

TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?

by Ray C. Stedman

We have come to that point in John's gospel where many of Jesus' disciples drew back and no longer followed him. This is a turning point in our Lord's ministry, where he confronts the twelve with the question, "Will you also go away?" This is a frequent phenomenon in our day also. Many people start out the Christian life and seem to do very well for awhile, but then they drop out of sight and nobody seems to know what happened to them.

This passage from the sixth chapter of John's gospel is very revealing as to why this phenomenon occurs. Jesus concluded his great message on the bread of life in the synagogue at Capernaum on a very offensive note, talking about "eating his flesh" and "drinking his blood." Many were disturbed by his words, and John records their reaction.

Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you that do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that should betray him. And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." After this many of his disciples draw back and no longer went about with him.

It is evident from that last verse that a period of time was involved here; over the course of several weeks many of the disciples drew back. This incident probably corresponds with the event recorded in the other gospels that took place at Caesarea Philippi, at the foot of Mt. Hermon, where Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ. Here is the first thinning of the ranks in our Lord's ministry.

It is remarkable how little emphasis God puts upon numbers in the Bible, in contrast with the tremendous emphasis on numbers in the church today. Many churches are even now setting goals for growth in 1984, usually in specific terms of percentage of increase, or even an arbitrary number, arrived at out of the blue, that they are aiming to achieve. Some churches, looking for quantity rather than quality, will do almost anything to increase their attendance. In San Jose a number of years ago a pastor announced that when the Sunday School attendance reached one thousand he would preach from the belfry of the church! Everybody wanted to see him make a fool of himself that way, so they scrounged the neighborhood and brought in every and any warm body they could find. When the Sunday School number reached one thousand, the pastor fulfilled his word and preached from the belfry.

That kind of thing, of course, is far removed from what the Bible teaches. God is not interested in mere numbers -- he proves that over and over. When Gideon sent out word summoning the men of Israel to battle and thirty-two thousand of them showed up (a fairly sizable army for that day), God told him, "That's too many; I can't work with that many" {cf, Judg 7:1-8}, and directed him to send home all the newly married and the cowards. I do not understand the connection exactly, but evidently there was some connection. At any rate twenty-two thousand of them went home. (There were a lot of marriages in Israel that year apparently.) Ten thousand remained, and Gideon thought that was barely enough, but God said, "It's still too many." He sent them down to the brook and tested them there, until finally only three hundred were left. Then God said, "I can work with that many. They're quality, not quantity." That is how our Lord works here in Capernaum, too. God is always sending people home. Quantity does not interest him; it is quality that makes the difference.

Notice the marks of these who drop out from the Christian cause:

First, it is clear that they take offense at difficult truth: "Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' " By that they implied they were not going to pay any attention to it; they

did not want to be troubled with difficult teaching.

I have discovered that this is frequently true of those who drop out of church: they are bothered when difficult doctrines are taught.

Take the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance. Many people say, "I don't understand the Trinity. How can God be one God and yet be three Persons?" I do not fully understand it either, but I believe it, and I understand there is a deep and marvelous truth about it that is very real and very rich. But many people do not want to be bothered with searching out anything that is difficult.

Some feel uneasy about the doctrine of election. How can God draw us and yet give us free will?

Others struggle over the doctrine of God's providential sending of difficult things, hardships, disasters, and so on. "What kind of a God do we have who puts us through this kind of a testing?" they ask. Unless God smooths their pathway they do not want anything to do with him.

Many struggle over the letters of Paul. They say, "They are too hard to understand. I don't want to be bothered with them." If you become bothered by difficult doctrines, sooner or later you will almost certainly drop out of the Christian cause.

In his response, Jesus points out the problem that these people had: "Knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said to them, 'Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail.'" Read that way it sounds as though Jesus means, "Are you offended by what I said about eating flesh and drinking blood? Are you repulsed by that? Well, that is nothing to the offense you are going to feel when you see me ascending into the heavens." If we read it that way, however, we have not understood at all what Jesus is saying. Unfortunately, it is the translation that makes it sound that way. The translators have inserted these words, "Then what if," but in the original Greek it does not really say that -- there is no "what" at all.

If you will pardon my having to do a little scholastic work with you this morning, what the text really says is, "Jesus said, 'If you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before (and then we have to supply the words which the Greek anticipates) *then you would know that* it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail.'" These people were hung up on symbols. When Jesus talked about flesh and blood they took him literally -- they imagined he was advocating a kind of cannibalistic practice -- but he was actually saying to them, "No, if you would continue to the end and saw me ascending into the heavens, thus removing my body from the earth, you would understand that I am not talking about flesh and bones, meat and blood, but rather I am talking about what those things symbolize, that 'it is the spirit that gives life, and the flesh is of no avail.' The words that I speak to you, these are spirit and life." This is how we should read this.

