

There are three actions emphasized in that paragraph.

First, the kiss of Judas. Mark uses the normal word for kiss, which means "to love," in telling of the

arrangement Judas had made with the chief priests. They were to seize the one whom he kissed. But in the actual moment, when Judas carries this out, Mark uses an emphasized form of that word, a word that means a prolonged kiss, a lover's kiss. I do not think there is anything in all the annals of treachery more contemptuous than this kiss of Judas' -- a deliberate, prolonged, apparently loving act, done with cold determination to accomplish his own purpose.

The second emphasis in this paragraph is on Peter's blundering defense. Peter is still trying to make a show of carrying out what he resolved. He grabs the sword and, as the priests and soldiers move in on Jesus, he slashes away. But so poor is his aim that all he does is lop off the ear of the high priest's servant. That is such a beautiful example of the flesh at work! We may strike out in our attempts to carry out our purposes, but all we accomplish is the lopping-off of somebody's ear.

I look back this morning on twenty-five years of pastoral ministry and I am sure that if the symbols of my actions were visibly apparent, you could look back and find lopped-off ears lying all over the place! They are symbols of my attempts to do what I thought was right -- but it was not of the Lord. We have all done this. The glorious thing, Luke tells us, is that Jesus reached out and touched that servant and healed his ear. I am so grateful for the Lord's healing touch on the lopped-off ears that I have been responsible for during my lifetime.

The third action emphasized in this passage is the sudden flight of the disciples. They all forsook him. I am sure this means that, at that moment, after three-and-a-half years, all their confidence that Jesus was indeed the Messiah suddenly forsakes them. They see now that he is nothing but a man. His willingness to give himself over without any resistance into the hands of his enemies and his refusal to defend himself in any way becomes, in their eyes, tantamount to his renunciation of being the Messiah. Now it is every man for himself, and so they flee.

In Luke's account of the resurrection, remember that as two disciples walked along the road to Emmaus, a stranger appeared, a man whom they did not recognize, and they discussed with him the events that had taken place in Jerusalem. They said to him, concerning Jesus of Nazareth, "We had hoped (notice the past tense) that he was the one who would redeem Israel," {cf, Luke 24:21a RSV}. Their hope was gone, so they forsook him and fled. And thus the smiting of the shepherd resulted in the scattering of the sheep.

Mark adds a little postscript in Verse 51 that we do not want to miss:

And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. {Mark 14:51-52 RSV}

All the scholars agree that this is Mark himself. This is Mark's way of saying, "I was there." I am sure there are two things at least that he is telling us by this little account of his presence there. At the beginning of this series on the book of Mark, I said that it was my conviction, derived from the Stedmaniac version of Scripture, that Mark himself was the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked the way to eternal life. Jesus said to him, "Go, sell what you have ... and follow me," and that young man went away sad, because he had great possessions, {cf, Mark 10:17-22}. I think there is some evidence that this was Mark. I believe this incident toward the end of the book is Mark's way of saying, "I did it. I went away and sold all that I had and gave it to the poor. All I had left was a robe. That night I followed him, and in the confusion and abruptness of the arrest, they laid hands on me and I lost even the robe!" And he fled away naked into the night. It is also Mark's way of explaining to us how we got the account of Gethsemane. None of the disciples could have given it. Eight of them were in a part of the garden some distance from Jesus. Three of them were close to him, but they were sound asleep and could not have heard the crying and the prayers; they did not see the angel come and minister to him. But somebody was watching. A certain young man was there watching the whole thing and gave us the story, that we might have hope in the hour of our Gethsemane. This account can help us when we feel that we do not want to do what God tells us to do, and we are confident that somehow we can work it out in our own strength. In that hour, we have Mark's account to remind us that we can come to a throne of grace and find mercy and grace to help in time of need.

Prayer:

There may be some of us this morning, Father, who may be in Gethsemane's Garden right now. There may be some who have just come through it. Father, we pray that you will open our eyes and hearts to understand this message, that we have one who is the shepherd of the sheep, risen from the dead, who goes before us to meet us. He is the shepherd upon whom we can rely, to whom we can go in the hour of anguish and find the strength to do what we do not want to do to obey when we would rather do something else. Teach us this by practice, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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