Many times in the Gospel of John people fail to grasp what Jesus means because they put too much emphasis on the symbols he employs. In Chapter 2, he said to the Jews, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again," {John 2:19}. They immediately thought he was talking about the beautiful building that stood on the top of Mt. Moriah. But John hastens to explain that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body, which was symbolized by the building. In Chapter 3, when Nicodemus was told by Jesus, "Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God," Nicodemus looked at him with amazement and said, "How can I be born again? I can't get back into my mother's womb," {cf, John 3:3-4}. Nicodemus was thinking of gynecology, but Jesus was talking about eternal life, the gift of life imparted, which physical birth symbolizes. In Chapter 4, when Jesus said to the woman at the well, "If you knew who it is that is speaking to you, you would ask of me and I would give you water that would spring up unto eternal life," she thought he was talking about plumbing. She said to him, "Give me this water so I don't have to come here anymore to draw," {cf, John 4:10-15}. But Jesus went on to make clear to her that he was talking about the gift of life. Thus when he speaks here of "eating flesh" and "drinking blood," he is not talking about cannibalism, but about inner food, that which you live on, the philosophy of life that is real and meaningful.

Those who focus solely on the symbols of Christianity invariably drop out sooner or later. Thousands of churches across our country today are almost empty because people who used to go to church no longer do. In

many cases all they get when they go is the sacraments, the symbols -- baptism, mass, the Lord's supper, some ritual, some ceremony. Many churches focus on those things as though that was what God desires. But our Lord is making very clear that these are simply symbols of a deeper reality, and that deeper reality is the content of what he says, the words that he speaks.

The divine viewpoint on life: That is the real truth; and that is what we ought to be concerned about getting -- feeding upon the promises and observing the warnings of Scripture. These words can turn us on and set us afire. At the Mt. Hermon pastors' conference last week, the speaker, Dr. Bruce Waltke, taught from the Suffering Servant songs in the book of Isaiah, those magnificent passages that predict the coming of Jesus. Dr. Waltke was pointing out that the Messiah said that God had given him "the tongue of the learned," {Isa 50:4a KJV}. God had taught him, and the purpose of his teaching was that he "might learn to speak a word to him that is weary" {Isa 50:4b}, that he might learn how to talk to the broken, the hurting, the disappointed and the discouraged in life. That is what Jesus fulfilled when he came: He had learned how to speak to the weary, and his words give life.

That passage in Isaiah closes with a remarkable verse. Speaking through the prophet, God contrasts the word that the Messiah will speak with the words that men speak to each other:

**Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who set brands alight! {Isa 50:11a RSV}**

That is a picture of the natural man, the man of the flesh, depending on his own wisdom to get things going, kindling fires and lighting brands everywhere by his own natural energy. So God says,

**Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the brands which you have kindled!
This shall you have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment. {Isa 50:11b RSV}**

What does he mean? The words of Jesus are truth about life. If you miss them, if you follow the distortions of the world and think you have adequate wisdom of your own to work out the difficulties of life, you will be so far removed from reality, you will be dealing with such fantasies, such false concepts, that when you lie down at night you will be unable to sleep. "You will lie down in torment" -- frustrated in your ambitions and angry that you cannot make things fit together, tormented and tortured because you cannot make life work. That is what Jesus is saying: "My words are spirit and life." Anything else is of the flesh and profits nothing.

Jesus points out also that those who draw back are the ones who really do not believe. He knew from the beginning who it was that would not believe and who it was that would betray him, thus he says, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." Remember that earlier he had spoken of being drawn of the Father, which he interprets as being "taught of God." God's teaching is always to open our eyes to truth. It is not always religious truth, it is any kind of truth, for all truth is from God.

When people obey the truth they see, then they will be taught more truth, but Scripture warns that if they resist the truth, then they lose the capacity to see and to hear anymore. This is the problem that Jesus is talking about here: "You do not allow yourself to be drawn along of the Father into more and more truth until you come to the fullness of life." Our Lord once put it this way, "To him that has shall more be given, but to him that has not, even that which he has shall be taken away," {Mark 4:25, Luke 19:26}. This is the tragedy that befalls many. Thus we read, "After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him." They had gone as far as they would go. Hebrews 11:6 says, "He who comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him." These who drew back were unwilling to seek further.

I want to say that is not necessarily a totally hopeless situation. I have every reason to believe that at least some of those who drew back returned again, and that people who forsake the Christian cause because they are not willing to explore deeply into the mysteries of the truth, or they resist obeying what they already know, are not necessarily lost. God may work on them so that, later in life, they come again to an awareness of truth. This sometimes happens. But there is another group mentioned here who cannot go away at all.

Jesus said to the twelve, "Will you also go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." {John 6:67-69 RSV}

Here is the mark of the true believer: He cannot quit! When Jesus said to them, "Will you go away also?" it is clear that he would have let them go if they had wanted to. He does not hold anybody against his will. Responding to our Lord's words, Peter says three wonderful things:

First, he says, in effect, "Lord, we have been thinking about it. We have investigated the alternatives. You're not easy to live with. You embarrass us. You frighten us. We don't understand you at times. We see and hear you do things that simply blow our minds. You offend people whom we think are important. We have looked at some alternatives, but I want to tell you this, Lord: we have never found anyone who can do what you can do. 'To whom shall we go?' You have two things that hold us, two things we cannot deny. There are your words. What you say to us has met our deepest need, has delivered us from our sins and freed us from our fears. Your words, Lord, are the most remarkable words we have ever heard. They explain us and they explain life to us. They satisfy us. Nobody speaks like you do, nobody understands life like you do. That holds us.

"Secondly, Lord, we have seen your character." Notice how Peter puts it: "We have believed, and have come to know." That implies a process which has perhaps gone on over the course of months and years. Peter is saying, "We have watched you, and we have come to see that there is nothing wrong in you. 'You are the Holy One of God,' you are the Sinless One. You fit the prophecies; you fulfill the predictions. You have drawn us and compelled us. You are the incomparable Christ, thus there is no place to go."

I have found this to be true of real Christians. Those who continue always feel this way about Jesus. They know their own failures, their own weaknesses. They know that despite the many times they do not understand what is happening to them yet they cannot leave. Here is a wonderful statement of what these disciples were seeing in Jesus:

In Christ we have a love that can never be fathomed; a life that can never die; a righteousness that can never be tarnished; a peace that can never be understood; a rest that can never be disturbed; a joy that can never be diminished; a hope that can never be disappointed; a glory that can never be clouded; a light that can never be darkened; a happiness that can never be interrupted; a strength that can never be enfeebled; a purity that can never be defiled; a beauty that can never be marred; a wisdom that can never be baffled; and resources that can never be exhausted.

If you have found Jesus to be like that, where else can you go? Who else can measure up to that? This is the testimony of those who walk with him and follow him. I have often said that the best definition of a Christian is 'someone who cannot quit.' I had a phone call once from a young man, a relatively new Christian who said to me, "I can't make it. I can't continue to be a Christian. It's too hard. I blow it all the time. I'm going to hang it up." I had heard that kind of thing before, so I said to him, "That's a good idea. Why don't you do that? I think you're right. Hang it up." There was a pause on the line, and then he said to me, "You know I can't do that." I said, "I know it. Of course you can't. You can't quit. Who can you go to? Where can you find answers and resources such as you have drawn on?" This is what Peter is saying to Jesus.

But Peter was wrong about one thing. Notice that he says, "We." By that he means the twelve: "We have believed, and we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus corrects that, saying, "No, Peter, that is wrong. There is one here who does not fit." In these last two verses Jesus exposes him:

Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" [John adds] He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him. {John 6:70-71 RSV}

Notice that there are three groups of disciples in this whole passage. There are those who will not stay with Jesus all the way. They drop out, at least for awhile. Then there are those who cannot leave, no matter what happens. They have seen too much, they have heard too much; they have realized who he is. Finally, there is

one who has never really come but he will not leave and that is the problem.

Three remarkable things are said here about Judas:

First, Jesus admits that he chose him as he did the others. The sixth chapter of Luke records the story of Jesus praying all night long before he chose his disciples. Out of the hundreds who were following him he prayed to select, by the Father's wisdom, the ones who would be closest to him, the ones whom he would give himself to, to train and develop for the work which would reach around the world and through the ages. Jesus knew of the weaknesses in Judas' life, his character failings, etc., and he prayed over him and yet chose him. It was the will of the Father that one among the apostolic band should betray him.

Secondly, Jesus gave power to Judas. On one occasion he sent the twelve out before him into the cities of Galilee and gave them power to cast out devils, to heal the sick, and power even to raise the dead. The twelve came back (Judas was one of them), reporting that they had done all these things. Do not ever forget that: God can give power to do miracles even to those who are not his, if he so chooses. Our Lord also gave Judas the trusted position of treasurer within the apostolic band. He gave him the bag to keep, from which Judas kept stealing. As his story develops, it is clear that Judas was never really with Jesus, he was always against him. Jesus said that all along Judas was a "devil." That is the word he chose: a "devil" -- always resistant, always opposed, always out for himself, never in line with what Jesus wanted. Judas stayed with the group; he lived with them, ate and slept with them, and yet was not one of them. He never was.

Thirdly, John tells us Judas is branded forever as the traitor above all others. Of all the traitorous names of history, Benedict Arnold, Quisling, etc., Judas heads the list. Judas Iscariot: outwardly a disciple, outwardly a lover of Jesus (remember he betrayed him with a kiss in the garden of Gethsemane), yet inwardly a traitor, an enemy, a devil opposed to all that God wants.

Here in this congregation there are probably representatives of these three groups. Some of you have started well, but you will drop out. You will not want to be bothered with studying and searching and understanding. You will not want to follow truth when once you see it. You will rationalize it. You will go on and do the wrong thing, deliberately, again and again, and eventually you will drop out. It has happened before. There are many missing faces.

But there are some of you who will never leave. You cannot quit. You have found too much, you have learned too much of life. You have been ministered to and fed and strengthened by the Lord Jesus. You know the comfort of his presence. You can never give him up.

But there may be some among us here who want to stay with Jesus for their own purposes. You want to appear to be a Christian, but you are not. You are only out for yourself. You want to use God. You are the ones who will betray Jesus!

I want to share with you a prayer, written by a friend of mine, to express the kind of feelings that people like that have. It is a prayer, but it is a self-centered prayer, the kind that would be prayed by a contemporary Judas:

O thou pleasant, comfortable, kindly, good-natured God,
With a reasonable degree of certainty
To another ordinary day.
Keep me today from anything that may tax my faith.

From discomfort, from unnecessary strain, from unusual problems,
Especially those involving sickness or death,
Or the necessity of extending financial aid to relatives or friends, Dear Lord, deliver me

Grant that nothing may occur which will disturb
My satisfaction with the way I am, the things I say,
The thoughts I think, the acts I do.
Or the many deeds I leave undone.

Give me this day, in addition to my daily bread,
The butter, meats, and sweetmeats
That are my necessary diet.
And let me not be troubled by qualms of conscience.

Concerning the amount of time and money
I spend on food and clothing; pastimes good and bad,
And those pursuits which, while not of spiritual value,
Are the accepted hall-mark of the normal citizen
Of this enlightened community in this enlightened age.

Should strong temptation come my way,
Help me above all else to be a gentleman
Who will not embarrass by word or deed
Those who are my companions at the moment of temptation.

Forgive me, in advance, if I embarrass Thee
By failing to identify myself as one
Who seeks to honor Thee in all my ways.

Let my conformity to this world's ways
Be limited, O God, to things which,
While some may question them,
Will not, I pray, be positive sin.

About the future, and the darkening trend of things,
Keep me from thoughtfulness.
Events rush on: the world travails:
Can screaming headlines prove Thy hand's at work
This very moment, bringing near
That fateful cry, "Behold, He comes?"

O, Lord, such disconcerting thoughts!
Keep me from worrying about such things.
And guide me safely to an from
My office, and my home. Amen.

There are many such prayers prayed today, I am afraid. But our Lord reads hearts. He knows.

In this closing moment let us all quietly bow and contemplate to which group do we belong. Does your heart say to him, "Lord, to whom can I go? I don't always understand, I can't always figure you out, I don't always like what you do, but Lord, to whom can I go?" That is the heart that he is looking for.

If you have to say, "I belong to the first group, I'm afraid," there is still hope. You can ask him to teach you and open your eyes and lead you on. You can start right now to obey what he tells you to do.

But if your heart is like that of Judas, centered in yourself, all you can hear, I am afraid, is the word of Jesus: "There is one who shall betray me."

Prayer:

Lord, we have eclipsed the centuries and joined that multitude in the synagogue in Capernaum and heard these wonderful words from your lips. We, too, Lord, fall into one of these three groups. We pray surely that it may not be the latter. We do not want to be a Judas, Lord, who lives only for himself under the guise of Christian faith. We do not even want to be those who follow from afar, uncertain and uncomfortable. Lord, make us those who love you, who cluster around you, who cling to your words, who are willing to search them out and understand them and obey them and believe that they are the words that give life. We ask in

Jesus' name. Amen.

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